Hanson’s Amusement Park. Artwork by Dorothy Ricci
A. The Lehigh Valley Picnic Grounds

In earlier years railroads and trolley companies stimulated passenger traffic by constructing parks at scenic areas along the rail lines. In the Wyoming Valley the Central Railroad of New Jersey opened Mountain Park near Wilkes-Barre in 1870; the Lehigh Valley Railroad opened Luzerne Grove in the Nanticoke area in 1882. Sans Souci Park in Hanover Township and Fernbrook Park in Dallas are examples of picnic and amusement parks originally created by Wyoming Valley trolley companies. After the Lehigh Valley Railroad purchased the Harvey’s Lake and Wilkes-Barre Railroad in 1887, it planned to develop a major resort along the lakeshore. In November 1889 several tracts of land between Alderson and Barnum Place were purchased by the railroad in order to construct the Lehigh Valley Picnic Grounds.

By early June 1891 the Lehigh Valley Railroad was preparing to open its splendid new park at the Lake. The railroad was making a special effort this year to landscape all its depots and grounds in the region, and the railroad had a force of men making last minute preparations at the Picnic Grounds at the Lake. Well-shaded and ideally located, the major attraction of the park was the dance pavilion, boasted as the largest in the region. On June 9, 1891, twenty train cars, run in three sections, transported the Odd Fellows from Wilkes-Barre and Pittston for the first major picnic at the new park. William Bond had launched his Big Boat, the new seventy foot steamer, a few weeks earlier and he was ready for the event. After the addition of the park to the Lake’s attractions, Albert Lewis predicted that Harvey’s Lake would become the most popular resort in the state.

On the lakeshore at the new Picnic Grounds the railroad built an immense L-shaped dock. It was 180 feet long with a ninety foot arm. The dock would accommodate Bond’s Big Boat, his smaller City Charter and the Mistletoe, a smaller steamer owned by the Rhoads Hotel. Bathing houses were also constructed at this time along the park’s shoreline.

The Lehigh Valley Picnic Grounds was an immediate success. In the 1891 season significant numbers of lodge, community and religious groups organized Lehigh Valley Railroad excursion trips to the Lake park. On June 16, 1891, the Schuylkill Press Association sponsored an excursion from Pottsville to the Lake park but with limited dining facilities there the newspaper men later took steamboats across the Lake to the Lake House for dinner. By July the railroad reported “big business” on the Lake line including a late July day when the Forty Fort Band and Luzerne Drum Corps held a huge picnic excursion to the park. Ten rail cars arrived at the Picnic Grounds and some guests found it premature or unfinished while a picnicker, Isaac Stout, broke a leg on a swing.

At this time rail passengers had to travel from Wilkes-Barre to Coxton at Pittston and then down the west side of the Valley to connect to the Lehigh Valley Railroad at Luzerne to the Lake. Shortly the Lehigh Valley Railroad would build
a railroad bridge across the river at Plains to the West Side at Luzerne to avoid the Coxton trips. The rail in 1891 to the Lake from Coxton took one hour.

Additional features for the 1892 year were planned. By May 1892 the dance pavilion was being prepared for another season’s use. C. F. Cook, the Wilkes-Barre photographer, opened a gallery at the Picnic Grounds in June. The steamer dock, which was moved several feet by the winter ice, was repaired, but plans by the railroad to construct a large hotel at the park grounds for the 1892 season were never completed. Perhaps the railroad found it was already overextended to the costly Glen Summit Hotel which the railroad built in 1884. The Lehigh Valley Railroad previously had a picnic ground, opened in 1882, at Luzerne Grove, near Wanamie outside of Nanticoke. The precise location is not known but it was likely the later site of the Truesdale Colliery. In late June 1894 the railroad announced the closure of Luzerne Grove. The Luzerne Grove equipment, swings, dumb bells, swinging clubs, trapeze bars and other items were relocated to the Lake park. A merry-go-round from Luzerne Grove was also to be moved to the Lake – but it is unclear if it occurred.

For a decade the Picnic Grounds served as a popular park for families to gather for picnics and for couples to stroll along the Lake shore. In 1903 the park grounds were still primarily shaded areas with picnic tables. A Merry-Go-Round was operating now at the park, but the only other amusement device at this time was a crude bowling alley. The railroad line from Alderson ran along the lakeshore and turned into the park to leave passengers at the small Harvey’s Lake substation, which was located behind the dance pavilion. Passenger cars chartered for picnic excursions would lay over on a side track at the park for the day. Each day regular passenger and freight service trains passed through the Picnic Grounds on the line to Noxen and northern points as far as Towanda. A bridge over the railroad tracks in the rear of the park provided access to a popular ball field. W. F. Clark now held the photograph gallery in the front of the park at Noxen Road.

For some reason not explained the Lehigh Valley Railroad removed the merry-go-round at the end of the 1903 season. D. E. Frantz had a ten year lease to operate the concession and he sued the railroad for violation of the lease. A jury in October 1904 awarded $1,220.75 in damages to Frantz. The railroad sought a new trial but it was denied.

In March 1906 the Lehigh Valley Railroad leased the park for five years to John A. Redington, Sr., who was building the Redington Hotel in Wilkes-Barre. Redington (d. 1941) was born in Ireland and immigrated to White Haven in 1883 to work with the Lehigh Valley Railroad. In 1895 he relocated to Wilkes-Barre to manage a hotel near the Lehigh Valley Railroad Station and in October 1906 he opened the Hotel Redington opposite the railroad station. The seven-story hotel is now part of the Best Western – Genetti Hotel complex at the corner of West Market and North Pennsylvania Avenue in Wilkes-Barre. Redington had leased the Oneonta Hotel at Sunset in 1901-1905 but relinquished management in 1906 to operate the picnic grounds. But late in the same year, on December 12, 1906, the dance pavilion was lost to fire along with the original carousel that had been stored inside the pavilion for the winter.

The Lehigh Valley Picnic Grounds did not open in 1907 and 1908.
Cottagers actually welcomed the closure of the park. The large crowds at the park were annoying to the Lake residents and the absence of Sunday excursion trains was particularly welcome. The Lehigh Valley Railroad also was not anxious to reopen the park stating it made too little money from its operation and were pleased to have leased it.

Redington and his business associates planned to expand the park and enlarge the park’s railroad station facilities in addition to a general reconstruction of the park. Conversion of the Picnic Grounds to an amusement park began in May 1909. The grounds were cleared of the 1906 fire debris. The Redington crews began construction of a new dance pavilion, boat and bath houses and picnic areas. But a plan to extend the pavilion over the Lake did not materialize. A large athletic field primarily for baseball and races was laid out. The railroad would offer a fifty cent round-trip fare from Wilkes-Barre to promote the park and a discount for group excursions. The $100,000.00 park makeover was contracted to the Chicago Amusement Company. Additional park features would be a merry-go-round, shooting gallery, photograph gallery, bowling alley, fish pond, and other amusement stands. The merry-go-round may have been a concession along Noxen Road operated by H. G. Seibert. There would be three round-trips daily from the city and four on Sundays. The railroad built and extended rail switches at the park to accommodate parking of passenger rail cars at the grounds. The company was still finishing the pavilion’s dance floor in late June and by July 4, the picnic grounds were packed daily. The traction company also had crowded cars on the runs from the city to Sunset where steamboats could take visitors across the Lake to the railroad park. In this year an arcade with “moving picture” machines was added and a Ferris Wheel was constructed. An early concession owner at the park was Charles Shelley. In 1909 Shelley began to build a small Roller Coaster, but the Coaster would not be open to the public until the following season.

On July 4, 1910, the record-breaking crowd at the Picnic Grounds bought 15,000 tickets to the new figure-eight Coaster. The Roller Coaster ran single cars, each carrying four to six passengers. The Coaster had its own organ for musical accompaniment. The Miniature Railroad owned by Fred Thomas was also added to the park. The steam operated train, an exact replica of a steam locomotive, was built in Tonawanda, New York. The operator sat on the tender car and pulled the passenger coaches. The coal-fired engine of the Miniature Railroad was real enough to throw cinders that could irritate the eyes of youthful riders, especially when the train passed through a tunnel.

The Lake was cresting as a major resort in 1910. There were daily train excursions planned for all of July and August. In addition to the park amusements, hundreds would crowd the park beach. Boating parties were common as tourists could take steamboat rides or sightseeing launches around the Lake. Other attractions were also drawn to the Picnic Grounds. During the 1910 season, arrests at the Picnic Grounds for gambling and liquor violations kept Squire Winfield Perrego busy. Presumably, Redington obtained another five-year lease extension for the park in 1911.

August 1911 was a local election season. Politicians plastered the fencing along the Picnic Ground with political posters. But someone painted “Rogue's Gallery” over the twenty-seven posters.
During this time, too, the park attracted family reunions, particularly among the pioneering families of the Lake region: Wilson, Kocher, Allen, Anderson are a few examples. Some returned to the park for decades.

