

“To Brookside”

A Nostalgic Remembrance of Times Past

By Larry Chiger

If you happen to be surfing the net and run a search on “Brookside Swimclub” you’ll be rewarded with the address of a single site. In 1958, the year of the Edsel, a fad swept the nation, particularly among the young and limber. It was the act of gyrating one’s hips to keep a 30-inch plastic ring seemingly suspended in mid-air for as long as possible. The “Hoola-Hoop” craze was a newsworthy sensation in that otherwise lazy sixth summer of Dwight Eisenhower’s presidency. So much so that when a ten year old boy, surrounded by hundreds of contestants on Brookside’s great lawn, set the club record of 3,000 revolutions, LIFE Magazine published an aerial view of the event.

Brookside Swimclub was THE summer experience for hundreds of mostly Jewish families living in Union and Essex counties in post-war New Jersey. This was particularly true for the children who grew up as part of that extended family. For many of us now in middle age, summers at Brookside were the best parts of each year. It was our place, and we were Brooksidiers. It was where we went each day with our moms (because most moms didn’t “work outside the home” then) for afternoons filled with baseball, knock-hockey, under-water tag and lanyard making. Later, it was where we had our first smoke, first close dance, first kiss and even first paycheck.

There was something truly special about summers at Brookside, even though we might not have realized it then. While it’s difficult to recall much detail from my grammar and junior high school experiences, the summer portions of those years, the Brookside times, are fountains of remembered imagery, sounds and smells. On those infrequent occasions when I get to reminisce with a fellow Brookside alumnus, the same seems true for them. Our memories of those summers and that place, especially when viewed through the compelling filter of middle-aged nostalgia, are nearly magical.

An average day at Brookside began in the late morning. The entrance drive was just west of the Crescent Golf Range, still located on Springfield Avenue in Union. Pulling into the parking lot in our Rambler convertible, there would already be an array of late model cars baking in the summer sun. Even the parking lot told a story. There was a reasonably inoffensive caste system at Brookside (upper middle class versus middle class, cabanas versus lockers, valet versus self-parking) that was generally observed without affront. Some *lower-caste* adults would occasionally grumble about all the

“good parking spots” going to the fat cats. To a boy growing up in the era of big fins and copious chrome, though, seeing all those Caddies, T’birds and Imperials lined up and glistening was just too good to be true.

Brookside was completely walled in by a six-foot, wood slat fence that provided exclusivity and privacy. From several vantage points in the parking lot, though, you could see the deep end of the pool, the diving board section. Walking across asphalt whose heat bore right up through the soles of your sneakers, one could hear the ka-thunka-thunk of the high diving board, and then see the huge splash that accompanied a cannon ball dive. I can think of few other sensations that have so easily produced such intense levels of sweet anticipation.

To enter the premises, Brooksidiers were required to show their picture cards to whomever was “watching the gate.” Milton, Al, Ruthie, Ed and Dick were all characters in their own rights, and the inspection ritual varied accordingly. Milton Metsky, Brookside’s general manager, was the scariest of the gatekeepers. A short man, his prodigious belly seemed to jut out, almost perpendicularly, from the rest of his body. I still have a vivid image of the club owner, Mr. Gelman, making a point to Milton by tapping straight down on his belly, just as if his forefinger were encountering a tabletop.

Also notable were Milton’s half-focal reading glasses, the first I’d ever seen. Except for brief periods when they dangled across his chest by a black cord, they were otherwise permanently perched at the very tip of his nose. When Milton confirmed your identity, it was with a tucked double chin and a withering glance over the bow of these spectacles. If you passed muster, Milton grudgingly allowed you to enter his facility. But god forbid you had been involved in some minor transgression the day before. If so, this would be related to your mother in minute detail while your shivering body was held in merciless limbo by the stainless steel arms of the turnstile monster.

