

The Olhausen Reunion
A Family Tradition

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Once a year the Olhausen family and their descendants and friends get together for a reunion at the Blue Lake section of ~~Reelfoot~~ Lake. Blue Lake is about twenty miles southeast of Ridgley, Tennessee. This is where Joeseeph Olhausen, the originator of the Olhausen renions, was born.

It was difficult to track down the exact date of the first reunion. I talked with John David Olhausen (Joeseeph's son and my Grandfather) who recalled the first reunion taking place when he was in his early twenties. This was at least fifty years ago. Since then, the number of people attending the annual gathering has tripled. Many other aspects of the reunion differ now from what they were in the early 1930's, but the purpose of the gathering, the foods eaten there, and most of the responsibilities of each person remain unchanged.

Fifty years ago Joeseeph Olhausen, a farmer with eight children, realized his family was growing apart. Many of his children had married, and there were only three of them left at home in Ridgley. Those who married moved to various parts of the United States. Some relocated themselves in places as far away as California. According to my Grandfather, Joeseeph Olhausen was intent on his children knowing each other well and relying on one another. He wanted his children to remain close despite the distances separating them. This is why he sent a letter to each of his children requesting they come back to Ridgley for a week's visit. Both my Grandfather and my Great Uncle Neil remember getting such a letter, but neither is sure in what year he recieved it. They both agree that it was in the early 1930's, and that Joeseeph relayed a sense of urgency in his writing. Maybe he was afraid he would never see all of his children together again. Whatever his reasons for feeling so strongly about reuniting his family, his children willingly complied with his wishes. Everyone made it home that summer.

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Accounts of the first reunions differ, but I did find the relatives I talked with all agreed on several points. The purpose of the gathering is still what it was fifty years ago. It's a chance to catch up on what's been going on in everyone's life during the previous year. It is an opportunity for the adults to see the new babies of the family, and for the children to get ^{acquainted} with their cousins, aunts, and uncles.

Those attending the first reunions included my Great Grandfather, his children, and his grandchildren. As the family grew, so did the size of the reunions. In the beginning there were only twenty to thirty people, today fifty to seventy people show for the meeting. When Joseph Olhausen died in the spring of 1956, John David was determined to keep the yearly tradition alive. The year of Joseph's death, John David arranged the reunion. He invited not only all of his relatives, but also extended the invitation to friends of his father's. These people and their children still attend the reunions.

At one time this annual get-together lasted a week. It is only a one-day affair now. People start arriving at Blue Lake as early as 6:00 a.m. on the day of the reunion. Some people camp at Reelfoot the night before to ensure sufficient time to see everyone and participate in activities. Those who arrive first are responsible for setting up the games that will be played throughout the day. There are a variety of games played during the day. Frisbee, baseball, and backgammon are all popular with the children and adults, but they were not played at the early reunions. According to my Grandfather, croquet, horse shoes, checkers and chess were the original forms of entertainment. They are still present today.

While the games are being set up by the men, the women busy themselves adorning the picnic tables with fruit, cheese, and other snacks. This is to keep everyone from becoming too ravenous before the 2:00 feast.

By 8:00 the majority of folks have arrived. For an hour or so pure havoc reigns as everyone searches for her favorite cousin, aunt, uncle (etc.). This

can be difficult with fifty or sixty people surrounding you. Eventually everyone settles down and they start breaking into groups. Most of the women find their way to a cluster of shade trees where they gossip, do needlepoint, or cross-stitch, and give gifts to the mothers of babies who were born since the last reunion.

The younger men begin organizing the games during this time. The smaller children usually bound towards the croquet games to get their names taken to compete in a tournament, of sorts. The croquet champ is awarded the privilege of sitting next to Grandfather during the family meal. This may seem trivial, but when you're five or ten years old it is a big deal. It has been the cause of several sweet children becoming vicious on the croquet grounds. I remember one year, my oldest brother hit me with a mallet because I was still in the tournament and he had been beaten out.

