

*The Deep Creek
Lake Swan —
She's Back!*

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

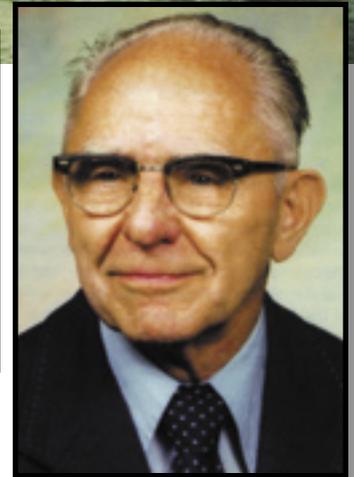
Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

Deep Creek Lake has been blessed with caring residents who have donated both time and resources to the community. Noel Obenshain was one of these special residents. An employee of Westvaco, a local paper plant, Mr. Obenshain has been credited with many patent worthy inventions. Yet his resourcefulness was not limited to his place of employment. A variety of interests satisfied rich curiosity during his long life in Garrett County. Among Mr. Obenshain's chief interests were wild birds that he loved to watch and feed regularly. His favorite were the Trumpeter swans, graceful birds that provided him inspiration for another creative idea and one that would attract attention for decades—a swan boat that glided across Deep Creek Lake carrying passengers of all ages. Mr. Obenshain's initial inspiration was quickly transferred into action as a design for the unique craft began in January 1963. A miniature, prototype model was completed within a month, and actual construction on the full size boat began shortly thereafter. The swan made her Deep Creek Lake debut on July 1, 1964.

The design of the 21-foot swan boat contained novel ideas. Running lights were incorporated into the eye sockets—red for port and green for starboard. The swan's head and neck stretched 14 ½ feet in height and had the ability to lower when approaching the Glendale Bridge and the old Route 219 Bridge. Air horns were also mounted near the swan's bill, and when sounded, the mouth opened as if voicing. Sightseers always responded to the swan's greeting by waving hands and smiling happily. Children were especially thrilled at the sight of Deep Creek's swan and if their parents were lucky enough to own a boat, they could ride as an escort to become better acquainted with the friendly bird. Children without access to a boat did not fear that the swan would forget them; Mr. Obenshain would often stop by docks and board anxiously waiting youngsters.

More conventional aspects of the swan included a 40-horse power, 2-cycle engine that was housed in the tail, providing speeds of up to 12 knots and a passenger load of eight adults.

In her first year of service, 979 passengers had the pleasure of riding on Mr. Obenshain's boat, and over the next 25 years the passenger list exceeded 7,000 entries. For nearly two decades, afternoons were the most likely



Top: The Swan boat, driven by Noel Obenshain (right), as it glides the Lake in 1964. Above left: The "Swan", ready for launch on Deep Creek Lake, was invented and built by Mr. Obenshain.

times to spot the swan. Unfortunately, the swan's excursions became less frequent as the years passed, and by 1990, they ended altogether. The graceful bird had aged and was not feeling well. Paint was flaking and wood was creaking. Many repairs were necessary to make the craft passenger-ready and her demise was inevitable.

Mr. Obenshain donated the boat to a local marina in hopes that she would be repaired and made worthy of her former service. Unfortunately, repairs were not forthcoming, and the once proud bird suffered through years of further neglect and deterioration. Mr. Obenshain's passing in December of 1994 seemed to be the final goodbye as no interest was expressed in healing the novel creation. The swan's demise was gradual, uneventful, and even quiet, a fate hardly befitting her grander days.

During the last decade swan stories became topics of conversation for residents and visitors alike as much speculation surrounded the bird's location and demise. Fortunately,

Attention to detail—Ervin Sweitzer in the tedious process of restoring the original dashboard in every detail. Some of the dash parts might need to be replaced with new “look-a-likes”. Much time is spent in disassembly, cleaning, stripping, polishing or painting to original finish or color.





Cover Inset Photo: Janet Lawson, left, Ervin Sweitzer, center and son Ben Sweitzer, right, prepare to raise the new swan head into place; no easy task considering its size and weight. Once in place, the head will raise and lower the way the original did for transport and, if needed, passing under Lake bridges.

Above Right: Janet Lawson with the tail section after many hours of sanding and matching paint to the original shade of white.



Mr. Obenshain's swan did not meet the ultimate, terrible fate of the scrapheap. To the contrary, she has recently taken on powers associated with the mythical Greek phoenix, rising from the ashes.

The swan's fate recently became entwined with the Madson family, Pittsburgh residents who call Thousand Acres their summer home. During a summer excursion to Deep Creek Lake several years ago, Mark Madson explained to his son, Mac, "the legend of the swan and how neat it was to see it cross the lake when I was younger. My son asked where the swan was now, and I didn't know. So, we decided to hunt for it." Father and son began their quests to locate the swan by driving around the lake to search for likely nesting spots. Finally, between two rusty warehouse buildings, Mac spotted the swan's neck. A quick examination determined the swan's dilapidated condition would require extensive repair work if she would ever sail lake waters again. A deal was struck with the swan's owner and she was taken to the Madson property at Thousand Acres.