Once inside, your senses were immediately reminded that this was Brookside. The noonday sun reflected wildly off the polished terrazzo entrance floor, causing you to look anywhere but forward. The disparate sounds of rippling flags, splashing water, loudspeaker announcements, slapping flipflops and jukebox 45s all merged into a cacophonous summer symphony. Depending upon the prevailing winds, you either inhaled the slightly sweet aroma of chlorinated pool water, or the impossibly wonderful restaurant smells of “*Noshoteria*” cheeseburgers, fries and simmering onions. “Only delicious.”

As we were decidedly lower caste, my brother and I would head down the hill to the locker rooms. The men’s and women’s lockers were at opposite ends of a flat cinderblock edifice whose sheetmetal roof turned the entire building into an enormous snare drum when it rained. Large, crisply uniformed black matrons constantly guarded the women’s locker room. Their presence only enflamed already overworked fantasies of

what an errant eyeball might hope to glimpse through the fabled but never found peep-hole in the shower room wall.

In contrast, two aging brothers, Pete and Jimmy tended the men's locker room. Short and wiry, white-haired and frequently ill-shaved, neither was unfamiliar with the anesthetic effects of liquid refreshment in half pint containers. This was our first locker room. Here we showered, took saunas, played whip-towel, dressed and, when lucky, overheard dirty jokes. It was a visual cornucopia of idiosyncratic pubic areas. There were boys like us, bald and perky. There were bellies of fat, doubled over so as to nearly hide the maleness tucked in below. There were sacs hanging down like plums in a bag--bigger than any we'd ever seen. There were guys just like our dad, normal and reassuring. And there was even the rare, uncircumcised penis that one suspected might belong to a spy from another club.

Season by season we watched and took note from our assigned space, locker 554. We grew from boys to young men, from baby powder to Right Guard. When we forgot our key there was always Jimmy or Pete's aromatic scolding, followed by a helping hand and the master key. That locker room was our introduction to a larger fraternity that welcomes me to this day

After changing into our trunks we'd make the long walk up to where my mother's group played mah jong. This activity, as the period joke went, was a game of chance invented by an ancient Chinese sage exclusively for the enjoyment of middle-aged Jewish women. To get to her area we first had to cross the great lawn and pass by the oversized circular awning just north of the diving board area. Then we'd head around the Olympic lanes of the five-foot section and finish up adjacent to the shallow end.

My mother's "spot" was under a freestanding, rectangular canopy that provided modest relief from the afternoon sun. It was directly across a grassy area from the "C" Cabanas. Cabanas were for those who could afford "upper-caste" status. They were in rows of individual wooden stalls about 5' wide by 7' deep. Each cabana had a changing room and a shower in the rear. Front cabanas backed up to corresponding rear cabanas, with each row having a total of 32 units.

Cabana rows and their surrounding areas were assigned to a specific cabana boy. Cabana boys were all college students and frequently the sons of Brooksider parents. In the mornings they swept and policed their areas, aligned deck chairs and chaise lounges and got the card tables ready. In the afternoons they catered to the urgent refreshment needs of their clientele, the gaming women. Throughout the day, Cabana boys were regularly seen dashing off to the Noshoteria, returning just minutes later with heavily laden trays of iced drinks, cantaloupe halves and packs of Viceroy's.

While lifeguards clearly had the sex-appeal jobs, the cabana boys were the big breadwinners. They could accumulate a couple of thousand dollars in a good season, this back when a new VW went for \$1,700. Dressed in yellow shorts, white polo shirts and converse sneakers they were, to a man, thin and lanky. Even if they didn't start the season that way, their continuous jogging in the summer heat soon trimmed them down to fighting weight.