The Lake crowds at the park immediately led to accidents. In early August 1910 a hail storm fell over the Lake and four people on the merry-go-round at the park were struck by lightning. Mrs. Charles Hyde was rendered unconscious but all four survived. In mid-July 1912 eight year old Adele Lewis was thrown from the merry-go-round and fractured her left leg.

In early August 1913 twenty-two year old Charles Deets, of Kingston, was at bat during a Saturday baseball game at the park for the Meeker team. Deets had three balls and a strike when the next pitch by Harvey Allen, on the Alderson team, struck Deets in the chest. A “ball” was called and Deets started to trot to first base – when he fell unconscious and died. Three doctors drawn from the picnic crowd were unable to revive Deets. The death was attributed to a previously unknown heart defect.

At the same time Charles Shelley built the coaster, he built the Shoot-the-Chute, an enormous attraction. The Shoot-the-Chute was about sixty feet high and was built along the water's edge, next to the steamboat landing. The wooden slide had rows of small rollers down the entire length of the long chute. Single, double or triple sleds were rented by the hour. The sleds were taken up a long ramp and three flights of stairs to the top of the Shoot-the-Chute. With elbows and legs tucked in and hands gripping the rope, youths raced the sleds down the Chute finishing with a grand splash into the Lake. A fence had to be constructed around the Chute in July 1913 to prohibit young swimmers from flirting too closely with the danger area.

In April 1914 the park announced the expansion of the Lake front bath houses and a new arcade with other improvements to be planned. The 1913 and 1914 seasons also banned alcohol at the park. A 261 foot deep artesian was also dug to supply the park with fresh water.

In the spring of 1915, a new steam operated Merry-Go-Round was added to the Picnic Grounds. The Merry-Go-Round, with forty-four wooden horses and two chariots, would run until the park’s closure. The ride was built in 1909 by the W. F. Mangels Company of Coney Island, New York. In the same year, the park prohibited swimming from the steamboat landing because children would swim too close to the steamboats. Children could also enter the swimming area from the landing and avoid the usual entrance fee.

In April 1916 the Lehigh Valley Railroad renewed the park lease with Redington for fifteen years. As with earlier leases, the railroad reserved its track line through the park, and sale of liquor in the park was prohibited, a condition frequently violated by transient and unlicensed salesmen.

In May 1916 three buildings serving the park were lost in a fire: Charles Lord’s restaurant, W. J. Diamond’s novelty and refreshment stand, and A. Wipple’s restaurant. Arson was suspected. The fire was discovered by Charles Seibert, park watchman, and while George Clark’s photo studio was also afire, the building was saved. Redington made a generous donation to the Lake’s “bucket brigade.”
Dance Pavilion (later Dodgem) and Picnic Grounds Beach c.1920
Redington was assisted in the management of the park by Charles Lee and George Heller. Charles S. Lee (d. 1926) had wide experience in the railroad business in New England, Middle West and Colorado before joining the Lehigh Valley Railroad in 1893 where he supervised passenger service for the railroad. George Heller (d. 1923) was from Allentown but spent his professional life in Wilkes-Barre as the regional ticket and passenger agent for the Lehigh Valley Railroad. He was the booking agent for group excursions to the Lake park, working from the Public Square office. Until this time the original restaurant on the Lake road was open-ended with an enclosed kitchen in the center. On July 4, 1921, the ten-piece MacLuskie’s Orchestra provided afternoon and evening dance music for the opening of the new dance pavilion.

Alfred Wintersteen (d. 1933) was a Philadelphia orphan raised by friends in Lehman. He relocated as a young adult to the Bald Mountain area near Plains and became a prosperous dairy farmer.

On April 6, 1917, the United States entered World War I. The Lehigh Valley Railroad was among the nation’s major carriers of coal and iron ore. In May 1917 the railroad announced that it was suspending “picnic excursions” to Harvey’s Lake for the balance of the War to conserve railroad equipment, fuel and employees for the war effort. Other resorts also had their special excursion trains cancelled by other regional railroads.

Redington already had seventy excursions booked for the 1917 Summer season. These parties had to book travel over the Wilkes-Barre to Harvey’s Lake trolley line to Sunset and take the Lake Transit Company steamboats from Sunset to the picnic grounds. The park lost additional bookings as groups chose to take the trolley to Fernbrook Park in Dallas rather than the trolley – steamboat transfer at the Lake. The end of the War in 1918 did not immediately reinstate railroad picnic excursions to the Lake. The Lehigh Valley Railroad did not permit another picnic excursion to the Lake until July 1921 when wounded and disabled WWI veterans at the Wilkes-Barre Business College were taken to the Picnic Grounds. Another excursion was permitted by the railroad on September 11, 1921, when the Lehigh Valley Railroad Veteran Employees’ Association held its annual meeting and reunion at the Lake. Trains arrived from Buffalo, Jersey City and Wilkes-Barre.

In the meantime Redington constructed a new dancing and restaurant pavilion in early 1921 along the Lake road. The principal dance and restaurant facility would remain at this site for the rest of the park’s history. The dancing area was on the second floor. The formal opening was in early June with 400 guests from area Rotary and Kiwanis clubs. Harvey’s Lake Park was now advertised as the most beautiful “One Day Amusement Park in the State.” Alfred Wintersteen managed the restaurant. Edward M. Glynn from Broadway, New York City, was retained by Redington to manage the dancing facility for the Summer.

### B. Harvey’s Lake Picnic Grounds

Redington, Lee, Heller and Wintersteen planned to purchase the park from the railroad and in anticipation of the sale, the four men created the Harvey’s Lake Park Company in 1922. On July 5, 1923, however, the railroad sold the park directly to Redington who, in turn, leased the park to the new corporation which generally still used the name Harvey’s Lake.
Picnic Ground or Grounds. Other transactions over operation of the park would follow. The park corporation subleased the park to Redington and Lee. In October 1923 Redington and Lee, in turn, leased the park to Alfred Wintersteen for fifteen years. Harvey’s Lake Park totaled twenty-five acres. But Redington had also purchased from the railroad a large undeveloped area adjacent to the park. He retained the larger tract and in 1925 Redington began to sell housing lots in the area he called Lakeview Terrace.

Through the late 1920’s there were a number of well-known concession owners who provided enjoyment to thousands of park visitors. The restaurant and some novelty stands were operated by Gus Condaras. D. P. Thomas managed the Shooting Gallery and would also introduce the Lake crowds to Bingo, a new and lasting attraction. Tommy Williams had the Penny Arcade and Whip. Williams had also acquired the Roller Coaster from Shelley. Wintersteen converted the dance pavilion behind the restaurant into the Dodgem ride. Nettie Wintersteen managed the Dodgem ride and assisted her husband, Alfred Wintersteen, in the management of the park. For years the beach was supervised by Howard Major who also managed the Shoot-the-Chute, which had been acquired by the park owners from Shelley. The Noxen Road was also an area growing with attractions. Irwin A. Rood, the West Corner grocer, had a ten-pin alley and game stands on the park side of the Noxen Road until 1933. During the Redington and Wintersteen years the park was equally called the Lehigh Valley Picnic Grounds or the Harvey’s Lake Picnic Grounds. Gradually, the latter name gained more usage.

C. John E. Hanson

In May 1930 the lease with Wintersteen was merged into a sale of the park to Nettie Wintersteen since her husband, Alfred Wintersteen, had become disabled. Nettie Wintersteen (d. 1945) was born at Bald Mountain. She was a music teacher in Miners Mills and Parsons and moved to Kingston upon her marriage to Alfred Wintersteen. In 1929 John E. Hanson joined Nettie Wintersteen in the management of the park, and when the May 1930 sale of Wintersteen was arranged, Wintersteen sold a one-half interest in the park to Hanson.

John Edwin Hanson was born in the Parsons section of Wilkes-Barre. During World War I he served in the U.S. Army in Baltimore and by 1930 he was a well-known home contractor in Kingston who wintered at a home in Miami Shores, Florida. He married Helen Rodouski, a native of Toronto, Canada. Helen Hanson managed a variety of tasks at the park over the years.

Hanson had a flair for unusual attractions to draw crowds to the park. For Labor Day 1930 Hanson engaged Capt. A. B. Henderson, a seaman, to exhibit a giant octopus at the park. Henderson claimed the octopus was the largest in captivity and he offered stories of adventures in Alaska and treasure hunting.