Deep Creek Lake Celebrates 80 Years

After examining and disassembling sections, the Madsons confirmed that the wood suffered from moisture damage and was beyond repair. At that point a decision was made to use the swan as a pattern for creating a new boat. Mark Madson's interest and subsequent research efforts into the swan's origins, uncovered photographs, diagrams and notes from Mr. Obenshain that were instrumental in planning the new vessel. Since more than basic repairs were necessary, the Madson family contacted a Garrett County craftsman about the possibility of building a new craft based on Mr. Obenshain's original design. The Madsons consequently entrusted the boat to Ervin Sweitzer of Grantsville, Maryland, a long time acquaintance of the family and a person who watched Mr. Obenshain build the first swan in the early 1960's. Mark Madson recalled, "My father knew Ervin for a long time and we knew the great quality of his work."

Ervin Sweitzer was excited to undertake the project. "I watched the swan being built when I was 10 years old because I knew Mr. Obenshain. When the boat came to me, outside sections were damaged and the tail was completely rotten. I took the swan apart to get a pattern and to make sure the new swan boat would be the same as the first one. The most difficult parts to work with so far were the head and tail, both curved pieces." Ben Sweitzer, Ervin's son, has also been busy with rebuilding. The new swan is nesting in Mr. Sweitzer's garage. The 13-foot neck and head are finished, including an operating airhorn and colored running lights. The tail section is also receiving finishing touches.

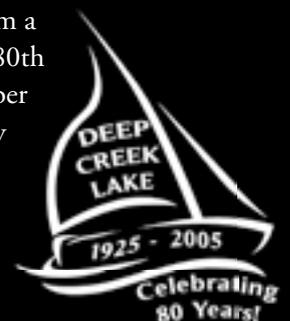
Disassembling the swan revealed much about the boat's construction and later modifications. Original pontoons were polystyrene covered with fiberglass but in time were penetrated by water and found to be useless. The gear box and its motor have been replaced by a stronger and more modern system as has the mechanism used to raise and lower the rear tail light. These new mechanical systems

continued on page 32



When the swan makes its debut this summer, it will also be the 80th anniversary of Deep Creek Lake. Ground was broken for the lake on November 1, 1923. The purpose of the project was to provide hydroelectric power service for the Pennsylvania Electric Power Corporation of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. An ambitious undertaking, 8,000 acres of land was purchased, including many farms. A railroad connection from Oakland, Maryland, became necessary to transport heavy equipment and materials to excavate the dam site. Stone crushing machinery for quarry use added to the massive building effort.

The hydroelectric system provided electrical service to distant customers but offered little else in the way of recreational activities and services during its early years. The only population center was McHenry, a village that offered three general merchandise stores and a post office. Fishing and boating activities were primarily weekend events for vacationers from Pennsylvania, a trend that continued into the 1950's and 1960's. Deep Creek Lake's rapid development and transformation into a premiere vacation destination site began during the 1970's due to completion of Interstate 68, the building of condominiums and development of a sewerage system. Today, Deep Creek Lake continues to grow and offers year round activities, drawing visitors from a wide region. To celebrate the lake's 80th birthday, the Garrett County Chamber of Commerce is planning a birthday party at the Discovery Center, near Deep Creek Lake State Park, in September. Check the website for a time and date.



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*The Deep Creek Lake Swan
 continued from page 11*

were designed and constructed by engineers at the Madson plant in Pittsburgh. The dashboard's compass, speedometer, amp gauge, and array of light switches await further evaluation before they are installed or replaced. A deteriorated Chrysler steering wheel will be replaced with a similar model. The dashboard's original white paint, in poor condition, is being matched closely with the new paint in the original color. Janet Lawson, who is assisting in the rebuilding process stated, "We matched the paint as closely as possible on the entire boat. The only paint difference is a non-skid floor paint we are using for safety reasons." A builder's plate once fastened to the dashboard reading, "Designed and Built by D. Noel Obenshain. Started 1-15-63. Launched 7-1-64," will definitely be polished and refastened, along with a new plate dated 2005.

Ervin Sweitzer's work is almost complete and a summertime 2005 launching is planned. Mark Madson will host a launching party in late June at an appropriate lakeside venue. The Madsons also plan to continue Mr. Obenshain's tradition of offering public rides, bringing happiness to new generations of children whose only knowledge of the swan has been through the fond memories of parents and grandparents. So, when you see the swan gliding across Deep Creek Lake this summer, be sure to smile and wave to make her feel at home.

Mountain Discoveries *would like to thank Mr. Ed King for his informative article on the swan that appeared in The Republican more than a decade ago.*



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