The cabana boy for my mother's group always had their card table and chairs ready and waiting at the same "spot" each day. "Spots" were territorial and it was social death to infringe on another group's table space. Whether it was mah jong, canasta, bridge or even the occasional penny poker table, the games were played with very real intensity. While husbands daily tested themselves in the market place, the ladies brought their cunning, wits and ambitions to the game tables. Scores were kept, debts were collected and the prestige stakes were high. Once, while I lay on a nearby chaise lounge nursing a headache, I saw the woman sitting opposite my mother stand up and announce, "Okay, so I peed on myself, big deal." Of course, she was wearing a bathing suit so it wasn't such a big deal. For me, though, the sight of an adult "having an accident" was as astounding as it was disturbing.

Many ladies liked to play near the shallow end of the pool, as it allowed them to sphitz. To those unfamiliar with this custom, its most common form involved a group of women walking down the stairs into pool water at or about the mid-thigh level. Then, while shooing away youthful interlopers likely to produce an errant splash, they ladled handfuls of water over mid-section, chest, back and shoulders. Those of stronger fortitude might even immerse themselves to neck level, thus cooling the entire body while preventing damage to the teased and heavily sprayed hairstyles prevalent in those days. Sphitzing, as I came to learn, was also effective in removing the unsightly damp evidence from over-competitive card playing.

While we generally ate lunch at home (a strictly lower-caste phenomena) we'd always stop by my mother's table to pick up money for the daycamp's snack period. If time allowed and we had observed the strict one-hour moratorium between eating and swimming (to guard against that nefarious taker of young life, stomach cramps) we'd also grab a quick dip.

My brother and I were both "fish." We loved everything about being in a pool: the chilling rush as you first dove in, squeezing fonts of water out between clenched front teeth, swimming under each other's spread legs, watching bulbous bubbles of released breath competing furiously to reach the surface. In the pool there was no need for TV, radio or other manufactured entertainment. We had the real thing, right there.

All too soon we'd be summoned from our underwater reverie to dry off and head back to camp. Brookside was situated on a very large piece of property, about a third of which

was the camp and sports area. There were 5 baseball diamonds, numerous tetherball, basketball and paddle ball courts, the arts and crafts area and the snack bar. Dick Fried ran the day camp. He was a public school teacher and all-around wonderful man who loved kids. He was assisted by an athletic director (whose son lost a leg to cancer) and by Helen who ran the Biddie program for the youngest campers.

At one PM all the campers would line up in groups at the edge of the ball fields. Groups would have anywhere from ten to twelve same-aged kids in them, either boys or girls. Boys groups always had the coolest names, like THE COUGARS or THE MOUNTAIN LIONS, and we had competitions for creating the best team songs and cheers. I am pleased to say I was personally responsible for coming up with THE WILDCATS.

Once lined up and quiet, two mutually exclusive states, Dick would give out the daily instructions via a bullhorn. Each group's schedule of sports, crafts, swimming and snack kept it more than busy until 5:00 PM. Being a chubby boy, my favorite activity was Snack. The Snack Bar was a small, fenced in area that could accommodate about four groups of campers at a time. It was run by the Noshoteria staff and had a grill, fries bin, soda fountain and ice cream freezer. For under a buck you could get a hot dog and a medium Cherry Coke, or fries and a milk shake, or several other wonderfully unhealthy '60s combinations.

Before ordering, everyone had to sit down at one of the long wooden tables. These were surrounded by black folding chairs whose seats and backs used the same stamped sheet metal as is found on old-style, steam radiator covers. They displayed a variety of patterns, the most common being quarter inch hexagons encircled by a ring of smaller dots. The chairs were blisteringly hot from baking in the sun and were only safely used by covering them with a pool towel. Once you'd been sitting on them a while, though, it was fun to remove the towel and imprint your bare flesh with the geometric patterns.

While snack was my highlight, the sports were also fun, particularly as I got older. Softball was the staple of the day, fueled by the seemingly continuous heroics of Yankee stars such as Mantle, Maris, Ford and Berra. There were always enough kids for a game. Even if it was "five-on-five" we could get by using the tried and true modifications of "call your field" and "supply your own pitcher and catcher." When campers were in abundance, we just added positions such as short center field.

