

Swimming at Linnet Lake

Linnet Lake was seemingly an ideal location for public swimming: it was close to the residential area, sheltered from the wind, allegedly fed by an underground stream, and the water was relatively warm throughout the summer.¹ The lake had found favor with locals for several years² before the park decided to formalize its use for swimming by building a public bathhouse at the lake for the use of all visitors.³

The new building was ready for use in time for late summer of 1923.⁴ With the logs already on the ground and a building materials list prepared, Supt. George Bevan requested some modifications to the bathhouse. He asked that the ground floor of the bathhouse provide space for winter storage of the park's 30-foot motor launch and any other boats or equipment the park needed to store in the off season. And he asked for some other revisions to provide "absolute privacy for the sexes." Ever practical, Bevan



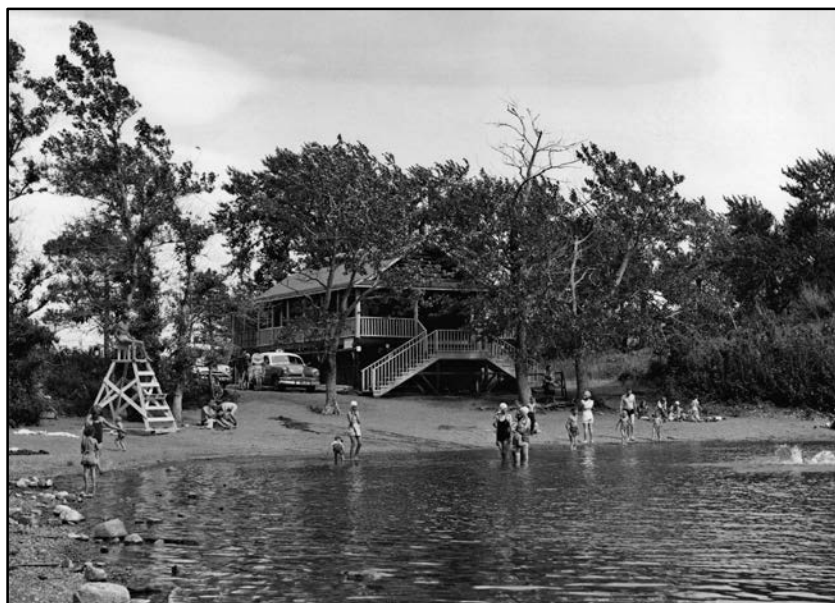
The first bath house at Linnet Lake, built in 1923, was a popular convenience for swimmers. A second facility was added in 1935. (Photo: Foster Collection, WLNP Archives)

also pointed out the need for privacy in the toilets to accommodate fathers helping their daughters and mothers helping their sons.⁵

Overall, the layout of the upper floor of the bathhouse was such that half was designed for ladies with six privacy compartments for changing into swimming attire. The other side, for men, was one large room for the same purpose. The lake itself was dragged and cleaned of the large boulders and sand was brought in to improve the beach.⁶

The new bathhouse was considered a great convenience⁷ complementing this free recreation which was very popular on warm summer days and added to the park's tourist attraction. Linnet Lake soon became a daytime social hub where people of all ages could swim, chat, read or simply relax in a relatively sheltered outdoor location.

An inherent danger associated with swimming, especially where no life guard was posted, was the risk of drowning. It was brought to the fore the second summer when a young man who was swimming became exhausted and nearly drowned. He was rescued by a vigilant 16-year-old girl from Lethbridge.⁸ Another near drowning was prevented in August, 1926 when a lad who could not swim was pulled from the water by yet another Lethbridge girl. To help prevent future problems a



*The life guard watched swimmers from a special tall chair, left, giving him a good view of the lake in the event help was needed.
(Photo: Harwood Collection WLNP Archives)*

floating log barrier was anchored in place just before the deep water line, replacing an existing rope barrier.⁹ Within the log boom the deepest water was less than four feet and all lake weeds were removed; the area beyond the boom provided plenty of space for swimming and diving.¹⁰ The following season, 1927, a larger and stronger raft equipped with diving boards was installed for the increasing number of lake swimmers.¹¹

Through the 1928 season, the park had no life guard on duty and denied responsibility for accidents and potential drownings but did place life belts at the lake. Each user was on his or her own to take precautions while swimming. The only staff member on hand was a bathhouse caretaker who did not act as a life guard. Nonetheless, that summer the caretaker pulled two people from the lake.¹²

The first mention of a life guard being posted appeared in *The Lethbridge Herald* in the summer of 1929 in a brief item which noted “all the necessities that make for safe swimming” had been made: a boom just before deep water, a raft for youngsters, a big float with diving board and a first class life guard.¹³ The presence of a life guard—who also kept the beach tidy, and cleaned the bathhouse--continued for the next 31 years. Still, there were at least three drownings at Linnet. In 1939, a 22-year old man who was working in the park for the summer died;¹⁴ in 1953 an 11-year old Stirling boy died;¹⁵ and in 1956, a 17-year old youth from Granum died while his companion was saved.¹⁶

Due to the growing popularity of Linnet and thanks to the Supplementary Public Works Construction Act another bathhouse was built in 1935 for exclusive use of female swimmers and an extension made to the older bathhouse which was designated specifically for men.¹⁷ The improved facilities were both popular and appreciated by the public.¹⁸ Over the next 10 years the presence of a dual-duty lifeguard/ cleaner worked well but as more visitors used the lake, it was necessary to construct a high seat from

which the life guard could observe the swimmers.¹⁹ An artificial respirator was also provided in the case of accident.