Grandfather told me that this custom had begun long before he sat at the head of the table. His father, Joseph always encouraged competition and good sportsmanship among his children. Grandfather told me he thought the seating custom started with Joseph's grandson, Mark. It seems that Mark, who was about 15 at the time, rarely excelled in any type of sport. At one of the early reunions Mark beat all of his cousins at croquet.

Joseph wanted to put Mark in the lime-light for a day, and insisted Mark sit right beside him during lunch. I talked with my Great Uncle Neil, Mark's father, after Grandfather gave me this information. He had a somewhat different version of this story which I thought was rather amusing. His version went like this:

"Mark had not ever played that game before and he beat everybody in it. He was not no more than six years old and he picked up a mallet and beat everybody there with no problem at all. Well, Pappa was just proud of him even though it was not nothin' at all to him (Mark) and he just wanted him to set right there beside him all through dinner".

I'm attributing the difference in these accounts to serenity, although I will not say on whose part. I'm guessing that the tradition of the croquet champs sitting beside the man who heads the table started thirty or forty years ago. I would have called Mark himself, but I'm going to have trouble paying my phone bill as it is.

The croquet tournament can last anywhere from 20 minutes to three hours, depending how well you play. Those children who are knocked out of the game early, or who do not get their turn to play until later in the tournament are still entertained. Many play chess or checkers with the older men, some feed bread crumbs to the ducks, and others play on the swing sets and slides. No matter what the children choose to do, they are carefully watched because this is the responsibility of the single girls and young women.

I've never really minded this practice of the young girls watching the small children. As a matter of fact, I felt very important when I was given this responsibility. (Incidentally, you know you're old enough to take on this responsibility when the mothers start handing you their two year-olds as they arrive at the lake). Anyway, It is a relief for the mothers not to have to keep up with their little ones every minute of the day, and I've always enjoyed it. My mother, Darius Olhausen Cain, believes this distribution of responsibility had begun at the first reunion. The married women had many more duties to keep them occupied forty years ago. They had to clean the fish before it could be breaded and deep-fried. The fish for the big meal is no longer caught in the lake as it once was. It would just be impractical. The fish is now bought at a store. The women were also responsible for mixing and freezing gallons of ice-cream. This they still do. Each woman who participates in this uses her own recipe. There are usually five or six different flavors of home made ice-cream. It is always hard to decide which flavor (or flavors) to eat.

As I mentioned before, the fish eaten was once caught by the men and boys in the family. The means of getting them has changed, but it is still cooked in the same way. Three steel vats are set up over open fires, and the fish is deep-fried in these. Oddly enough, the men undertake the chore of frying the fish. They always have. Each man who has been appointed chef for the day claims that his fish is the best, and that his wife's hushpuppies are the tastiest. Usually the same four or five men are chosen to cook the fish. At their insistence, my Grandfather always samples a piece of fish from each man's batch. He then tells each man that his fish is the best. This has always been a joke among the relatives.

While the fish is being cooked, all those who are capable help move the picnic tables together to form one long table. The food is set out and everyone takes a seat. When Grandfather takes his seat everyone knows to get quiet and listen to him say the blessing.

After the meal most of the family just relaxes for the rest of the day. Those who have the energy take the children for a swim at a nearby beach. By 6:00 p.m. or 7:00 p.m. the crowd has begun to dwindle. By 9:00 all "goodbyes" have been said. Everyone has headed home or to a relative's house nearby to spend the night.

I guess you could look at this reunion as just another family getting together for a day. To me though, it symbolizes the closeness of my family. It reflects how much Joseph Olhausen was loved by his family and friends. Hopefully, Joseph's wish to keep his family close will continue to be carried out by kith and kin.

In conclusion, I feel privileged to be a part of this family tradition. In these complex times, many families are distant. They are not only separated by the miles, but by feelings toward each other. There is a closeness which I share with my relatives which many people will never know. Writing this paper allowed me to appreciate this closeness which often I have taken for granted.

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