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What was life like
for kids in
Iselin
90 years ago?

“Do you have the air-conditioner on?” I can hear my father ask my mom. He sounds incredulous, probably because he’s from Europe and hardly anyone owns an air-conditioner. “Yes!” my mom calls out, “It’s hot in here!” I can hear a spoon clank against a pot and I know that it’s almost dinner time. Mom is making spaghetti. I know, because I can smell the tomato sauce and the ground beef simmering. I started to think about, how much time I would have, to have a little fun, once I’m done with my homework, and have eaten and showered for the evening. I realize, with dread, not much, because I can’t wait to tell my parents about the book that I’m reading.

We had a great time at dinner, and I wondered what did kids my age did 90 years ago in Iselin. Were they able to sit with their parents at dinnertime and tell them stories of about the books they read? Would they be able to take up such a huge block of their parents’ time to share their day’s experiences? So, I decided to scour the articles of 1926, from my computer, that seemed to be painstakingly scanned, so that kids like me would have the opportunity to research and attempt to discover what their peers of yesteryear were doing. Computers are modern Time Capsules. I can definitely tell you, **they** were not scouring a computer for information on what kids did 90 years before their birth. That would have meant that Andrew Jackson was President, and slavery would have existed!

“Health Board Warning” reads a headline in The Woodbridge Independent, as reported on August 6, 1926. It was mid-summer, and the Township was advising people not to swim in the waters of the creek and brook, at Crab Beach between Iselin and Colonia, due to them being polluted. I can only imagine the children being free and wanting to cool themselves off because they didn’t live in homes with central air that blew the sweat from their bodies, and allowed their mothers to cook in comfort. I don’t know, if fathers were available to take their sons for a quick dip in cool waters, and with the pollution situation, they would not have had the chance to do so. The truth of the matter was that there was a likely danger of contracting Typhoid Fever, because of the stagnant water, as the story goes in the first article in the same paper. In comparison to today, we have city run swimming or private pools, which are heavily chlorinated or salinized to kill bacteria, fungi and viruses, so we are able to

swim in safety. Beaches for the public, are at the coast, where here in the East, we have access to the Atlantic Ocean, which is naturally salty.

But it appears that the contamination with Typhoid, of creeks and brooks were not the only H²O problems that Iselin had. At some point, a private business man named Sam Foster went bankrupt. Sam Foster had owned the water system in Iselin, and his bankruptcy forced the business into the hands of another. This led to inefficiencies, and as a result the people suffered. Residents were now without water for days at a time. Some people even travelled long distances to retrieve their water. Eventually, this led to Iselinites organizing and calling upon the Public Works Department to take over the water system in Iselin. This was reported in The Woodbridge Independent, on August 6, 1926 under the headline **“Put Iselin Water Up to Public Utilities Board”**. How, might this effect the children, one might ask. But, clean water is a vital necessity to public sanitation, especially during warmer months. It was discovered that Typhoid Fever was spread by people not washing their hands after using the restroom. Without free flowing water, people were unable to practice clean sanitary habits. Especially children and babies, who were the most vulnerable in the community. It is also a probable reason why the creek and brook was contaminated.

It's almost a foreign concept to the average American mind, but there are moments when I can see how this can happen here, even with all of our modernization to be without water due to contamination with long forgotten diseases. For example, Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy or even the earthquake in Haiti have caused conditions where available clean water was contaminated. The advantages for me are a) modern medicine, b) health insurance and c) infrastructure. All of these work together to make sure that I can be a happy and healthy child.