I was a particularly uncoordinated fielder and a slow runner. Added to these deficits, I was left-handed and forgetful. When wielding a borrowed right-hander's glove on the reverse hand, a ball hit to my position, deep right, was nearly certain to result in extra bases for the hitter. Once into puberty, though, my fortunes eased a little as I got to be a pretty fair long-ball hitter. While I could never match the slugging feats of Bob Cherkis, the strongest Jewish boy I ever knew who regularly hit the ball over the left field fence, I did have my moments. On those days when a drive up the gap allowed me a slow but

definitive four-bagger, I was on top of the world. It was pretty special to see your name highlighted in the Camp News too.

The Arts and Crafts area was the source of an unending stream of household, fashion and decorative items. Over the years I tiled and grouted numerous hot plates, banged out sheet metal ashtrays, assembled unrecognizable Popsicle stick sculptures, stenciled bas-relief Indian chiefs and stitched-up foul smelling Moroccan-leather wallets. My parents, particularly my mother, were very good at appreciating these chefs' d'oeuvres and giving them places of distinction in our home.

My forte, though, was lanyards. The inside of Brookside's wooden back fence was randomly full of nails at various heights and angles of "bentness". Would a future anthropologist ever have deduced the hundreds, no thousands, of lanyards that grew outward from those pegs, or envisioned the children like myself who whiled away countless happy hours contemplating their own creativity and determination. I loved the patterns one could create with those colorful, plastic coated strands and particularly the barrel and box stitched closures. More than one lifeguard's whistle was the beneficiary of my endeavors.

My teen years at Brookside coincided with the start of the club's slow demise. As the baby boom generation grew older, more and more families sent their kids off to camp. Not surprisingly, many decided against the dual expense of that and Brookside. Likewise, there was the ever present rumor of a highway (Route 78) that would cut through the land that comprised our sports and daycamp facilities. While still a decade away, that added to the attrition. Nonetheless, many of the *old families* remained at Brookside until its last summers. But, more of that later.

"Sixties" teen life at Brookside reflected the emerging nuances of the baby boomers. The first real TV generation, we easily became bored and needed lots of stimulation. Dick Fried, now Brookside's Teen Director, was truly gifted at coming up with activities that we could disdain, yet still enjoy. There were myriad contests, bowling trips, ping-pong and knock hockey tournaments, driving range excursions, day trips and, of course, the wildly popular rock and roll dances. As my date for some of these was also the club photographer's daughter, I still have several glossy but fading 8 x 10s of two innocents in dress-up.

Every season Brookside was also a magnet for visiting dignitaries. The lesser of these (through a teen's eye) were the various local and state politicians who never donned trunks and went around greeting constituents. Of far greater interest were the astronauts, the singing groups like The Four Seasons, Miss America, and especially the day Cousin Brucie made an appearance. To those too young to recall, Cousin Bruce Morrow started life as Bruce Meyrowitz, and was the founder of NYU's first radio station. By the time we were pubescent, he was a WABC disc jockey and the dominant radio personality of

our time. On the day he visited Brookside, and to the delight of every kid on the premises, Cousin Brucie commandeered the PA system mic in the front office. He proceeded to tastefully poke fun at the club's management and to regale us with irreverent witticisms including a prognostication that, "For today's forecast, we're predicting that there will be weather!"

Teens were also participants in and audience for the several annual events that the members staged for one and other's enjoyment. Several notable examples of these were the synchronized swimming demonstration, the day-long Brookside swim meet, and the Miss Brookside beauty contest.

To any number of people, (mostly male) synchronized swimming was and is a funny pursuit. To the girls and young women who spent untold hours in the deep-end perfecting their routines, it was serious athletic endeavor. In a time before we as a nation understood the value and human right of organized sports for both sexes, synchronized swimming was a rare acknowledgment of girls' athletic contributions. Far less politically correct by today's standards, the Miss Brookside contest was always an eagerly awaited event. Suffice to say that I have stronger memories of this latter competition.