A log boom kept swimmers close to shore and a diving platform provided some variety in the water. (Photo: WLNPA Archives)

The 1950s were troubled waters for the lake which no longer provided the attraction promised by picture postcards. Regular water tests showed contamination and the presence of thousands of tadpoles.²⁰ Superintendent J. H. Atkinson noted in 1950 that lake “was of great importance to holiday makers at Waterton and if we are not to get the proposed swimming pool within the near future, it is very important that this area together with the facilities be improved as soon as possible.”²¹ Three

years later, blood suckers²² had infested the lake and Atkinson reiterated his hope that a pool would be built.²³

Finally, in 1959, an announcement was made that a new swimming pool would be built in Waterton and in March, 1960 swimming in Linnet Lake, while still available, would no longer be supervised. The men’s bathhouse, the older of the two buildings, was torn down and the ladies’ bathhouse was moved to the park compound for use as storage building.²⁴



¹ "Wonderful Waterton," *Lethbridge Herald*, June 30, 1923. WLNP Archives Box 130, Item 30.

² A 1921 photograph taken found in the Harwood Collection (Galt Museum and Archives) show swimmers at Linnet.

³ The area between Linnet Lake and Middle Waterton Lake had once been referred to as Moccasin Flats because of its traditional use as a campsite by First Nations people. See “Place Names” for more information.

The term “bathhouse” was commonplace in those days. Today it would be called a “dressing room” or “change room.”

⁴ Letter to George Bevan, WLNP Superintendent, from J. B. Harkin, Commissioner of National Parks, Ottawa, March 13, 1924. WLNP Box 141, Item 4

It should be noted that while the *Report of the Commissioner for the Year Ending 1925* indicates a new “boathouse” was completed at Linnet,” this was an error in terminology, no doubt created by Supt. Bevan’s request for inclusion of boat storage space in the lower area of the bathhouse. The primary purpose of the building was for use of swimmers wishing to change their clothes. The storage of park boat(s) was a winter only use. (Refer to footnote 5)

The authoritative W. F. Lothian in his *A History to Canada’s National Parks* dates the bathhouse as being built in 1924, very likely relying on the 1925 Report of the Commissioner and corrected “boathouse” to “bathhouse.” As will be seen, the bathhouse was in use during the 1923 season. Evidence of this use is found in both the June 30, 1923 reference noted in footnote 1 and another mention in the July 20, 1923 *Lethbridge Herald* article (WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30).

⁵ Letter to J. B. Harkin, Commissioner of National Parks, Ottawa, from George Bevan, Superintendent, Waterton Park, June 18, 1923. WLNP Archives Box 141, Item 4.

⁶ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, June 30, 1923. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

⁷ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethridge Herald*, June 30, 1923.

⁸ “Near Browning at Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, July 26, 1924, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

⁹ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 11, 1926, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

¹⁰ “Waterton National Park,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 16, 1926, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

¹¹ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, July 25, 1927, 4. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

¹² “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald* July 25, 1928, 17. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

¹³ “Wonderful Waterton,” *Lethbridge Herald*, July 25, 1929, 5. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

¹⁴ “James Fisher Plunges In, Fails Appear,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 16, 1939, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

¹⁵ “Stirling Boy Drowns in Lake Linnet,” *Lethbridge Herald*, Aug. 3, 1953, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

¹⁶ “Granum Youth is Drowned,” *Lethbridge Herald*, July 28, 1956, front page. WLNP Archives, Box 132, Item 30.

¹⁷ Library Archives Canada, *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Fiscal Year ended March 31, 1936*, (Ottawa: J. O. Patenaude, I.S.O., 1936), 96-97.

¹⁸ Superintendent’s Report for 1937. WLNP Archives Box 206, Item 7.

¹⁹ Superintendent's Report for 1945. WLNP Archives Box 207, Item 5.

²⁰ Superintendent's Report for 1950. WLNP Archives Box 207, Item 10. The nature of the "contamination" was not specified in this report.

²¹ Superintendent's Report for 1951. WLNP Archives, Box 207, Item 11.

²² In 2009 a sign was posted at Linnet Lake (since removed) warning swimmers of the possibility of contracting "swimmer's itch" but did not prohibit swimming. In Alberta, swimmer's itch is common and is thought to be spread by aquatic snails and birds which act as hosts to the free-swimming larvae of parasites called *schistosomes*. Symptoms can be an allergic reaction and a rash lasting up to two weeks. Research on swimmer's itch is ongoing to predict the risk and alert the public. For more information see <http://www.swimmersitch.ca>. A warning appears on the park's website. See <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/pn-np/ab/waterton/activ/activ1/j.aspx>

²³ Superintendent's Report for 1954. WLNP Archives Box 207, Item 14.

²⁴ "Linnet to Continue as Bathing Beach," *Lethbridge Herald*, March 21, 1960. WLNP Archives, Box 130, Item 30.