

On Ice

ICE, MY TEACHER

AN ESSAY BY
ANNE FELKER

In my hometown of Jim Thorpe, a stream ran through the western end of town near the cemeteries, behind McGarvey's baseball field, and meandered south to empty into the Lehigh River. Forty years ago, there was no State Park and no road to Glen Onoko Falls, though we went to the Glen often, hiking across the wooded hills beyond St. Joe's cemetery.

The town was a quiet place where everyone knew everyone. Though no bigger than a couple of square miles, every inch of Jim Thorpe had its name: there was Germantown and Indianland, Broadway and East Chunk, Up on the Hill and Downtown. Local culture was defined by the clashes between the Irish Catholic, who lived mostly on Broadway, and the German Catholics, mostly in East Mauch Chunk. Whatever our religious affiliations, we children found our sole and common entertainments in the wooded mountains that encircled the town.

Through the eighth grade, I walked to school every day with my older brother and sister and my younger brother. Down the hill in the morning, up for lunchtime, down for the afternoon, and up one more time to go home after school. The trek grew longer as the weather moved from the smooth September warmth to the raw winds and cold of late Fall.

As Winter approached, classmates wriggled in their seats over the merest snowflake, but I sat still. Not that I didn't appreciate the snowstorm nascent in every flurry, but cold was what I really wanted. Sunny or cloudy, wet or dry didn't matter to me, as long as it was cold. Cold enough that the pond would ice over.

As soon as late November came, I began my regular visits to our skating pond. We lived atop the hill on Center Street and the pond was way down near the Lehigh River, but I didn't care

about the distance. Sometimes I talked my sister into coming along. I always avoided my little brother's company. Once in a while I invited one of my friends along, redheaded Bobby Jean, on the young end of a family of thirteen children and the most tomboyish of my friends, or maybe Darla, whose house was always so quiet, as was Darla herself. Most often, though, I went myself, not telling anyone where I was going or why.

As one of the older girls in my family, after school I had to help with laundry or with getting supper ready or watch my youngest brother and baby sister. Yet I knew if I could get in the house, change out of my school uniform, and slip out quickly, the rest of the day was mine. I didn't think of myself as seeking solitude; I knew only that I felt most content when I wandered the woods alone. The secrecy of my expeditions was something I held on to later, when back in the midst of the daily hubbub.

I would head down toward Front Street, usually down the alleyway behind Lehigh Street, where I was less likely to be seen by my grandfather on his way to the firehouse—the Hosie—for his afternoon beer, or by my grandmother coming back home from baby-sitting my cousins who lived a few blocks away, or by one of the gangs of kids who hung out closer to North or Center Streets, near the corner stores that sold penny candy. At Front Street, I turned right down the steep hill filled with potholes, and at the bottom of the hill, I left the road and went right again, to where the stream was dammed up into a pond. And I watched for ice.

At first, there were only the tiny, fantastic ice structures coating the brown vegetation along the creek that fed the pond. Then, a clear ice film with crystal lines grew over the pond. At an inch or two of thickness, I could look down into it and see a million tiny, vertical straws of air. Finally, the ice became

a mass of undifferentiated white thickness. I'd throw rocks of increasing size onto it, and then, gingerly, I tested it with slow, light steps. And when it was ready, I and the others who kept a watch—for occasionally we'd see one another there, and trade comments like "Won't be long now"—would spread the word. Within a day, that quiet spot was transformed.

All the kids came. And, of course, so did Mr. Sheridan.

Pete Sheridan lived just up the Front Street hill from the pond in a small green house teeming with his large family and his tiny, washed-out looking wife. He was gray haired, partially bald, a small-framed man, with a little paunch in front. His dusty blue eyes crinkled when he smiled.

I knew him as father to the seemingly endless number of Sheridan kids—my older brother, sister and I all had Sheridan kids in our classes. And there were older Sheridan kids who had grown up and moved away from Jim Thorpe. One of them was in seminary and the special pride of his family.

But beyond knowing Mr. Sheridan as father to his tribe of children, we knew him as the protector of our pond, the overseer of the bonfires we built to warm ourselves in the recess underneath the reddish-rock cliff next to the pond. He was the arbitrator of our disputes and the enthusiastic organizer of our games of ice tag and whip line. Most days, by the time we got there after school, he'd already swept the pond clear of any overnight debris or snow.

