

# *My Green Lake Story: Almira Collier*

Board the train in Indianapolis; take the Parmelee between train stations in Chicago; ride from Fond du Lac on a train with slippery woven straw seats and gas lights; a stop at cross roads to pick up milk cans to take to the creamery in Green Lake. Then a bus ride to the gates of the Northern Baptist Assembly; a breathtaking ride down to the lake; a handsome bellhop in full uniform to welcome you, show you where to register and take your luggage up to your room! It was 1945 and we were at the Youth Conference! The start of a spiritual growth experience - a closer walk with God! That conference and the one the next summer left me with memories of fellowship, singing, Bible studies and sitting on the hillside for evening vespers, listening to Clarence Jordan; one year hearing thoughts on the Sermon on The Mount creating thoughts of what it must have been like for those sitting on the hillside listening to Jesus!  
My second year at the Youth Conference (1946)



God opened the door to a wonderful summer never to be forgotten. Dr. Oliver deWolf Cummings, Director of Northern Baptist Youth Work, asked my parents if I, a high schooler, could stay for the summer as his secretary at Green Lake. What trust my parents had when they said “yes” and sent me another suitcase of clothes! Long evening and night walks struggling with forming my own beliefs and a closer relationship with God. ·

What fun to move at the end of each conference to whatever room was available! Since Dr. Cummings had not known he would need a secretary at Green Lake as well as in Philadelphia, no room had been reserved. My favorite place was John Clark Lodge.

Indian Village, with the beautiful totem pole, was a wonderful place to consume an ice cream cone. And it was easy to slip into the prayer tower for a quiet moment to talk with God.

I was also trained as a backup for the switchboard - the ancient toggle switch type. The last two weeks I ran the Conference Office putting out the nightly newsletter to be distributed at dinner and printing a list of conferees on those messy mimeographs. A sidelight: Dr. Hoiland’s nightly announcements and “newscast” at dinner, with his sense of humor, was not to be missed.

Those last two weeks led to my returning the next summer to run the Conference Office. Upon arriving, found both mimeographs needed a **drastic** cleaning. What do you mean it will take two weeks! I sent one to be cleaned. Knowing the mimeograph was like my father’s, one Sunday afternoon I got a coffee can of gasoline, found a small screwdriver and an old tooth brush, took the mimeograph apart and started scrubbing away. Dick Hoiland came in to find me on the floor with pieces of a mimeograph spread out on newspaper all around me. Fortunately, he did not have a heart attack or fire me! Never told him I ended up with one itty bitty spring left over! But it worked just fine without it.

What a memorable experience it was working for Dick Hoiland. His warmth, his sense of humor and especially his love of Green Lake and its history are still etched in my memory. Taking his tour of the grounds listening to the stories sprinkled with his sense of humor brought the history of this place alive.

What experiences those two summers held. Listening to speakers like Clarence Jordan and Dr. Cranford. Getting to know J.L. Kraft, C. Oscar Johnson, Dick Sun from a wealthy family in China responsible for the snack shack who shared stories of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek, a friend of their family. Listening to Adele Norman singing (her never-to-forget rendition of “His Eye is on the Sparrow”), listening to two musicians who had escaped (believe it was from Estonia) in a leaky boat traveling by night and hiding by day; two students from Juilliard School of music on student staff playing the piano and organ in RWI lobby (you could see the bumble bees as one played “Flight of the Bumble Bee” and feel the

chariots shaking the floor as the notes of "Chariot of Fire" filled the room); Richard Alsasser who had memorized all of Bach's organ works by age 21 playing the organ; a young man with one arm playing the piano; singing in the student and adult staff choir directed by Chuck Boddie who with a grin told us we would never get the rhythm of the Negro spiritual right because we had never toted a barge!

*"Many nights I wandered the roads with no fear, struggling to weave my own concept of God, to find and weave my own beliefs."*

What a safe haven this place was. Many nights I wandered the roads with no fear, struggling to weave my own concept of God, to find and weave my own beliefs. Always knowing the night watchmen would pick me up on their rounds if I had wandered and wondered too late.

Years later I had the opportunity to come back as a volunteer during the Christmas shows and then during the summer to work the switchboard. But this time it was a much more up-to-date switchboard! Another chapter of my time at Green Lake!

Busloads of people arrived two consecutive weekends for the Christmas celebration. What fun! People with all types of crafts filled Morehouse Hall. Coffee, cider and homemade cookies were served in the lobby. My job – make the coffee and keep the trays filled. What wonderful people I met!

There was the year it snowed the night before we were to leave. We loaded into a vehicle crossed our fingers and inched into the Goose Blind. An evening of good food, sharing stories, telling jokes and tons and tons of laughter. Laughter was still ringing out as we said good night to each other.

Then came summers of volunteering for a month or more at the switchboard, my favorite place to be. The beginning of becoming a part of the volunteer family; building friendships with the gals at the reservation desk.

All calls had to come through the switchboard. Sometimes you were talking on one line and the other four lines had people on hold. A piece of paper

at hand was a necessity otherwise you forgot who was what. And the switchboard and guest services desk were in Roger Williams Inn lobby while Kraft was remodeled and expanded. How noisy when conferences came in. But what fun! I was at Green Lake! Then came the summer when we were back home in the new lobby of Kraft. The switchboard was located in the small hall behind the guest services desk. We sat on high stools with our feet dangling until Red built us a box to put them on. The switchboard was later moved into the guest service area. Hallelujah!

But volunteering here is so much more than your opportunity to serve. It is becoming a part of the volunteer family, making and sharing friendships, going places together, playing table games in the evening, putting a piece in the puzzle always in process, sitting with others by the lake, watching sunrises and sunsets, attending Bible studies, having times when God opened your eyes to something new. There were the times I watched the lake go from smooth as glass to waves with white caps in what seemed like a twinkling of an eye. God guided my thoughts to the stories in the New Testament that involved the Sea of Galilee. How much more meaningful they became. And I still think of Green Lake as a reflection of the Sea of Galilee.

Finding the berry bushes and picking the ripe berries. Walking to take in the beauty God created; listening to the morning and evening songs of the birds; watching the squirrels, rabbits and chipmunks scurrying around; stopping to let the wild turkey and her brood cross the road; being surprised by the sight of a doe and her fawn.

Being a person who thinks there should be a purpose to walking – enjoying the fresh air, letting thoughts wander, talking with God or picking up trash. I learned to take two plastic bags – one for trash and one for lost golf balls. We said the fawns must have played with the balls at night. They seemed in an odd place for golfers to have lost them!

God, thank you for these years. Please just one more!

