

Swimming at the Train Bridge

First published May 26,2016

The Prince of Wales Bridge is a multi-span truss bridge, which opened in 1880 to provide rail service between Ottawa and Gatineau. It remained in service for over one hundred years. From a point east of Bayview Road, it crosses the Ottawa River to Lemieux Island, then continues to Gatineau.

The last regular passenger train over the bridge came in from Montreal November 15, 1981. Presently, the Ottawa side is fenced off with warning signs regarding fast moving water and holes between the ties. But back in 1966 and for a few generations before, the bridge provided the backdrop for a tempting swimming hole for many area kids.

One sweltering afternoon in July, my friends Judy, Karen, Mike and I were trying to decide on a plan for the afternoon. We had already gone biking all the way to my cousin Sean's house on Northwestern Avenue, but he was in summer school.

Sean's mom, my Aunt Violet, was in the middle of a cleaning spree, so the visit was short. On the way back we stopped for popsicles at the corner store, and collapsed on Karen's porch.

"Let's go swimming," was Judy's idea.

Karen moaned "I don't feel like biking all the way to Westboro, we were halfway there a while ago. And Carleton beach is too shallow."

I was the one with the bright idea. "I know. We can swim at the train bridge again. We didn't get caught last time. What do you think?"

"Let's do!" Judy yelled enthusiastically.

We all went home and put on our bathing suits and T shirts, made a couple of peanut butter sandwiches and raced back to Karen's house. It only took a few minutes to bike down to the Prince of Wales train bridge.

With our plastic bags of sandwiches, matches and pilfered cigarettes held in our teeth, we stepped into the cool dark river where the water was almost immediately over our heads.

We swam as far as the first abutment, and climbed out to sunbathe, picnic, and enjoy a relaxing smoke on the rough cement. Being so sophisticated, the interesting submerged junk we could see in the river didn't bother us a bit.

We were in and out of the water all afternoon, until suddenly a loud authoritative voice interrupted our revelry, "You kids get out of the water!"

We looked up to see an RCMP officer striding down the hill towards us. Meekly we all swam across to shore and scrambled up the bank. "Don't you know how dangerous it is to swim here?" he demanded. "The current is very strong and leads to the dam at the Chaudiere Falls."

We were too polite, or too intimidated to make the obvious comment that we'd have to get past several log booms and at least half a mile across the river to be in any danger of the falls or the intake pipes at the E.B. Eddy Paper Mill on the Hull side.

The officer noted all our names and telephone numbers, and said he would be in touch with our parents. We didn't really believe him until we got home. My dad said "Have you been swimming at that train bridge again? The police called and said to make sure you stay away from there".

From then on, according to our parents, it was Westboro beach for us, (too crowded and too far) or the Plant Bath Pool (closer, but that cost five cents). But at least there were no wrecked cars underwater, and no danger of being swept over the Chaudiere Falls.

So, officially, that's just where we went for our cooling summer swims. But if bridges could talk, the Prince of Wales might have a tale or two to tell.