Mr. Sheridan was a wonderful skater, joyous in his movement. When there weren't too many of us on the pond, he skated backwards in long elegant loops, his blue eyes alight while his scarf flew out straight in testament to his speed.

He took part in every ice game we devised. When we lay on our stomachs, with our faces pressed against the ice until

the cold burned our cheeks to a feeling of warmth, arguing over who had found the most beautiful air bubble, he was the judge of our contest. When we played hockey, he had ready for us an array of sticks he'd gleaned from the surrounding woods and a supply of flat rocks to use as pucks. And always, he skated, in and out between us, around the edges of the pond, helping the littlest ones to learn to move on the ice, admonishing the older ones not to get too rough.

Off the ice, when I'd see Mr. Sheridan at church, or at the A & P buying groceries, he was mostly quiet, but he'd give me a secret wink, crossing the line that separated us children from our elders.

One night when my brothers and sister and I came home from ice skating, into our overheated kitchen where the windows were clouded from the pressure cooker's savory steam, I told my mother what a great skater Mr. Sheridan was. She shook her head and sighed, "Poor Pete, dear soul."

"What's so sad about him?" I asked.

"Got a bad heart. They say he can't work any more. I'm sure he shouldn't be down there skating with you."

For the next few days of skating, I paid particular attention to Mr. Sheridan. Did I see a touch of sadness in his blue eyes when he skated backwards? I wondered, when it was time to turn out the light and go to bed at night, did he think about what it would be like to be dead? But soon enough my vigilance fell away. Mr. Sheridan readily guffawed at our antics and showed us more than a few of his own.

I remember being at the pond on the very day it became too warm, one late February. The ice was soft around the edges, and we used the backs of our skate blades to scrape up a sort of slushy snow. This we packed into balls and played tag with

until Bobby Jean's little sister Louise, skating near where the stream emptied into the pond, put her foot through the ice into the water. Mr. Sheridan hurried her over to the bonfire to dry her wet foot and shooed the rest of us off the ice.

In the chaotic few moments before we were all accounted for, I couldn't find my little brother Joe. I panicked. What if he had fallen under the ice? He didn't even know how to swim! But he turned up standing by the side of the pond, quietly watching everything and everyone around him, unaware that he'd even been missed. For the first time I realized that my little brother might be something more than a nuisance to me. Mr. Sheridan announced that our skating for that year was probably done. I remember walking up the hill toward home with Joe that evening, knowing that something had shifted in our relations that would never shift back.

A few years later, after I'd moved on to high school where my after-school activities kept me out long past skating hours, I came home one night to learn from my mother that Mr. Sheridan had died that day of a heart attack.

Since then, I have come back to skating. When I was away at school, I skated on the pond at Haverford College on Philadelphia's Main Line, usually late at night under the stars. Early in my work career, when my husband was still in graduate school, he and I skated for whole days on Hammond's and Bullough's ponds, near Newton, Massachusetts, or on Hampton Ponds in the western part of the state. For the past twenty years or so I've been back in the Lehigh Valley, I've skated at Green Pond. I used to go with my children and their friends, when we could work it around their school schedules. Now that they're grown, I skate alone.

I go early in the morning, when the sun is half an hour or so from rising, so that I can lie on my stomach and look down into the icy dark without drawing attention from passing motorists, who might be alarmed at seeing a still body on the ice. I let the ice burn my face to warmth. Then I rise and skate backwards in long loops across the surface, glassy in some spots, bumpy in others. I watch the sun rise and listen to the weird quivering, cracking noises the ice makes when the morning sun first touches its surface.

Many times, I've seen that first light transform the gray surface of the pond to a dusty blue, a memorial to the smiling eyes of a man who was never too old or burdened to play, to take joy in so simple a phenomenon as ice.

© 2007, *On Ice: Ice, My Teacher* Williams Center Gallery, Morris R. Williams Center for the Arts, Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, all rights reserved.

On Ice: Ice, My Teacher, is published in conjunction with the exhibition, Art Poetry Science *On Ice*, January 7-February 11, 2007, Williams Center Gallery, Lafayette College.

Copyright of the essay is held by Anne Felker

The Williams Center Gallery is funded in part through a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, a state agency funded by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