As I was at my athletic best while in the water, the annual swim meet was something I eagerly looked forward to. I was generally on the winning relay teams, but try as I might I never could seem to beat Brian Hartman in the individual races. Disappointing as this was, my dad and I almost always won the father/son race, and the small plastic trophies we earned for such always carried substantial emotional import for me.

While there were plenty of organized events, there was still frequent opportunity for harmless mischief. For my gang, this meant sneaking behind the now unused L and M cabanas to play blackjack, smoke cigarettes, look at Playboys and brag about largely fictitious *make-out* sessions. As I was good at numbers, my daily trips to the candy store were generally subsidized by my gambling profits. Soon enough, though, these activities began to lose their appeal.

As mentioned before, Brookside's lifeguards had the sex appeal jobs. Their muscular builds, easy gaits and matching swimsuit uniforms gave them near mythic presence. The cult of the Brookside lifeguard was both real and imagined. Chompsky drove a corvette, Heshie had thick black curls all over his torso, Stuie kept 4-X condoms in his locker, Eddie had been to Vietnam. They were a confident lot and within the yellow lines encircling the pool they commanded complete authority. Their weapon of choice, the blast of a brass ringmaster's whistle, would freeze nearly all activity deckside and in the water. Their ultimate consequence, a half hour's banishment from the pool, was enough to keep even the most mischievous kids in line.

By the time I was fourteen I was a complete lifeguard wannabe. I spent large portions of each day hanging around their command table, soaking up every word, studying every personality quirk and nuance. Steve Gleitzman was the pool director. A phys ed teacher during the school year, when Steve walked around the pool it was with shoulders back, hands on hips and feet splayed out to the sides. He was the unquestioned dominant male and, not surprisingly, my hero.

Once or twice a summer Steve and some of the other guards would give stunt diving exhibitions off the high board. These included cut-aways, swan dives, various flips in tuck and layout, backdives and all manner of twists. The grand finale was always a two-man stunt. Steve would begin what looked like a regular dive. As his body was launched straight up off the board, Chompsky would come running off of the same board and dive quickly forward. If the timing was right, and it invariably was, Gleitzman would land on Chompsky's back and they would descend together into the water, like a horse and rider.

After observing my fear of the high board, Steve helped me to become a reasonably proficient diver. He was a patient teacher, particularly considering my still obvious lack of coordination. With time, I overcame my fears and learned to do a number of dives with a fair degree of form and consistency. Every time I do a clean jack-knife or swan dive into the Maplewood pool today, I think of Steve.

The summer of tenth grade I enrolled in junior life saving. This meant coming to Brookside several hours earlier twice a week. Besides the extra pool time, this also *necessitated* the otherwise unattainable lunch in the Noshoteria. For me, the concept of "win/win" became a tangible reality that summer. The next year I took senior life saving and gave it more diligence than perhaps any previous endeavor. A day did not pass that I was not practicing escape moves and hauling procedures on my not-so-enthusiastic younger brother. In late August my determination paid off. While awarding me my lifesaving badge, Chomsky, the senior lifesaving instructor, praised me as the best student he'd ever had. To a chubby kid whose on-land grace was questionable at best, those were some of the sweetest words ever heard.

"It was the summer of sixty nine, those were the best years of my life." Indeed they were. The age of Aquarius was in full bloom and remarkable earth-bound events, like their astrological counterparts, were falling into magical alignment. 1969 was the summer when Neil Armstrong first stepped down upon the moon's surface, when the Amazin' Mets went on to win the world series, and when hundreds of thousands of kids converged on Max Yasger's farm to celebrate Woodstock in Bethel NY.

