

The Legend of the Lost Horses

For generations there were two legends which enchanted the young and were widely believed by area people of all ages.

Until fairly recently many believed the lake had no bottom. Indeed, there were rumors the lake had deep springs which were connected by mysterious channels to the Finger Lakes in central New York State.

However, the lake was sounded in the early years of the twentieth century and the deepest point was 90 to 100 feet. This maximum depth was confirmed in 1950 by the late Prof. Charles B. Reif, Wilkes University professor of biology who studied area lakes.

The most persistent legend, which still continues, is that there is preserved in the cold depths of the lake bottom two horses which had fallen through the ice in the dim past. Interviews with the oldest residents of the lake, from the World War I era, confirm this legend and may have arisen as early as the late 1800s. The legend is generally that a team of horses used for ice-harvesting broke through the ice one winter and sank to the bottom. Their ghostly remains are still there and preserved by the frigid water. Most claim the event occurred near Alderson not far from the deepest section of the lake between the picnic ground and Point Breeze.



Serious commercial ice-harvesting did occur as early as 1888 but the ice company storage houses at Alderson burned in February 1900. Later, major ice-harvesting operations relocated to the Mountain Springs lakes near Ricketts Glen but small ice operations continued on Harvey's Lake as late as 1947.

In the early years horse-teams pulled ice plows to cut ice from the lake surface. No written account of the legendary accident has been located. It was not uncommon for a horse team to break through thin ice early or late in an ice season. However, the teams had special halters (rope gear) which enabled the ice men to respond to an accident and usually they were able to safely retrieve a team (and men) who fell through ice.

The undated accident which gave rise to the legend is likely a true event - although not likely to have been reported in area newspapers. The event likely happened in the 1890's since older generations born in

the pre-WWI years had no actual memory of the event. Despite the depth of the lake at certain points clearly the remains of the horses would not be preserved. (There are also four drowning victims whose bodies have never been recovered from the lake bottom).

There are, however, confirmed facts which may have led to the legend of the horses but are not so ghostly. There is an undated account of a team of horses hauling a sled of loose stone across the lake when the team and sled fell through the ice. This event was early in the 1900's. But the limited account states the horses were retrieved.

The late Tommy O'Brien, famed lake scuba-diver, may have had this account in mind when he, too, noted the story of the horses but understood the horses were saved.

In 1898 two young men, Gowan C. Herdman and Lewis McCarter were riding horses in the shallow water near Alderson when one of the horses stumbled and in the ensuing panic both boys were drowned. It is possible that at least the former story

was embellished over the years to create the legend of the lost horses.

There is a documented instance of a horse who drowned in ice but well after the legend was established. In late February 1943 Newell Wood and his son were in a buggy testing Wood's new mare Flaxen Lady which he purchased in September 1942 for \$1,500.00. The mare was frightened by a truck and Wood was thrown out; his son, Michael, age 9, jumped out. Flaxen Lady scampered off the road and on to the ice on the lake dragging the buggy which overturned (near the Outlet). The horse plunged through the ice into 3 feet of water and 3 feet of mud and Flaxen Lady drowned. Police Chief Fred Swanson, who pulled numerous drowned bodies from the lake, was also called to remove the horse.

In the 1950's ABucky Kelly, an accomplished scuba diver, scoured the lake bottom in a systematic effort to locate a sunken ice sled and horses' remains. His search was hampered by feet of fine salt clouding the lake bottom and he was unable to find the lost horses.