

In small towns, tradition often runs strong and in Chatham it is no different. Various festivals are held every year bringing the community together to celebrate friendship and past accomplishments and those to come. Whether it be the Fishawack Festival or the Fourth of July parade, in Chatham, there is always a chance to bond with your fellowman. For me, the most central experiences I have had took place at Kelly's Pond, formerly known as Milton Pond. It's a small pond, but it very well may be the most important pond in my life.

Every year in April, Chatham Borough residents take their kids to this humble body of water to participate in The Fishing Derby. A three-day event with two days of fishing held by the Chatham Borough Fire Department. My father took me and my brother every year since we were allowed to compete in the competition. Our car's tires would sink down into the mud as we hopped out to unload our gear. We set up our tent along with the other four loyal Borough residents who were willing to brave the wilderness along with us (Camping is not a requirement but it does feel like a rite of passage and it's an event you don't want to miss). There would be no fishing on that day, but there would be plenty of activities to keep you busy. You could huddle near the fire and listen to stories of old (many included my father), you could walk around the pond searching for frogs to catch or you could climb "Big Kid Mountain" - the name devoted to the inclined slope leading from the campground to the Chatham Mulch Area.

The stories were often funny and gave you a better understanding of how Chatham was, well before your birth. While listening to stories, you could roast marshmallows while simultaneously avoiding the thick smoke that seemed to pursue you no matter where you went. Hunting frogs was less of a sport and more of an art. It took stealth, keen eye, and patience. As you stalked around the perimeter, your eyes gazed inward to the black plane that was Kelly's Pond. Occasionally, you would hear a croak, see an imperfection on the water's surface and witness the immediate reaction from those in your hunting party. After the frog was netted, it was carefully handled by the hunter and transported to the legendary frog whisperer, a devoted and hearty firefighter. The whisperer would caress the frog and croak - almost as if a conversation was had. The frog quelled its squirming and croaked back. After the fun was had, the frog was released back into the pond.

"Big Kid Mountain" was the ultimate goal of that night. The hill represented maturity and its conquering was seen as a feat by me and my young peers. Leading up to the hill is a 'dangerous ravine', which I can now cross in a single step. Halfway up the mountain is an 'intense' increased slope that requires all the strength that a 9 year-old could muster, but a now 18 year-old can pass with one arm behind his back. At the top, there were logs and nothing else really. In the earlier years of my experience, there were logs and older kids, including my brother, hanging around the top. They all seemed so tough and so strong. We would try to roughhouse them and they must have simply humored us. Eventually as time went on, there were less and less big kids at the mountain and we found that we were the ones hanging out with logs.

When all the playtime was over, it was time to hit the sack, for a huge day of fishing was waiting. Many a year, people claimed they heard a bear, but those who have tackled the derby before knew it was just the awful combination of snores from five different dads (including my own father who was and is still is the loudest). In the morning we secure our lucky spot and we prepare for the air horn signaling that the competition has begun. It releases a blaring explosion of noise and a swarm of hooks suspended by nylon fishing lines fill the air and soon after, land in the pond. Within minutes, no, within seconds, the first trout is reeled in. The prize for first

fish of the day has been claimed. Maybe an hour later, the kid who has been getting one after the other reels in his third, and the prize for first three fish of the day is won. After catching three trout, your day is done and you have to wait out the rest of the day to see if any of your fish have won the prize for largest fish of the day. After 8 hours, the first day of the derby is over. The events of the night repeat themselves and the events similar to the previous day proceed in the morning. After all is done, the prizes are officially awarded. For each category there are two winners, a girl and a boy. All except for one. There can only be one biggest fish of both days. To the fisher goes the spoils, a trophy commemorating their achievement. From the minor prizes, my brother and I have accumulated tackle box after tackle box and fishing rod after fishing rod over the years.

My brother, in his dwindling years up to the cutoff line of 13 years, had already won the derby, but as for me, on my 12th year, I still had not picked up the honor. But that all changed when I threw out a line and instantly hooked what felt like a pretty competitive fish. As I reeled him in, I saw that this could be the fish to win the derby. I weighed him in and only then did the dread set in that I had to wait out the rest of the day and the next to see if my fish had proven largest. Low and behold, it was the largest and my story had come to a near perfect end, for in my 2nd to last year of eligibility in The Chatham Borough Fishing Derby. I had won! Now the Derby seems to have lost some of the magic. Less people show up, less fish are caught, and the stories seem to be on rerun but one thing that never dies are the memories and the chance to share in the campfire socializing between friends, family, and strangers.