In the spring of 1931, the sixty-five foot high Roller Coaster was built by John A. Miller and Oscar E. Bittler at a cost of $10,825.00. The Roller Coaster was built over the Lehigh Valley rail line which turned from the Lake’s shoreline and passed through the Picnic Grounds. The Speed Hound, the name of the Roller Coaster, was not generally used, although the coaster itself enjoyed great popularity. The name Speed Hound
John A. Redington late in life. Alfred Wintersteen, left in skee ball court
Munchower Studio and Ethel Anderson, daughter of Acoma Capt. G. M. Anderson
was selected from a contest the park held from naming entries submitted by young girls. The winner, not identified in the news accounts, received a season pass to the park. For a time the park advertised the new roller coaster as the “New Long Aeroplane Drop Roller Coaster.”

In earlier years, the park closed in the early evening, except on special occasions and holidays, when it remained open until 8:00 P.M. The restaurant was always open later in the evening because it had a Delco battery plant. Electric lighting was not in general use at the Lake until 1927, and Hanson arranged to light the park for late evening use, especially for graduation parties after the new Roller Coaster was built. The Merry-Go-Round was also converted to electric operation.

Redington had retained ownership of the bathing beach and bathhouses in the May 1930 sale to Nettie Wintersteen. Still, Wintersteen and Hanson promoted beach attractions as much as the park and amusements. The Picnic Grounds helped to promote annual boat races, usually in a triangular two and one-half mile course around the Lake, with the Picnic Grounds as a favorite viewing point. For a time Alex, a tame bear, delighted the crowds as he wrestled the local talent. The bear was originally owned by Ralph A. Davis, who raffled the bear to Emory Newell of Noxen in late July 1931 and there was considerable fanfare as Alex wrestled Howard Johnson of Noxen. It was the time of the five cent hot dog, and the Picnic Grounds restaurant raffled a free bike every Sunday. The Picnic Grounds restaurant was a favorite stop of picnic crowds for delicious Harrington’s ice cream, which was shipped to the park on the train from its manufacturer in Dushore. Of course, Charles Lord’s was also a popular roadside stop and in one weekend at this time he sold 1,500 hot dogs.

Besides the roller coaster the park in 1931 advertised a children’s coaster, caterpillar, merry-go-round, whip, Hey-Day, miniature railway, ferris wheel, penny arcade, shooting gallery, Dodge-Em, bingo and dancing each afternoon and evening with Benny Jacobs and the Yellow Jackets. For July 4, 1931, there were also two sets of motorboat races based from the park. Italian Day was also a new feature in 1931 when 20,000 people of Italian descent attended the park with a 6:00 P.M. floor show with Russ Andaloro and his orchestra and 9:00 P.M. fireworks.

For Labor Day 1931 Hanson advertised a 5,000 foot parachute jump into the Lake and awarded a park guest a Chevrolet sedan to Genevieve Williams from Baltimore, Maryland. But due to high winds the parachute jumper missed the Lake and landed in nearby woods. An airplane show had to be cancelled due to the winds.

In late June 1933 airplane stunts over the Lake were the attraction for Russian (or Rusin) Day at the park. The largest picnic of the season was always the Coxton Yards Welfare Association, whose annual excursions to the Lake began in 1925. In 1933 the Coxton Yards excursion brought thirty train cars of guests to the Lake. To close the 1933 season the Picnic Grounds offered Children’s Day in mid-September and 15,000 children were offered free rides and refreshments.

In May 1934 Redington agreed to sell the beach to Wintersteen and Hanson. For the 1934 season the owners assumed direct control of the bathing area; Howard Major moved to a corner of the beach next to Lord’s restaurant where Major rented canoes and rowboats for another two decades. At the time of the sale, the beach had two hundred feet of boardwalk in the water and a forty-foot high diving platform.
There was no admission charge to the beach, although there was a small charge for use of the bathhouses.

In late June 1934 one of the Lake’s most tragic accidents occurred at the Picnic Grounds. Joseph Bradbury, who was twenty years old, arrived from Luzerne with his family. He had constructed a diving helmet from a hot-water heater. Glass was inserted for viewing and a garden hose was extended from the helmet for breathing. However, Bradbury made the mistake of tying a thirty-five pound stone to himself for the dive into the Lake. The apparatus failed and Bradbury was unable to lift himself to the surface. After Bradbury was underwater for seven minutes, George Lutz, Sidney Ganaposki and Elwood Davis, lifeguards at the beach, tried to rescue him, but it was too late.

By March 1935 Alfred Wintersteen had died, and Nettie Wintersteen sold her one-half interest in the park to John Hanson. However, Wintersteen retained ownership of the Merry-Go-Round and Dodgem in the 1935 sale. She then transferred the Merry-Go-Round to her daughter, Genevieve Wintersteen Fisk, and the Dodgem to her son, Delmar Wintersteen. At the time of the sale, the park also had the Munchower photo gallery that offered photographs of visitors, often with Munchower’s pet goat. Edwin F. Munshower (d. 1942) from suburban Philadelphia began his summer Lake studio in 1912 at the Picnic Grounds. By the mid-1930s the Picnic Grounds also housed a Shooting Gallery, Arcade, Fun House, Carousel, Whip, Miniature Railway and two Coasters. The sale included Orville Walton’s Pretzel Ride, later known as Pirate’s Cove, which was built in 1934. Walton was another of the popular concession owners who spent years at the park. The concession owners would develop a game or ride with ground lease payments to the park owners. A familiar sight in these early years was the large icehouse which served the park. It stood near the front of the park where the Bingo stand was later located. Before refrigeration, all of the Lake’s amusement and refreshment facilities acquired a season’s supply of ice during the winter for summer use.

With the sale a number of changes shortly occurred at the park grounds. For some time Martha Higgins Condaras had assisted Alfred Wintersteen as a bookkeeper for the park. She also operated a gas station at the park near the icehouse. Her husband, Gus Condaras, leased the restaurant at the park for several years. After Hanson acquired the park, Gus Condaras built the Rex later renamed the Colony restaurant along Noxen Road across from the park. The site formerly held a restaurant owned by Frank Gilday. Martha Condaras also left the park and managed other Lake concessions including a stand at Sunset. Finally, she acquired a wedge-shaped lot at the intersection of the Lake and Noxen Roads, next to the Rex site, and opened a popular ice cream and snack shop.

Even under the ownership of John E. Hanson the park retained its name as the Harvey’s Lake Picnic Grounds or Ground. Only in John Hanson’s later years did the park carry the Hanson name, and only occasionally in its public ads.

Unlike the Redington years, when the Picnic Grounds were largely dependent on the exhaustive booking of group picnics, the Hanson years were characterized by the promotion of the Picnic Grounds as an amusement center. While picnics were still popular, they were not the fashion of the time. Hanson drew crowds to the Lake with a number of promotional devices, particularly along the water front. For a few years parachute drops in the water were a glorious attraction. Swimming and
diving shows also complemented the water sports. The park was not neglected in the new era. A popular gimmick during the early 1935 summer was the “buried man” who remained underground for a few weeks. The dances were still popular, and clowns or other special features drew crowds to the park grounds. Near the park grounds, Marion Stetz had a barbershop which served both men and women. For children the Stetz shop had a barber chair built into a play automobile which seemed to settle apprehensive young customers.

The Hanson years were especially notable for the changes to the beach area. On the lakeshore the women’s bathhouse stood next to the old steamboat landing; the men’s bathhouse stood on the other side of the beach. An older bathhouse in the center of the beach was used for an office, equipment rentals, and the ticket booth for the Shoot-the-Chute. After Hanson acquired the beach he dismantled the women’s bathhouse and replaced it with a smaller but wider bathhouse. It was built over the cribbing for the steamboat landing, which was removed since regular steamboat service at the Lake was ending. The new 1937 bathhouse accommodated women on the left and men on the right. On the second floor of the new bathhouse, Hanson had a roller skating rink. In September 1938 thirteen-year old Eleanor Gebler swam from the Picnic Grounds to Sunset – the youngest female known to have made the long-distance swim.

In the early years of the park, a three-tiered platform challenged local divers. The highest platform was forty feet (another source thought forty-eight feet), above the water, which was about twenty feet deep. The second highest platform was thirty-two feet, and the lowest was twenty feet above the water. A fatality occurred when a young man dove inside the dock area into shallow water, a stunt he had successfully performed several times. In early July 1935 Gerald O’Hara, a Scranton bus driver, fractured several ribs after high-diving at the Hanson beach. He had driven a bus load of guests to the park from Scranton and the Scranton Railway Company was called to send another driver to the park to drive the bus passengers home. After the spectacular high-diving platform was damaged by ice, it was replaced with a two-tiered diving platform.

For some time the original docks at the beach were planks attached to floating double barrels set in wooden frames. The hinged double-barrels were actually fifty-gallon drums. When taken out of the water for the off-seasons, they were easily stacked for storage. When the docks were crowded, the planks would sink slightly and float just under the water. The floating docks, however, would be replaced in the early 1930’s by fixed docks. A familiar sight at Hanson’s beach for years was a huge log, nearly three feet in diameter, which was kept in the water for swimmers to roll around. The log came from the Arthur Stull boathouse at Alderson. The framework of the boathouse was set on two of these huge logs which rested on top of the underwater cribbing.

