

The Swimming Hole Tragedy



The swimming hole in the Creston River below Midvale was one of the most popular places, especially during the long, hot summer months. Even as early as May, groups of students would enjoy this special spot.

We had to drive five miles of unpaved road to a place where the river widened out and deepened. There we could take turns jumping off the overhanging branch of a big cottonwood tree into the cool dark waters. Most kids in town had known about this swimming hole since they were young. It was where most of us learned to swim. We went there to catch frogs and fish and to float around on old inner tubes. That place brought back those special memories of childhood that still seemed as fresh as yesterday, even though years had passed.

On hot, lazy, vacation days, Midvale residents would be drawn to the wet oasis to play, relax, and learn some important lessons. It was there that I first learned that dragonfly "dive bombers" really didn't sting or sew up your lips. It's strange how those old stories get started. Sometimes I'm sorry that those myths have to die. They always added excitement and mystery to growing up and playing along the river. It was there that I learned that the best way to find stonefly larvae was to carefully lift a stone from the river bottom and scrape the clinging animals off with a leaf. It was easy to figure out how they got their name.

I reached the point where I knew almost every log that jutted out into the river's current below the surface. That was where those lunker bass were. I knew the locations of the best logs as I knew the back of my hand—at least until the next heavy rain and high water came along. I can still close my eyes and see the sparkle of sunlight on the rippling waters. I can feel and smell the dank moisture down under the big trees by the swimming hole. All of those memories and more made the swimming hole a special place—both in my head and in my heart. You probably know some special places in the outdoors that do the same thing for you.

No one could ever guess that such a paradise would turn our hearts so dark. This place took my sister's hearing away and came close to claiming her life. I was crushed, and I never will forget the feeling. Here's how I think it all happened. One day my sister Jenny, Jeff, and I went down to swim at our favorite spot. The swimming hole gradually had changed over the years. No one had been able to

catch any big bass recently. More junk was floating downstream and the water wasn't as deep as it used to be. Fewer insects were hatching, and piles of trash were gathered around fence posts.

On the day we went swimming, the water was especially warm and it had a greenish tinge, but that didn't stop us. In fact, we invented a contest to see who could dive down and bring up the biggest rock from the bottom. We stayed longer than usual that day and made over 50 trips diving from top to bottom. A couple of days later, we all had earaches and had to stay home from school. There was little doubt how our pains came about. We had not told our families that we were going to go to the swimming hole. When my Mom found out, she said that the river had become an open sewer. She said that we had taken our last swim in the river. It was too late for my sister, Jenny. Jenny's ears got worse and, after an intense fever, she lost her hearing forever.

We called the health department and soon after someone came to the swimming hole to take water samples. In fact, they took samples all along a stretch of river that passed by three towns, including Midvale. I was there to watch them take the samples. The person from the health department told me that they suspected one or more of the towns might be dumping raw sewage directly into the river. The sewage treatment plants were all over 40 years old, and the towns had grown by leaps and bounds since then. Human sewage can carry germs that can cause more damage than just earaches, the official told me.

It was a long time before I could again return to the river, but when I did, I noticed that it was harder to find stoneflies and other creatures that lived in the river. I also noticed that the water color had become greener and murkier. It all had happened so slowly that, until our earache incident, I didn't pull all the pieces together. When I did, the conclusion was clear—even if the water in the river wasn't. The Creston River was polluted, and now I had a painful reminder that this was hurting the living things I cared about—including my sister.

It seemed ironic that the river that had taught me so much and had given me so much pleasure had now changed. What should I do about it? Could one person make a difference? I had some important reasons to try.