It was also the summer when I made the transition from Brookside member to full-time Brookside employee. Some of my friends had become Cabana Boys, other went to work for Bernie and Charlotte who now owned the Noshoteria franchise. I claimed my swimclub birthright and donned the uniform of a lifeguard. It was an initiation into yet

another fraternity, and the membership privileges were many. For one, I now got to change in the lifeguards' locker room, an underground bunker that also served as the pool's filter room. Accessed only by a steep ramp located behind the diving boards, it housed the massive pumps, chlorine diffusion tanks and the diatomaceous earth filtering system. The filter room was also a place of occasional after-hours drunkenness and debauchery, activities for which I am, today, both grateful and a little embarrassed.

Lifeguarding was full of responsibilities and rituals. Every morning, before the Brookside's arrived, the pool's surface needed to be skimmed and its floor needed to be swept. Sweeping was done from within the pool using long, telescoping poles. On many a morning the water temperature was such as to have a uniquely shriveling affect on certain parts of the lifeguard anatomy. That hardship was lessened by the *miserable loves company* bonding that took place, and by the dissonant if not enthusiastic attempts at Four Tops harmonies. Sugar pie honey bunch, indeed.

Once the dirt had been moved into the deep end, one of us would don a wet suit, weight belt and diving cap attached to an air compressor. He (or she, as there were now female lifeguards) would then descend into the 12 foot water to sweep the sludge into the lower-most drains. Once a fish, always a fish. I loved playing Lloyd Bridges and usually did not cease and desist until signaled to ascend (via a kink in the air line) long after the cleaning was completed.

One of our more dangerous responsibilities was moving and changing the pressurized chlorine gas tanks. When the new tanks arrived they needed to be lowered into the filter room, a task the pool's designers had obviously never contemplated. The tanks were massive, zinc-coated cylinders that weighed well over 150 pounds. It took at least two guards with grappling hooks and chains to finesse each cylinder down the ramp and steps that led to the filter room door. Once inside, connecting, tapping off and unhooking the used chlorine tanks was perilous duty too, and done with gas masks at hand. On more than one occasion the entire club had to be evacuated due to a chlorine leak.

Of course, the most visible part of lifeguarding was life guarding. While outwardly we seemed to pay a lot of attention to our baby oil and vinegar tans, cool sunglasses and Marlboros, in reality each of us felt a great responsibility to protect our charges. Either up in the stands or, on less busy days walking the deck, we were constantly on guard for both danger and mischief. Over the several years that I was a guard there were really only one or two notable incidents in the main pool, and none with any lasting consequences.

Much more frequent, though, were the baby pool rescues. For many mothers of little children, the availability of inexpensive baby-sitting was both a relief and temptation. Many infants were left in the care of pre-teen baby-sitters whose attention spans were

understandably limited. I can think of dozens of times that I had to leap into the baby pool to snatch up a toddler whose head was under water.

Over a few years I rose to the number two position of head lifeguard. It was a heady experience to be treated with deference by children and adults alike. Such deference ended with my boss, Eddie Grobe the Pool Director. Eddie was a maddening, lovable, and slightly larger than life character, who otherwise might have been the inspiration for an adult Eddie Haskell revival. His boss, Al Lobalbo, was the defensive coach for the St. John's basketball team and Brookside's second in command. Al was an impeccable dresser, a stickler for rules, and a master of swimclub metaphor. When my friend Bill, a Brookside parking attendant, quit his job two weeks before summer's end to go to Woodstock, Al really lit into him. "Here I went and gave you a chance this summer and what do you do, you pee in my locker."

Due to my status as a lifeguard, I also was able to wait tables for Brookside's Thursday and Saturday night shows. Brookside's shows were truly famous. In keeping with the nearby Catskill tradition, they booked many of the rising (and sometimes withering) cabaret stars of that era. When you first entered Brookside there was a large sign (that grew each year) whose headline read, **Stars Who Have Appeared At Brookside**. The list read like a who's who of the entertainment world. Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennet, Jerry Lewis, Buddy Hackett, Myron Cohen, Totie Fields, Phyllis Diller. Of course, by the time I was tending tables, many of the above had grown beyond the Brookside stage. None the less, their ghosts were a part of the club's mystique.