The most unusual act at the Picnic Grounds was “Cowboy” Bill Hubbard, who claimed to have been a movie stuntman. He arrived in July 1936 with the bold announcement that he would drive a motorcycle into the Lake from a specially built forty-foot ramp constructed at the top of the Shoot-the-Chute. In his initial attempt at the stunt, Hubbard’s motorcycle stalled and he failed to get a proper run, landing on his face in the Lake. Despite his injuries the fearless Hubbard continued his Sunday spills into the Lake, drawing thousands of thrill seeking visitors. Hubbard was often injured, but not seriously, and sometimes the crowds were disappointed when a cranky
Merry-Go-Round and Whip, 1935
John and Helen Hanson.
Courtesy of Bruce Hanson
motorcycle would fail. In addition to the motorcycle stunts, the park offered canoe tilting contests and “surf boarding” displays with Elwood Davis and Robert Woolbert. Other young men who worked at the beach and participated in the water entertainment at Hanson’s were George Jones, Jack Dalton and George Lutz. The young men also retrieved the motorcycle from the Lake after Hubbard’s stunts. Hubbard was rumored to have been killed the following summer at another park after diving into the frame of a large well.

Swimming races were also popular at the Lake during the late 1930’s. The races were usually sponsored by the Wyoming Valley Swimming Association and the WPA Recreation League, and the swimmers could qualify for Amateur Athletic Association championship meets. A three-mile triangular course began at the Picnic Grounds. After a one hundred yard swim into the Lake there was a right turn at a buoy for the long leg to Sandy Beach, then a turn at another buoy back to the Picnic Grounds. Two circuits around the course were needed to complete the two-mile distance. In 1938 the Mid-Atlantic AAU long-distance champions were the local team of Irving Roe, Jim Campbell and Elwood Davis. They had won the title in the five-mile Lake Ariel championships a year earlier. Other strong competitors from the area at the Lake races were Bob Jackson, Charles Stitzer and Andy Tryka. The national AAU long-distance swimming championships were held at the Lake on July 29, 1939. The five-mile course began at the Picnic Grounds and ten laps were required around a long course in the Lake. Well known Wyoming Valley swimmers in the event were James Campbell and Michael Cavanaugh, but the individual championship was won by Steve Wosniak of Buffalo, New York. An extended essay on swimming races at the Lake during this time is at www.harveyslake.org.

Near the end of the decade the Shoot-the-Chute, in disrepair, was removed from the beach. To replace the Chute attraction, Hanson introduced Hackercraft speedboat rides in 1938. A Chris-Craft speedboat was added in June 1940. Within a few years one twenty-two foot and three nineteen foot Chris-Craft speedboats offered a thrilling summer ride around the Lake. The well-remembered speedboats were named after the Hanson grandchildren: Bruce, Corry, Danny and Donnie Lee. Bruce was the 22-foot Chris-Craft. The four speedboats with six cylinder engines ranged from 113 to 130 to 145 in horsepower. The speedboats were based at the bathhouse and weekend crowds would line the dock for tickets. In 1939 Hanson also had a seaplane service three days weekly.

In March 1940 Hanson formally incorporated the “Harvey’s Lake Picnic Grounds, Inc.” The incorporation may have been prompted by a lawsuit filed against Hanson and the Moosic Fireworks Company. On July 30, 1935, a park patron was injured when he encountered a firework piece on in the park. It exploded when the patron sought to remove it. Two jury trials resulted in hung juries who were unable to determine if the park was liable.

Hanson continued to hold elaborate and costly firework shows at the park in 1940. In early August he also displayed the “death car” of Clyde Barrow, once Public Enemy No. 1, and his girlfriend Bonnie Parker – the famous Bonnie and Clyde. In 1940 he also began Professional Night which featured a professional musician followed by amateur engagements. The restaurant and dance hall was renovated for the 1941 season.

With the entry of the United States in World War II in December 1941 the Summer 1942 season drew fewer crowds.
to the Lake and larger crowds to parks closer to the city. Sans Souci drew a record 25,000 for Memorial Day.

World War II attendance at Lake events were helped when a fully concrete 12 mile highway from the Valley to the Lake was completed in mid-1942. The Old Lake Highway was by-passed by the new road from Dallas to Sunset. With gasoline rationing limiting private automobile use, the Wilkes-Barre Railway Cooperation ran two morning and two afternoon-late evening routes from Wilkes-Barre to the Lake with stops around the Lake including the Picnic Grounds. Trips to the Lake made eight stops at Lake sites. Trips to the city from the Lake made twenty-two stops at Lake stops to pick passengers up.

To encourage traffic to the picnic grounds Hanson remade the bathing beach and overhauled the amusement rides. Private fireworks were banned by the War effort and only professional firework displays were lawful. On July 4, 1942, Rocky Glen was the only regional park with a firework display. For the balance of the War years no park seemed to hold further displays. Fireworks were in part considered unpatriotic or its chemicals diverted to the War effort.

A long Hanson tradition that continued during the War years was Children’s Day. On the last Sunday in September when the park was open Hanson charged children special low prices for rides. On September 14, 1943, most rides were two cents; the roller coaster and Dodgem was four cents.

As a family park John E. Hanson’s sons, Donald and Robert P. Hanson, were raised at the park and worked there from their youth onward. During World War II Donald Hanson served with the Merchant Marines in the Pacific, Atlantic and Mediterranean War theatres. Corp. Robert Hanson was an anti-aircraft gunner in the U.S. Army who was wounded in battle in Europe in early 1945.

A WWII tradition at the park was the January visit of James “Little Bill” Smith, from Luzerne Borough, who took an annual dip and swim in the Lake during the War years. Smith was a young member of the 379th Air Base Squadron at Miami Beach where he served as a life guard for the training base. His winter swims began in 1940 when he accepted a challenge to swim in the ice-covered frigid Lake. He returned each winter during his service years, removed his service uniform down to a bathing suit and plunged into a large opening friends cut into the ice.

At the Harvey’s Lake Picnic Grounds the War’s summer seasons fell into a routine of basic amusements, beach activities and group picnics. Likely, too, the speed boat rides were curtailed due to the War’s gasoline rationing.

There were a number of changes to the park in later years as new rides were placed in the park by concession owners. In 1944 Orville Walton added the Whip to the park and two years later he built a new Miniature Railway. In 1946 the small Roller Coaster was dismantled and Walton built the Twirler in its place. In the same year J. L. Garrahan added a small Ferris Wheel to the park. In 1947 the Flying Scooter ride was added to the park by Michael H. Yozviak and James V. O’Donnell. In time, however, Hanson would acquire direct ownership of the new rides.

After World War II the drive-in theatre was a new attraction gaining wide popularity. Hanson’s Drive-In was
opened in the rear of the park in June 1948 but it apparently operated only five years. Hanson’s Drive-In was built by Jay Evans, a Tunkhannock general contractor. The site accommodated 300 cars with additional outdoor seating for 300. Generally a film was shown twice each evening beginning at 7:00 PM. On the opening Saturday night on June 26, 1948, the special features were a musical “Swing the Western Way” and a Metro picture “Luckiest Guy in the World.” Regular feature movies began on Sunday, June 27, 1948, with Meet John Doe starring Barbara Stanwyck, Gary Cooper and Edward Arnold. The last advertised movie was The Prince Who Was a Thief with Piper Laurie and Tony Curtis on September 7, 1952.

On May 21, 1947, a Republic CB four passenger amphibian airplane, only two months old and based at the Forty Fort airport, was caught by severe winds and crashed into the Susquehanna River in south Wilkes-Barre. The pilot and a passenger received minor injuries. Three hours later another amphibian, a Fleetwood Seabird, also housed at Forty Fort, was having flight tests by potential buyers, Leonard Sleyo, Dunmore, and Stephen Balut, Wilkes-Barre. They had practiced Lake landings and take-offs at the Picnic Grounds and on a third test the right-wing pontoon fell off at take-off. They were able to land the craft on the Lake but the right wing tipped over and the plane began to capsize. The two men jumped into the Lake which, at that point, was 85 feet deep. They were rescued by a motorboat. Police Chief Fred Swanson, who witnessed the accident while on patrol, and Herbert Fields, another motor boatman, were able to lasso the plane and haul it to the park shore before it could sink. Swanson took Sleyo and Balut to the police station and offered them clothes, extra pairs of his size 12 shoes, and “stimulants.”

In 1948 the Lake Township School District adopted a ten per cent amusement tax for the district which primarily affected the park. John Hanson refused to raise the cost of rides to pay for the tax. He announced the park would pay the tax on all rides on behalf of his patrons.