Notwithstanding the water scares that they had, Iselinites were an organized group of people. They worked in together to organize fairs and dances, providing activities for the entire community, all in an effort to enrich their lives. **“Daredevil Dive to Feature in Iselin Firemen’s Carnival”**, The Woodbridge Ledger, May 14, 1926, reported that “the grounds will be brilliantly illuminated, and there

will be many prizes and awards for the attending participants.” Can you just image the joyous smiles on the faces of the children attending? This is not unlike when St. James School holds its annual Street Fair in September. Families and children gather to enjoy the day’s events. Although, the daredevil now is probably the person who sits in the water tank, above the ice cold water, praying on a hot day to be relieved of the perspiration that drips down their skin, but praying for the opposite if the day is brisk and cool.

“Iselin Looks Forward to Big Church Affair”, reads a headline, announcing the big fair that St. Cecelia’s was having, in The Woodbridge Ledger, August 6, 1926. Church is such a big part of many people’s lives, and there are many things that it does to organize community spirit. If I can hold an image in my mind, I can see another child walking with their friends, going from stall to stall to see what the vendors have to offer, then lining up to get on a ride. It’s exactly what I do, when there are street fairs in town, and I get to be with my friends, to have fun. All the while, my dad is working one of the stalls, helping to bring enjoyment to our community. He does this every year for St. James School, just like Iselinites in 1926 did for their community. Meanwhile, my mom is nearby, to watch over me and my friends. She rode her bike, while I rode my scooter to this year’s fair because we live about a mile away from where the street fair was going to take place. It didn’t make sense to drive, as it was such a nice day. **“Iselin-Fords Bus Line O.K.’d by State Board”**, reported The Woodbridge Ledger, August 6, 1926. I’m sure some people sighed in relief when they discovered that soon they would no longer have to walk great distances to get to future fairs. Especially mothers with babies and small children. I’m certain that after a long and fun filled day, taking the bus home would ease their minds and aching feet from all of the walking.

After all of the excitement of the carnivals, education was a great factor in the lives of the kids from 1926. School begins for me on the first weekday of September, and it wasn’t very different for 1926’s Iselin children. **“Township Schools to Open September 8”**, was the announcement on the front page of The Woodbridge Ledger, August 27, 1926. There is always an air of nervousness and excitement when preparing for the first day of school. I am always happy to see my friends, but anxious

about what I will be learning during the school year, and melancholy about my summer's end. Could the children of 1926, possibly have felt the same way? But I doubt if the kids would have had enough time to linger in their anxieties and melancholies, because teachers have a nice way of engaging a child's mind. With an established free public library, I'm sure that the children had the opportunity to visit, with their class, to obtain a book so that their minds were stimulated with the fantastic stories contained within the pages of the many books that were donated. **"Iselin Library Organizers Meet on September 3"**, The Woodbridge Ledger, August 27, 1926. School was and is the jackpot for kids to learn and make new friends, to join clubs and participate in group activities. Groups like the Scouts Golden Eaglet Troup No. 1 for Girls, who bicycled and hiked throughout Woodbridge, as reported in The Woodbridge Ledger on August 27, 1926 under the heading, **"Iselin Girl Scouts Plan another Hike"**, or the Iselin Senators, with their young men that looked to compete on the town's baseball team, or simply enjoy a nice day out with their fathers, **"Iselin Senators Hand Drubbing to Iroquois"**, The Woodbridge Independent, Friday, June 4, 1926.

It had only been eight years since the end of World War I, and people seemed to be getting through life just fine, despite some challenges, just as we do today, in 2015 with wars that we still participate in. I feel that, the children were, and are, the life blood of our American society. In a suburb, like Iselin, where they were most likely, often shielded from harsher lives that were lived by kids in the major cities, like New York. The people of Iselin appeared to make life a community event, where most children were safe. Iselin, is pretty much the same today, a nice and quiet, family oriented community. Whatever technologies or social advances that were developed at that time, Iselin communities came together to afford them for themselves, which in return, benefitted the children of Iselin. It is not so different from the modern technologies that we all rely upon today. We get together for church or ballgames, street fairs and dances. Only now, it so much quicker just to text my friends to ask them if they are available to go skating or the movies. Modernization, like time, is all relevant.