

EDITOR'S PICK FEATURED

The Haunted History of Lake Shawnee

By Michelle James REGISTER-HERALD LIFESTYLES EDITOR
Oct 25, 2015



1 of 4



Image by Jonathan Hannain addition to skeletal remains, White says artifacts like this pot and pipe were discovered during the dig.



“Listen to this one,” Chris White says, putting his cell phone on speaker as a distinctly British voice rings out.

The caller is a writer with the “Telegraph of London” and he’s cleared out a few days on his schedule to travel to meet with Chris, to tour the historic property his family purchased nearly 30 years ago.

Turns out tiny Lake Shawnee in Mercer County has developed quite a following in the Internet age.

The road that leads to Lake Shawnee is easy to miss, and many drive by it on their first visit. The lake itself is small and it’s by no means a traditional lake. Families don’t vacation there or even spend a warm summers’ day swimming.

But Lake Shawnee is a tourist destination all the same.

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It is on that land that Mitchell Clay, Mercer County’s first white settler, and his family made their home in 1775. And eight years later, Shawnee Indians killed two of his children, Tabitha and Bartley, and captured a third, Ezekiel. Clay and a posse tracked the group to Ohio, but his son was burned at the stake.

In the 1920s, businessman Conley T. Snidow bought the property to build an amusement park — Lake Shawnee.

White has done much research since his family purchased the property in 1986, but says he doesn't know much about the early years of the park. He paints a picture of a busy, popular Lake Shawnee in the '40s, '50s and '60s, however.

"They had a cement swimming pond with a bath house in front of it and they rented wool bathing suits for 15 cents," White says, with a smile, adding the "pond" had two water slides and several diving boards.

Lake Shawnee, White says, also featured a speakeasy and a dance hall. Of course, the amusement park had rides — the Ferris wheel and swings drew large crowds.

Despite its popularity, the park was marred by tragedy, including the drowning deaths of two boys — one in the lake, which wasn't used for swimming, and another in the pond. It was the 1966 death of a young girl on the swings, however, that led to Lake Shawnee's closure. The accident, White said, occurred when a truck delivering drinks to the park backed into the swings while attempting to turn around.

"The park closed because of the deaths," he said.

So Lake Shawnee, the site of such violence, joy and tragedy, went quiet. But in the 1980s, White's family — his now deceased father Gaylord had worked at the park in his youth — decided to try its hand at reopening the park.

The old rides had been sold off, but the Whites decided the swings and a Ferris wheel were necessary to revive Lake Shawnee. They brought in a Ferris wheel, but the acquisition of swings, White says, is "an interesting story."

"We found a swing in New Jersey, loaded it up and brought it back," he said. "When we got here, we ran the serial numbers, and found it was the exact same swing that used to be here."

With the core rides in place, the Whites added some smaller "kiddie rides," paddleboats, bumper boats and a stage for entertainment. On the 4th of July weekend in 1987, the Whites had bands playing 24 hours a day, and with an admission of just \$1, he said he thinks they saw close to 10,000 people.

After three years, though, skyrocketing insurance rates forced the closure of the amusement park and the Whites began holding fishing tournaments and other events to keep the property active.

While working on a tract of land for "mud bogging" in the early 1990s, the Whites made a startling find.

"We were bulldozing and we started finding artifacts," White said. "We found arrowheads, pottery and pots. So we stopped. We said, 'This is pretty interesting. Let's get somebody out here and see what we can do.'"

A team from Marshall University, White said, spent several years at Lake Shawnee uncovering artifacts and graves.

"They stopped digging when they started finding kids' graves," he said, adding the experts say they believe there are about 3,000 bodies buried there. "The only thing they can figure out happened was they got some kind of flu or something and to protect the rest of their tribe, everyone except for the kids and the elderly left. It's sad, but Marshall thinks that's what wiped out this Shawnee tribe back in the 1700s."

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In the mid-to-late 1990s, Gaylord, his wife Jewell and their son Gay, who passed away in 2013, began offering campfire stories and tours of Lake Shawnee during Halloween week.

With so much tragedy and history at one place, interest in Lake Shawnee grew. Paranormal groups and ghost hunters began contacting the Whites for permission to visit. In recent years, those phone calls have increased significantly as people read about Lake Shawnee on the Internet.