Hanson’s innovations also included a special section for young children which opened in 1950. Kiddie-Land included a number of mechanical rides, for example, small boats, fire engines, pony carts, and a miniature whip. There was also the Starlight Express, a small children’s roller coaster which ran for nineteen years.

Since the 1935 sale of the park, members of the Wintersteen family operated the Merry-Go-Round and Dodgem. Until 1959 the rides were operated by Genevieve Wintersteen Fisk and her husband, Harold Fisk. Harold was a popular figure at the “brake” of the Merry-Go-Round; his father Sidney Fisk, skirted the apron helping the children astride the horses and extending well-wishes to the riders. Later, his son Delmar K. Fisk, operated the Merry-Go-Round. He served in the U.S. Navy during the Korean War. Afterwards, the late Robert Wintersteen, well known for his civic services to the Lake community, managed the two rides, which were then operated by his wife, Mary Ann Wintersteen.

The popular speedboat rides at Hanson’s ended with the close of the 1960 season. The park introduced Kayot pontoon boat rides – which had greater passenger capacity and were efficient to operate. One of the Hanson Chris-Craft boats is owned by a Lake resident. The fate of the other three speedboats is not certain.
Don Hanson Pilots Speedboat.  
Courtesy of Bruce Hanson

Pretzel Ride, 1940
Donald and Shirley Hanson.
Donald and Robert Hanson.
Courtesy of Bruce Hanson
D. A Day At The Park

For decades Hanson’s was a favorite park for the youth of the Back Mountain and Wyoming Valley. At an earlier time a forty foot diving platform challenged young braggarts and, of course, at a later time, there was a considerable youthful betting as to which of the speedboats was actually the fastest. Children always ran to the Roller Coaster for an early ride. The Coaster never failed to surprise even the most seasoned rider. The cars, jammed with gleeful youths, were slowly cranked to the top of the Coaster. The initial view was rather drab—a filled parking lot below—but suddenly, at the top, the large blue Lake would wondrously appear. Riders could grab a quick glimpse of speedboats on the Lake trailing a white wash. Then suddenly the cars would turn away and plummet down the Coaster’s huge dip as the riders’ screams drowned out the thumping musical tunes of the Merry-Go-Round. There was an immediate second, but smaller dip, a quick rise to the top at the far end of the Coaster, and then a neck twisting hard left turn and drop through a series of smaller dips, all to the countless clack-clack clacking song of the Coaster cars as they raced along the thrilling track. With an unexpected suddenness the Coaster cars were swiftly braked at the end of the run in view of an anxious crowd waiting on the platform. Night rides on the Coaster were especially enjoyable. The park would be awash in colored lights with the Merry-Go-Round in the center of the park filling the summer nights with its banging music. From the Coaster indistinct sounds could be heard from the Bingo stand below as the cars crested for a brief view of the dark waters encircled by lights and the glow of Sunset on the far end of the Lake. Then the Coaster would crash away pulling the breathless riders through a ribbon of lights along its winding course.

For young children the Merry-Go-Round was the center of attraction. The youngest children, held by reassuring parents, were usually seated on a colorful, stationary stallion; more experienced youngsters rushed for a favorite jumping horse. If all the horses were filled, kids would usually step off to wait for the next ride rather than sit on one of the carousel’s ornamental carriages, which were reserved for “old ladies.” The outside ring of horses were favored for the opportunity to juggle an outstretched hand for the brass ring. Merry-Go-Round riders can always remember a youthful fascination with the booming brassy machinery in the center of the carousel as images hypnotically passed through the circle of mirrors above the organ.

In the years before the video games the Penny Arcade was lined with fascinating mechanical gadgets that tested the skills of small, youthful hands; the little pocket prizes have long disappeared from memory. A miniature gypsy in a glass case would drop the future down a narrow slot; in another case the mechanical shovel always dropped the best prize before it would swing over to the chute. The shooting gallery games were slightly out of reach; a youngster teetered on tiptoes to aim a rifle at the jungle animals or gangsters that popped in view. For many years a penny would bring a picture card of a movie star or western hero. In time, the arcade cards of the silent movie heroes, William S. Hart and “Bronco” Bill Anderson, were replaced for another generation by Tim McCoy and Buck Jones, until they, too, were eclipse by Roy Rogers and Rex Allen. In later years, every boy wanted the elusive card of Lash LaRue, a curious anti-hero in black who fascinated a generation of “front row kids” before the Korean War. Of course, it took a brave youngster to gamble a penny for a card from the glass-paneled catalogue of burlesque queens. Then, too, there was the
frightening challenge among friends over the “grip tester.” For
others the manly test was to evade the parental eye and to play
the forbidden pinball machines.

There was usually one attraction which offered everyone
an equal chance, through luck or skill, to plot some harmless
damage. The only penalty was the long line at the Dodgem. The
anxious wait, however, was an opportunity to spy the swiftest
car, and to laugh at a helpless youngster whose car was stuck in
a corner turning in a frustrating circle. But a ticket only allowed
a precious few minutes on the electric cars, and soon the floor
would be cleared. When the attendant dropped the chain, a
torrent of kids charged the rubber-ringed cars. There was only
one way to really grab a car: run to the far end of the pavilion
and slide the last few feet along the metal floor, fling a hand on
the back of the seat, grab the wheel with the other hand, and
jump in with the smug furtive glance at a favorite girl before
eyeing the competition. When the bell rang, the cars would
begin to swirl into a raucous mass of innocent menace. There
were two theories about building speed as quickly as possible:
some kept the accelerator “floored,” but others “pumped” the
cars to full speed. It usually took half a circle to really move the
cars along, and woe to the early cars hopelessly driven into a
corner where an uncertain novice could be continually knocked
into spins by the circling horde. Amid the bumping fleeting
laughter of the Dodgem ride, children could joyfully inflict
painless aggression on nameless strangers, who were usually
too busy planning their next crashing challenge to chase the
annoyance of more amateur drivers. The Dodgem ride was
always too short; it always seemed longer waiting in line for a
rack at the wondrous cars.

The last major picnic excursions to the Picnic Grounds
were sponsored by Coxton Yards, a railroad assembly connected
with the Lehigh Valley Railroad. But the last Coxton excursions
ended in the late 1940’s. A few other excursions followed in the
early 1950’s; for example, the Pittston area Sunday Schools held a
train excursion to the park on July 7, 1951.

E. The Rock and Roll Dances:
Eddie Day and the Starfires
1963-1966

Harvey’s Lake and other ballroom venues in the
Wyoming Valley were energetic magnets for evolving musical
styles in the twentieth century. The Oneonta and Sunset
Pavilions (at Sunset) belonged to the jazz age. Similar settings,
especially Fernbrook Park in Dallas, saw the great dance bands
of the 1930s and 40s.

Three decades after the “dance band” era had entranced
the nation, a new musical craze, Rock and Roll, breathed new
life into the Lake’s amusement centers. Local musical talents
provided weekend retreats for teenage crowds, including
Hanson’s Amusement Park. From the early 1960s to the
early 1970s, dances featuring local and national talent were
regularly held in the second-floor dance hall above the Hanson’s
restaurant.

A weekend dance at Hanson’s could draw two thousand
people to enjoy emerging national talent which included Chubby
Checker, Bobby Goldsboro, and The McCoys. The dark hall,
built to serve the musical dreams of a much earlier youth,
Starfires with the McCoys (top) and Chubby Checker (bottom), 1966

Star Fires at Hanson’s Park
jumped to a new, raucous beat. And a new, uncertain generation lost themselves to the wonderfully deafening music.

Many others milled along the outside of the dance floor searching for fun and sometimes a little trouble (in a pre-six pack era, beer usually came in a glass quart container). Hanson's dances were able to draw considerable local talent from the Wyoming Valley; the most popular area attractions were Joe Nardone and the All Stars, and Eddie Day with both the Starfires and TNT.

Prior to the summer of '62 Hanson's Park hosted a variety of musical talent. In early 1962 the dean of area “Rock and Roll,” Joe Nardone and the All Stars, were at Hanson's. Joe Nardone began his music career while still a student at Coughlin High School. His group was originally called the Four Stars and played at the CYC, Wilkes-Barre. Graduating from Coughlin in 1959 Nardone attended the Wyoming Seminary Business School. In 1957 the band was renamed the All Stars. The area’s earliest “rock and roll” band the All Stars began playing at the CYC, Wilkes-Barre, in 1957 and the city’s Granada Ballroom in 1960, but they were most identified with the Sans Souci Amusement Park and opened for concert tours by Danny and the Juniors, Gary Puckett, the Union Gap, and Neil Diamond.

The Starfires played throughout the Wyoming Valley including the Spinning Wheel (which closed December 24, 2007); the Starfire Ballroom (once the old Giant Market, South Main St., Wilkes-Barre), and of course at Hanson’s. At Hanson’s the Starfires joined rising musical stars of the 1960s in special nights which never quite left the 60s generation and would emerge again in the 1980s.