Show nights had a process and pecking order all their own, both for the adults (our parents) who attended them and for us who worked them. On a typical Saturday, adults would begin forming a line as soon as the club opened. Each adult was later given a numbered plastic card, similar to a hat-check card. The purpose of this was to establish the ranking for the "race to the tables" that took place at eight that evening.

On a night featuring an act of some repute, and particularly for the extraordinarily popular burlesque nights, there could be in excess of 100, ten-seater tables set up in the covered but outdoor amphitheater. The best tables, generally reserved for Mr. Gelman and other club notables, were right in front of the stage. They descended in value the further away or off center you were. When the doors opened at eight PM it was like watching an old-style land rush. As the number-clutching guests pushed and scurried to reach the favored tables, they brandished bottles of whiskey to serve as claim markers. The competition was fierce. Occasionally real shouting matches occurred and more than one waiter was fired for slipping a bottle of whiskey onto a table for a favored client.

There was also strong competition between the waiters, both for table position and for the few and highly prized big tippers. On show nights, most Brooksidiers tipped \$.50 cents a head. This meant that five full tables would ordinarily yield twenty-five bucks plus the

\$1.40 an hour you were paid by Bernie and Charlotte. Twenty five dollars for a few hour's work (when gas at the Arco station across the street cost \$.25 cents a gallon) was decent money. The big tippers, Mr. Gelman, Mr. Zuckerberg, Dr. Fox, Dr. Zacher, Big Moe and the few mobster members whose names are still protected by "omerta," could all be counted on for anything from a dollar a head to a flat \$25 per table. Real big money in those days.

The headwaiter had considerable discretion over which waiter got what tables. Like any cash-for-service business, money changed hands and various unholy alliances were concocted, exploited and abandoned. In general, though, the new waiters got the worst tables (where the widows and \$.25 cent tippers generally sat) and their lot improved with each passing season. My last season, when I had also ascended to the position as headwaiter, I achieved (comparatively) the highest level of monthly income I've perhaps ever known.

During the first hour, the waiters would bring set-ups to the tables (ice, mixers and chips) and gather the dinner orders. It often seemed that our customers, these once children of the Great Depression, felt compelled to settle the "I'm still hungry, mommy" score each and every show night. While the meals they ordered had to be of good quality, what really mattered was that they were BIG. Let's face it, when it comes to Jewish deli, size matters! Entrees consisted of everything from huge steak dinners (the Big Moe Special: never under 24 ounces, two inches thick and covered with sautéed onions) to massive Greek salads (when Nick Fotinos ran the "Nosh") to that world renowned Jewish specialty, the 6 inch high deli sandwich ("tell Bernie to make it lean, for Mrs. Cohen, he knows how I like it) to every variety of plain, cheese, pizza and lobster burger. While this compulsion may not have caused bi-weekly spikes in the price of beef futures, it was certainly responsible for the substantial number and urgent nature of post-meal seltzer requests.

While the show was underway, the Noshoteria crew was scrambling to cook and prepare hundreds of food orders. The atmosphere was, at best, one of loosely controlled chaos. Bernie, the owner and chef, had learned his trade in the most demanding delicatessen school in the world, the Catskills. He was a physically imposing man of perhaps 300 pounds who, behind the meat counter, had the grace and instincts of a ballet dancer. Each night, as the pace and volume of orders increased, Bernie performed a pas de deux within a cloud of steam-table mist. With speed acquired only through years of practice, he deftly trimmed, forked and maneuvered twenty-pound slabs of slippery hot pastrami and corned beef onto ever spinning meat cutters. Moments later they were transformed into small mountains of sliced perfection that immediately became the center of a huge sandwich. Then with a deep base growl he'd command, "Who's next," and the dance began anew.