Those calls haven't just been from individuals, though, as networks such as the Travel Channel, Discovery Channel, ABC Family and National Geographic have all filmed on location at Lake Shawnee. White has even done a phone interview with the Howard Stern Show.

Everyone, he says, wants to know if Lake Shawnee is haunted.

"What's your definition of haunted?" he asks. "I don't have one, but there are strange things that happen here all the time."

When the Discovery Channel filmed, White says one of its investigators got stuck in the old ticket booth and went into such a panic she had to go to the hospital in Princeton. "She couldn't get out and she was yelling for help," he said.

"It was a push door and she was pushing."

White won't speak of any personal "creepy" Lake Shawnee experiences. He does, however, say his father had an encounter with the little girl who lost her life on the swings 49 years ago.

"Dad was on the tractor mowing the field and he kept feeling a weight on his shoulders," White said. "He didn't know what it was, so one day he felt the weight and he turned around and the little girl from the swings was there. She was in a ruffled dress and she just appeared. He wasn't scared, but the only thing he could think of was, 'Well, if you like this tractor so much, I'm going to give it to you.'

"So he got off of it and left it sitting there. It's still sitting where he left it in the late '90s."

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With the deaths of both her husbands and oldest son, Jewell White said she wasn't sure how she would continue to run Lake Shawnee, so she called upon her other children for assistance.

Today, she and Chris, along with other volunteers, take care of the property, give tours, answer calls and take care of the website. In 2014, Lake Shawnee's Halloween activities underwent a bit of a change as they shifted from campfire tales and tour to the "Dark Carnival Lake Nightmare" haunted attraction that went around the lake, swings and Ferris wheel.

This year, The Dark Carnival/Lake Nightmare will continue, but will be confined to a certain area of the lake. The campfire history and self-guided tour will be reinstated, allowing visitors to walk around the swings and Ferris wheel area and visit the grave of the Clay children, taking pictures if they wish.

Jewell White says she was worried her husband and oldest son might not be happy with the changes last year, as they were opposed to changing anything about the Halloween campfire week.

An image captured inside a bus her son used to work in, however, proved to her he was there and was OK with it. And security video of a Ferris wheel safety bar unfastening in the middle of the night while no one was around showed her her husband was there, as well.

"He was very particular about the Ferris wheel," she said. "He was always worried about the lock, so to me, this was him. He said it was 'OK.'

"It makes me happy," she said, watching the video with tears in her eyes. "I'm just so glad to know that they're here. Even though I already knew it myself, I have this so I can prove it to others."

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Lake Shawnee's final two night's of Halloween attractions are scheduled for Friday and Saturday from 8 p.m. to midnight. Tickets can be purchased online or at the gate.

Lake Shawnee

470 Matoaka Road

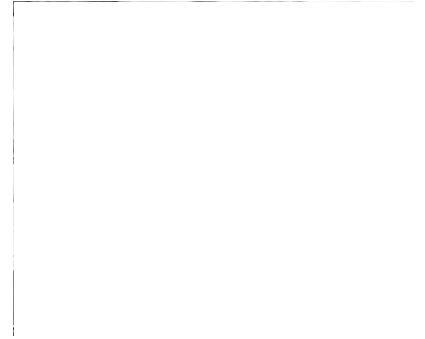
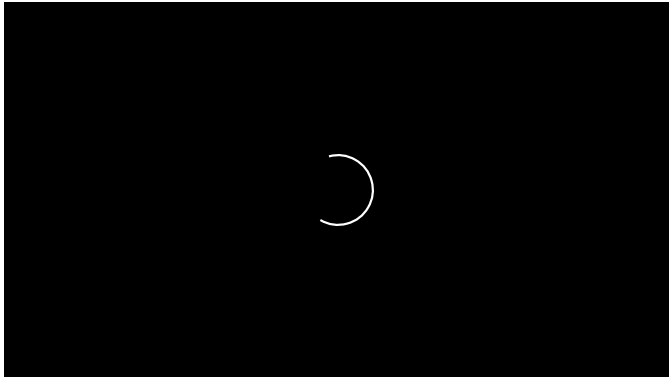
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1