The Starfires first appearance at Hanson’s was on Sunday, July 8, 1962, with dancing from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. with a fifty cent admission charge. Earlier in the season Joe Nardone and the All Stars played at the park but Nardone’s band was already best known as the “house band” at Sans Souci Park. Nardone appeared at Sans Souci with many national recording artists including Freddie Cannon on June 29, 1962, and Dion on July 28, 1962. During the 1962 season at the Lake the Starfires usually played on Thursday and Sunday nights.

In 1963 Hanson’s Park also began to feature national recording stars beginning with Freddie “Boom Boom” Cannon on August 26, 1963, with the Starfires band (another locally based band, also with Wilkes College roots, Melvin Wynn’s group, was also at the Lake park). Cannon was an established rock and roll artist with major hits “Tallahassee Lassie,” “Way Down Yonder in New Orleans,” and “Palisades Park,” each selling over one million copies. He had major exposure on Dick Clark’s American Bandstand TV broadcasts.

On September 2, 1963, the Starfires appeared at the Park with the short-lived American group, the Essex, a four member
band composed of US Marines based at Camp LeJune, North Carolina, who were only active in 1963-1964 and known for one hit “Easier Said Than Done.”

It was the following three years best remembered when numerous national recording stars appeared with the Starfires at the Lake.

Twenty-one national recording artists appeared at Hanson’s in 1964-66. The earliest was Bobby Goldsboro on June 12, 1964. Other 1964 artists were Gary “U.S.” Bonds, Little Anthony and the Imperials, and the Four Seasons. In 1965 the dance hall rocked to Patti and the Emblems and the Orlons.

The Starfires opened at Hanson’s on Easter, April 9, 1966. Two weeks later, the Starfires appeared on Sunday, April 24, 1966, with the Marketts (with an admission price of 75 cents). The Marketts were basically Los Angeles studio musicians who were known for “surf rock” hits in the early 1960s. They had an unusual hit with “Out of Limits,” an album based on the TV series “Outer Limits” but they were best known for “The Batman Theme,” a 1966 album based on the Batman TV series. It also marked the high point of their career as a group.

In 1966 the Starfies played at Hanson’s on Wednesday, Friday and Saturday nights. But on Sunday, June 26, 1966, they were joined by The Capitols, a Detroit trio best known for their hit “Cool Jerk,” one of the dance oddities of the 1960s. The group broke up in 1969 but its one major hit was featured in later commercials and movie soundtracks into the early 1990s.

The Hanson dance hall had its largest attendance when Chubby Checker appeared with the Starfires on July 15, 1966. His No. 1 1960 hit, “The Twist” has become an American Iconic musical image. He was paid $1,000.00, rather steep at the time for his Hanson’s appearance. Checker arrived at Hanson’s with only his manager. The Starfires served as his full band for the evening performance. Born Ernest Evans in South Philadelphia, Checker’s Twist created “dancing apart from the beat” with “The Jerk,” “The Hully Gully,” “The Fly,” “The Pony” and others.

The last 1966 act was The McCoys, from Union City, New Jersey, who had a “Mod” British look when they appeared with the Starfires on August 16, 1966.

In 1967 Eddie Day formed the group The Night Timers with appearances at Sandy Beach beginning on Friday nights on May 26, 1967. The Starfires band opened at Hanson’s earlier in May on Friday and Saturday evenings with a new lead singer Julie Downey. Admission at both venues was now 75 cents for 3 hour programs running from 8:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m.

Hanson’s Park also hosted other bands in 1967 including Prince Charles and the Royal Tones in late July and early August. In July 1969 Hanson’s featured the musical style of country-western group Tex Valen and the Rhythm Ramblers while Eddie Day and TNT continued at Sandy Beach, but the beach closed in 1973.

A fuller essay of the Eddie Day era and complete playlist of the 1963-1966 Hanson’s dances may be found at www.harveyslake.org.
Ferris Wheel and Park Train. 1980s
Dodgem
Roller Coaster and Flying Coaster
F. Don Hanson’s Amusement Park

For another generation, Hanson’s Amusement Park continued to attract young families to the grounds during weekends, but the weekday crowds of an earlier time were ending at area parks. In time, beaches everywhere at the Lake drew fewer bathers as other diversions attracted Wyoming Valley residents. Hanson’s speedboats were eventually replaced by pontoon boats, and as the expansive dock system was gradually lost to ice damage, the large docks were not replaced.

For the 1964 season John Hanson leased the park to his son Don and Shirley Hanson. On December 30, 1966, John Hanson died in Florida, while visiting there with his son Robert Hanson at his Miami Beach condo. For the next six years the Hanson family continued to operate the park. The park was generally managed now by Helen Hanson, Don and Shirley Hanson, and Robert and Patricia Hanson. But the park was closed in the 1972 season while the Hanson Estate was resolved. In 1973 the park reopened as Don Hanson’s Amusement Park. Robert Hanson concentrated his business interest as the owner of the successful Crown Imperial Bowling Lanes (Back Mountain Bowl), Dallas, which he opened in 1956.

Don and Shirley Hanson were optimistic supporters of Eddie Day and the Starfires and the 1963-1966 dance era at the park. They also introduced the R.P.M. Old Stars to the park and Shirley Hanson leased the park for the Amphitheatre for its seven year operation.

On Labor Day 1980 structural damage closed the Roller Coaster. There was uncertainty regarding the future of the roller-coaster in the early Summer of 1981. It was unclear if it was economical to repair the coaster. Don Hanson at the time was developing a camp ground which was a greater priority. There was competition from larger parks and most visitors came now in the evenings and uncertain weather reports deterred customers. There was also a possible plan to blow-up the coaster for a MGM major movie in the works. In the end the coaster was not repaired and remained closed.

Fatalities at developing mega-parks had a high impact on amusement park insurance rates. In 1978 Six Flags St. Louis had three deaths in an accident on its Sky Way ride. Another eight died in another Six Flags park in New Jersey in a Haunted House fire in May 1984. Amusement park injuries doubled between 1980 and 1982. There were nine deaths on American amusement park rides between 1973 and 1984. The liability insurance premium for Hanson’s Park rose 600 per cent. A new State law effective in 1985 would also require all amusement parks to have an annual state inspection at the park’s expense even though park owners generally inspected rides daily.

By 1984 Don and Shirley Hanson concluded it was best to retire from the park business. On Wednesday, September 26, 1984, at 1:00 p.m. the amusement rides and games at Hanson’s Amusement Park were auctioned. The sale was handled by Norton Auctioneers, Cold Water, Michigan, a nationally known amusement park auction services. During the weeks before the sale, small crowds enjoyed their last rides and photographed their children on the merry-go-round. A few of the Hanson rides have remained intact elsewhere. For example, the sixty-foot long train, with its four cylinder Ford gasoline engine cab and three coaches, built in 1948 by the Bittler company of Elmira, New York, is now the Bonneville-Pine Creek Railroad, at Register (near Benton), Pennsylvania, and operating between
the Bonham Nursing Home and Memorial Park. The children’s pony ride from Kiddie-Land is at Conneaut Lake Park in Pennsylvania. The Tilt-A-Whirl ride was acquired by Hoffman’s Playground in Latham, New York. This park relocated to Albany in 2015. The merry-go-round, separately owned by the Wintersteen family, and not included in the auction sale, was leased in 1987 to Old Town, a park in Kissimmeee, Florida, where it operated until 1996 when it moved to Auburndale, Florida, until 2008. There was a plan to auction the carousel in April 2008 but Wintersteen withdrew the carousel as auction day approached. For nearly a decade the carousel, now in storage in 2017, awaits a plan for its future.

G. R.P.M. Old Stars
1988-1996

In April of 1988 a likely “last dance” was planned for June at the Hanson’s ballroom by Frank Hourigan, Jr., and Bruce Hanson, featuring the R.P.M. Old Stars, an area retro band playing the nostalgic music of the 1950s and 1960s. The band was organized by Frank Hourigan, Jr., drums, of Mountaintop and the original members were Bob Gryziec, Plymouth, bass guitar; Dale Houck, Kingston, sax and flute; Tom Cavanaugh, Laflin, guitar; Dr. Richard Blum, Dallas, keyboard; and vocalists Andrea Petrosky and Billy Brown, both of Wilkes-Barre. Brown was formerly with Joe Nardone and the All Stars.

With a “Happening at the Lake” on Saturday evening on June 25, 1988, the R.P.M. Old Stars were joined by Dr. Ange Anzalone and Attorney Jim Anzalone, the Anzalone Brothers, a folk duo, who also were reviving an act honed in the 1960s.