Waiters were not allowed to deliver food or drink during the shows and every table, rich or poor, expected to be eating within seconds of the lights going back up. Experienced waiters knew to share a portion of their tips with the kitchen staff, and the associated largesse strongly determined the level of attention and service we received. That being said, a skin-flint waiter could find his ice cream dishes turning to mush while a missing order of fries waited to cook.

The last hour of each show night was for dancing. To this day I remain touched by the memory of my dressed-up parents and their friends deftly gliding over the terrazzo floor, dancing to the big band music of their youth. There was much grace and tenderness shared on that dance floor. Like much of Brookside's spirit and character, those art forms are less practiced and sometimes not even remembered today.

Two of my favorite characters were Morris and Rosie. Already in their sixties when I knew them, Morris and Rosie were beloved fixtures at Brookside. Morris, though slight in stature, could always be recognized from a distance. He walked around on bowled and spindly legs, but he always had a bounce in his step. And Morris alone might have reversed the dubious fashion trends of the sixties with his bloomer style bathing trunks, zinc-oxide coated nose and the little straw hat that was always atop his head. Morris had a smile and a good word for everyone but all agreed his greatest attribute was that he was married to Rosie. Rosie was a free and youthful spirit. She always sported a cosmetic beauty mark on her right cheek and she wore the most flamboyant and colorful clothes, especially on show nights. She was a sexy lady who loved to dance, and she always saved one for me. Late into each show night, when the band would invariably break into one of those newfangled rock and roll numbers, Rosie would summon me from bussing tables, "Larry, come shake a little leg with me!"

While my romance with Rosie was limited to the dance floor, there was a wonderful girl at Brookside who, particularly during one summer, captured my heart and imagination. Karen was perhaps the prettiest and sweetest girl of my youth. I can still remember the throaty exuberance of her laugh, the radiance of her smile and the softness of her lips. One of the last things I said before she left for college and a life beyond was "Someday I hope to marry a girl like you." Indeed, I did, but the side of me that will never cease being long-haired, bell-bottomed and nineteen remains, in part, with her.

The final time I entered Brookside was on Labor Day, 1972, the last day of the last summer. During the following winter I heard it was sold to the township as a public pool. A year or two later its property was claimed by the state, under eminent domain, in order to begin building Route 78. After that I lost track of it and of most of my fellow Brooksidiers. I became engrossed in an education of sorts, a career of sorts, and a New York City lifestyle.

Brookside remained quietly in my memory until I became a father and my new family moved from Manhattan to Maplewood. On a spring day in 1988, having decided to take up golf, I drove over to Crescent Golf Range. Once there I could not resist the urge to see the old place again. As I sneaked past the metal fence blocking the driveway, my heart stuck in my throat and an involuntary sound escaped my lips. In front of me was an empty landscape. There was nothing save for the remnants of the deep end of the pool, and a battered concrete and iron stub where my high diving board used to stand. Everything else was gone, the Cabanas, the Noshoteria, the locker rooms. As I walked over the blistered and partially bulldozed terrain I came across a rusted sign, "To Shady Glenn," that once led to the toddlers' camp area. Momentarily I thought of bringing it home.

I did not go in for my golf lesson that day. Instead I went back to the car and allowed myself a good, cathartic cry. As time has passed (and my own son has grown to be a teenager) I've come to better understand what those tears were for. In part they were for me, the youth I cannot regain and the distance that grows farther between then and now, every day. But in part, they were also for my son, Alex, who by nature of his place in time, will never experience the innocence and beauty of those types of summers. Yes, he'll have his own memories, some sweet, some poignant. Regardless, they won't be framed by the security and simplicity of a time before South Park, Columbine High School and AIDS.

So here's to my Brookside, to our Brookside, and to all the Brookside's that populated the summers of our youth. Like the hoola-hoop record, nothing lasts forever. Soon enough a new champion comes along, and soon enough, even a new game comes along. You can never go back again, which in many ways is a blessing. But just as surely, there are times I'd bargain with the devil himself to have a second taste of what is now only memory.