The June 25 dance drew considerable pre-dance publicity and drew a magical 800 people to Hanson’s. A follow-up “Dance Part II” promptly followed on July 23, 1988, with R.P.M. and the Anzalone Brothers. They were now joined by Eddie Day whose last appearance on the public stage was in 1982. Eddie Day (Pashinski) was a member of the music faculty at Nanticoke High School and had recently served as a Pennsylvania delegate for Presidential hopeful Michael Dukakis who would lose his 1988 bid to President George H. W. Bush.

Fourteen hundred people danced during the oppressive evening heat of July 23 where the crowd was “elbow to elbow, and the music was loud, loud, loud,” with the crowd shouting “Eddie, Eddie, Eddie.” It was fifteen years since Eddie Day’s last Starfires appearance at Hanson’s. A video of Eddie Day’s July 23, 1988, appearance will eventually be shown on www.harveyslake.org.

On August 27, 1988, the R.P.M. Old Stars again appeared at Hanson’s with Eddie Day, now joined with Joe Nardone. It was a special reunion for the two rockers in an “End of Summer Dance.” It was a 35 to 40 age crowd of nearly 2000 that night for a return to the 1960s. A local review declared that the R.P.M. Old Stars “can still do better than any other rock and roll band of that era.” The August crowd was even larger than the July dance and it was thought to be the “last dance.”

But on May 13, 1989, the R.P.M. Old Stars returned to Hanson’s followed by a June 10 dance with the Anzalone Brothers and a July 9 “Second Summer Dance” with Eddie Day.
A “Quake at the Lake” followed on August 19 with the R.P.M. band and both Joe Nardone and Bill Brown and Eddie Day and the Dayettes, his daughters. Tony Rasimus was now a joint vocalist with Andrea Petrosky for the R.P.M. Old Stars.

To conclude the 1989 Summer’s “Save the Last Dance for Me” Hanson’s featured Tom Slick and the Original Converted Thunderbolt Greaseslappers.

The success of the R.P.M. oldies dances continued through the 1990s. “Summer Dance 90” with R.P.M. was held on June 16, 1990, followed on July 28, 1990, with Eddie Day again joining the R.P.M. Old Stars. Following the July concert Bill O’Boyle, Citizens Voice writer, noted: “The faces were all familiar. They were the faces we used to see every week at Sandy Beach or Hanson’s or Sans Souci or Wilkes or Kings. The faces looked the same, the bodies were a little different. But it was the same crowd - that familiar old gang-back to “The Lake” for some fun… just like in the sixties, the attire for the evening consisted of tee shirts, shorts and not much else. And, unlike the good old days, alcohol was served, not smuggled in.” Joe Nardone, joined by his former “All Stars,” appeared with R.P.M. on August 18. Eddie Day and the Dayettes and the New York Times Band held an “End of Summer Dance” on September 2, 1990.

In 1991 three dances were held: July 27, 1991; August 10, 1991; and August 17, 1991. These were a mix of Eddie Day and the Dayettes, Billy Brown, and Joe Nardone with the R.P.M. Old Stars.

A two-day dance offering held on August 31-September 1, 1991, was billed as the “Centennial Celebration of Hanson’s Park” with Eddie Day and the Dayettes, Billy Brown, and the New York Times Band.

There were two August 1992 dances but no dances in 1993. The Harvey’s Lake Fire Company held an August 20, 1994, dance with the R.P.M. Old Stars and Dr. EL, and an August 17, 1995, dance with R.P.M. and Eddie Day. The final 1996 R.P.M. Old Stars dance was on August 17.


In March 1992 area concert promoter Thom Greco announced that a Wilkes-Barre and Pittsburgh partnership, Harvey’s Lake Amphitheatre, Inc., would lease and remodel a section of the park for major concerts. A 4,500 seat outdoor amphitheatre would compliment a restaurant, outdoor patio bar and sand volleyball courts. Named the Bud Light Amphitheatre due to underwriting by the Budweiser/Anheuser Busch brewing company, the site encompassed nearly 5 acres of the 27 acre park with 20 acres available for parking.

The initial season opened on Sunday, May 24, 1992, with The Machine, a Pink Floyd tribute band, with local bands completing a day-long event. The first actual concert was held the following day Monday, Memorial Day, May 25, when 3,500 people crowded into the park for rocker Kenny Loggins. The California-based performer was best known as a member of the singing/song writing team Loggins and Messina. The inaugural concert successfully managed parking, security and traffic control under the supervision of Eddie Day who would serve as
Courtesy of Bruce Hanson
the Amphitheatre’s Operations Manager for several seasons.

The 1992 season brought other major concert stars to the Lake after a laser light show of Pink Floyd/Led Zeppelin music on June 6: Crosby, Stills and Nash on June 16; Dolly Parton on June 21; and Willie Nelson on July 20. The Amphitheatre concerts drew wide pre and post-show publicity in area media outlets.

The CSN concert started one-hour late due to traffic issues. At times the party atmosphere of 5,000 people drowned out the concert. The concert was a retrospective of hits from the 1970s and Citizens Voice critic Al Choman noted the musical messages of that time were less striking to a 90s audience, but the sounds were no less exciting. The overcrowding prompted the addition of 500 seats for future shows. The Dolly Parton concert was also sold out. The Tennessee pop and country rock singer in a blue-sequined dress danced and told down-home stories which captivated the audience.

An estimated 4,500 fans saw Willie Nelson on July 20 deliver both old and new material to a rapt audience. (During his visit he played golf at an area course and he visited a local nursing home). In August the Rocky Mountain boy, John Denver (who later died in a 1997 California plane accident), delivered one of his well-received shows of earnest pop-country hits.

The last official concert in 1992 was also over-crowded for the Southern Rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd and Abilene, a regional legend in country rock.

In May 1993 the Amphitheatre announced it planned to expand to 6,000 seats for concerts and a California-based promoter had become a partner in the concert center. Seating arrangements were improved with a 700 seat Gold Circle with a separate entrance and a 500 seat bleacher section. The roof was extended to protect performers from the Lake’s weather with a secondary roof for light and sound equipment. The season opened on May 30 with 9 bands at the Amphitheatre and at the Beach Club.

On June 27, 1993, rock legend Steppenwolf found John Kay and rocker Edgar Winter whip up a musical frenzy for 4,800 fans. On July 18, 1993, Hank Williams, Jr., and the Kentucky Headhunters drew nearly 6,000 people for the Amphitheatre’s largest crowd in its history. Voice critic Al Choman found the concert the “most artistically fulfilling” to date. Williams, whose father was a country-song pioneer and legend, followed an opening set by Kentucky Headhunters, itself a high challenge to follow. Voice critic Al Choman thought Williams’ Lake performance “electrifying and magical.”

In the meantime a few residents near the Amphitheatre were campaigning against concert noise and traffic congestion. Then in early August 1993 a drug-enforcement task force arrested 22 people on drug related charges before a Def Leppard concert at the Lake. They were on a world tour in 1992-93. But the police recorded no noise complaints after the Def Leppard concert – still the borough council was considering its ordinance role.

By the close of summer the Liquor Control Board was also investigating the noise issue – which actually occurred with bar bands at the site after the concert concluded. The LCB subsequently dismissed its noise citation.
In 1994 new political leadership at the Lake was more sympathetic with residents’ issues and new sewer fees would add to concert costs. Too, concert promoters were attracted to the competing Montage Mountain Performing Arts Center at Moosic which opened with Chubby Checker on July 3, 1992. A Memorial Day concert on May 30, 1994, was held at the Beach Club Complex with Steve Walsh and Kansas, a progressive rock group – with additional music by Guy Archer, Hybrid Ice and Fall Free. But after Kansas the Amphitheatre was silent for the season.

In mid-May 1995 plans were announced for another full season at the Lake with improved traffic and safety control and early closing of the bar area. Greco’s Factory Concerts presented country singer Lorrie Morgan as the opener on June 4 to a crowd of 3,000. A heavy rain delayed the heavy metal band performances of Motorhead and Black Sabbath for 3 hours on June 30. An expected crowd of 2,800 fell to 1,200 but both bands rocked the crowd. The 1995 season out-distanced earlier seasons with even greater musical stars: Steppenwolf and Molly Hatchet on July 16; Kenny Rodgers on July 17; the Charlie Daniels Band on August 3; Toby Keith on August 16; and Johnny Cash on August 14. But the season surprise was on July 14, 1995, when Beatles drummer Ringo Starr and the All-Starr band, on World Tour, appeared at the Lake drawing more than 3,000 fans.

Kenny Rodgers appeared with a 21-piece band complimented by light and laser displays – and a flashback of his earlier group First Edition on three screens hung from the stage roof. He drew 5,000 fans. Yet only half this crowd saw Johnny Cash’s two-hour performance. Johnny Cash (1932-2003) was born in Arkansas and would become one of America’s most influential and recognizable musicians. Cash arrived at the Lake in a black bus, a trademark color for the 40-year veteran of country music.

Other concerts in 1995 included Firehouse, Kolander, Bush and the Toadies. Kolander stayed an extra hour to sign autographs. Unfortunately, the Bush event drew additional complaints. Ambulances were called to attend five people who suffered heat exhaustion and neighbors again complained of post-concert noise from the Tijuana Liquor Stand at the Beach Club. But on balance the complaints were less than earlier years and the concert organizers were recognized for much improved controls. The Oak Ridge Boys, a country group with roots to the Grand Ole Opry was a late addition and appeared on September 3. The name Oak Ridge stems from their original home base, near Knoxville, Tennessee. Oak Ridge was the site of development of the atomic bomb.

Country, rock and pop concerts were announced in early May for the 1996 season. The Double Trouble Tour with Travis Tritt and Marty Stuart opened on June 22 followed by Eddie Money on June 29. A music legend, Paul Anka, cancelled a July 26 concert due to voice problems.

The Scorpions and Alice Cooper followed on August 7. Cooper, of course, is best known for his theatrical stage presence. Alice Cooper (birth-name Vincent Furnier) has musical roots dating to 1965 and his high school rock band The Spiders. Cooper created a unique stage presence sometimes called “shock rock” – the Stephen King of rock?

The 1997 season opened with Canadian country singer Terri Clark on June 12 and the rock bands John Kay and
Courtesy of Citizens Voice
Last Dance with Which Doctor?
and Starfires, 2002. Central four; Eddie Day, Helen Hanson, Shirley Hanson, and Bruce Hanson, rear. Courtesy of Bruce Hanson
Steppenwolf and Edgar Winter on June 17. Another country singer, Mark Chesnutt with Midnight Rodeo, was scheduled for July 11 with Crosby, Stills and Nash on July 15 and Sammy Hagar and Lynyrd Skynyrd later in July.

Crosby, Stills and Nash gave a surprisingly engaging performance in mid-July to 3,800 fans. Best known for message music from an earlier time they were able to click with the audience not only with familiar songs but also new material well-received with both group and solo performances.

A crowded audience of 4,000 saw the Red Rocker, Sammy Hagar, give an intense performance which had the audience reportedly on their feet for the three-hour show. An August concert with Clay Walker was cancelled; Daryl Hall and John Oates appeared on August 25. Hall and Oates drew 2,500 people. The duo had numerous hits in the 1980s, had broken up for a time, and were reunited for new tours.

After the end of the 1997 season a lease dispute arose between the property owner and the concert promoter but it did not halt performances. The 1998 season drew talent with New Park Entertainment of Philadelphia and One More Production, a Lake-based company whose principal was formerly based in Colorado. The “Whose On First Tour” featured the headliner “moe” which opened on June 14. Later in the month George Thorogood’s “basic blue-collar rock and roll” entertained 3,000 at the Lake. Opening with “Born to be Bad” Thorogood encouraged his audience to sing and dance and have a “Pennsylvania Party” for this two-hour-concert – which they did. Steve Miller and Little Feat with the Space Cowboy Tour 1998, on an international tour, brought 5,000 fans to the Lake on August 8 for blues and rock, and reportedly the largest audience since Hank Williams, Jr., appeared in 1993.

The last major concert at the Lake was country-music star Clint Black on August 12, 1998. Raised in Texas Clint Black is a multi-talented country music, singer, songwriter, producer and occasional actor with a star on Hollywood’s Walk of Fame. A season-closing “carload” show ended the season with The Badlees with Oz, Flaxy Morgan, Riverside and Rockaholix on September 6, 1998.

The Amphitheatre was not revived after 1998. The lease arrangement with the park owner was concluded to permit exploration of residential development at the site – which would not occur for nearly two decades later.


I. The Fire Company’s Which Doctor? Dances

In 1997 the Harvey’s Lake Fire Company engaged Which Doctor? for a fund-raising dance at Hanson’s on July 5, 1997. Formed in 1994 Which Doctor? was originally composed of members Dr. Rick Blum, keyboard; Dr. Martin Freifeld, bass player; Neal Cook, drummer; John Callahan, guitarist; Amy Jones, vocalist/saxophone; and Joelle DeLuca, Annette Phelps, Karen Blum and Doug Takacs, vocalists. The 1997 dance drew a crowd of 400.
The July 18, 1998, Which Doctor? dance drew 500. These dances in support of the Lake’s fire company were generously supported by area businesses and volunteers which included Bayo’s Ice, Grotto Pizza, Unigraphics, and Hoss’s Garden Hut. Volunteers included Ed Kelly, Fire Company President; Robert and Becky Aben; John Martinson; Frank Lasota; and Joe Neilson.

The July 17, 1999, Which Doctor? dance drew a crowd of 450. The co-vocalists were Doug Takacz and Karen Blum. A special attraction was a Donna Summer medley.

The Which Doctor? dances at Hanson’s were also held on July 15, 2000, and July 14, 2001. The final dance was in 2002.

J. The Final Years

The September 1984 sale of the amusement rides did not in fact close the park. Earlier in 1982 Don Hanson and his son Bruce Hanson opened a campground and marina at the park grounds. Bruce Hanson, a third generation serviceman, was in the U.S. Navy in 1971-1975 serving in Vietnam and with the 6th Fleet in European waters. He, like his father, was raised at the park and worked there since his youth. Upon his return from the U.S. Navy he would work at the family park from 1976 to 1988.

Bruce Hanson operated the waterfront which remained open after the 1984 sale. The bath house were still available along with pontoon boat rides. Hanson’s Marina also sold Kayot pontoon boats. The marina also had 96 boat slips and sold gasoline to boaters at the Lake. Family members Donna and David Hanson assisted in the family business interests. Hanson’s beach closed to the public after the September 3-5 Labor Day weekend. With the closure of the Sunset Beach on September 18, 1988, public beach swimming ended at the Lake. The campground remained opened through the 2003 season. In April 1989 Don and Bruce Hanson began to dismantle the 65 foot high 1931 roller coaster. A final section of the coaster was dismantled by a professional demolition company in July 1991.

Hanson’s restaurant remained opened during these years. The Amphitheatre operators leased the restaurant in 1992-1998 after which it closed.

Donald J. E. Hanson died in November 1990 while working on the grounds. In his youth Don Hanson attended Kingston schools and later Harvey’s Lake schools. He was a member of the George M. Dallas Lodge 531 F&M, Caldwell Consistory, Bloomsburg, and Irem Temple. He had served as a member of the Luzerne County Tourist Promotion Agency and he was a former councilman for Harveys Lake Borough. Afterwards, Shirley Hanson operated the Hanson interests with family support until the grounds were sold.

On August 10, 2002, five years after the final R.P.M. Old Stars dance at the park, the Harvey’s Lake Fire Company held “The Last Dance” at the Hanson’s ballroom with Which Doctor? and with guest stars Eddie Day, Rev. Roger Griffith, and Robert Gardner, former Starfires members. Which Doctor? still had five original members: Dr. Rick Blum; Dr. Marty Freifeld; Doug Takacs; Joelle DeLuca; and Karen Blum. Other members for “The Last Dance” were vocalist Lisa Gadomski; guitarist D. Dean Copley; drummer/vocalist Jim Clark; vocalist Susan Lake; and saxophonist Greg Riley.
In 2002-2005 the park grounds were sold to Villas at Waterwood, LLC, a corporate entity for a controversial 130 unit townhouse development. But with the 2008 recession, zoning issues, storm water management regulations and community concerns, the housing development did not occur. In late July 2008 Helen Hanson, now Helen Hanson Sponholtz, passed away at age 89. A quiet woman she capably managed the secretarial side of the park for many years and had “A delightful sense of humor.” In early 2014 Shirley Ann Hanson passed away. Intensely proud of the amusement park Shirley Hanson kept a family “memory room” of park memorabilia. Eddie Day Pashinski, State Representative for the Wilkes-Barre area, credited Shirley Hanson for the Starfires’ earliest start at the Hanson’s ballroom and her professional guidance in business matters. Joe Nardone noted “… when I played at the ballroom, a handshake and you had a dance contract for the summer. That’s how it was to deal with good people like the Hansons” – in addition to free pizza for the band.

In mid-November 2014 the remaining structures in the park were demolished by Stell Enterprises, a demolition contractor. It was hoped the dodgem pavilion could be saved but the wooden structure had deteriorated and the pavilion and restaurant/dance hall were demolished along with the Bingo hall and its arcade, the Tijuana liquor stand, a row of cinder block concessions along Noxen Road, and the restrooms. The grounds were now limited to future development of a few single-housing structures and a couple of lake front lots for dock structures. The only remaining amusement park structure left standing in 2017 is the former 1937 roller-skating/bath house, a sentinel overlooking the Lake and guarding the memories of generations past, itself awaiting potential development – or demolition.
Last Structures, November 2014