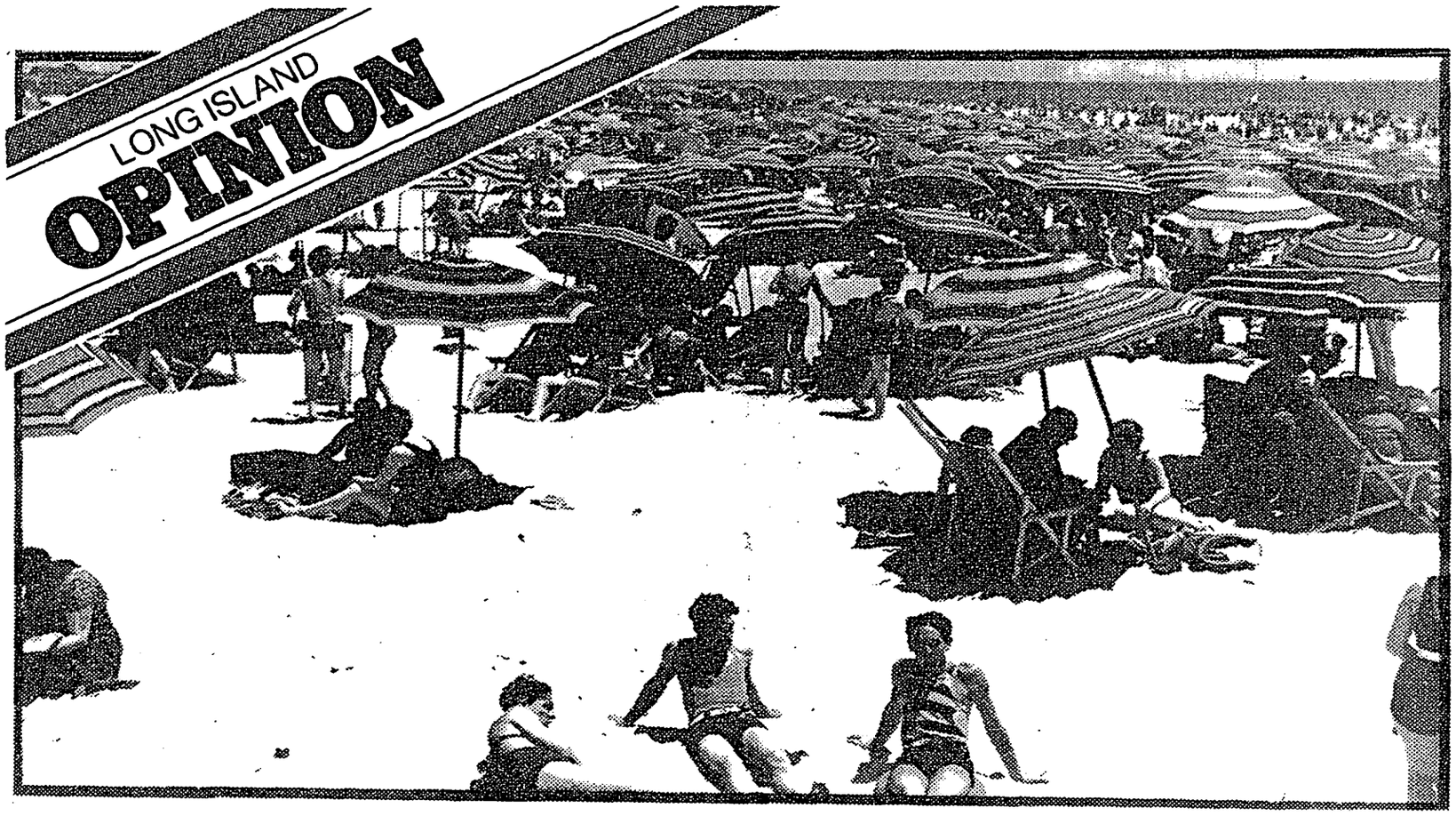
LONG ISLAND
OPINION



The scene at Jones Beach on a hot summer day in the late 1930's

And That's the Way It Was

By SHARON MONAHAN

JONES BEACH has been a member of the wedding ever since my parents married themselves to Long Island 35 years ago. But as Frankie in the Carson McCullers play noted, "Life is surely a sudden place." Jones Beach has changed all of a sudden, and yet slowly over the years.

From the time that I was 6 years old, when sighting the carillon tower through the marshland meant that a treasured day was about to begin, Jones Beach has been my retreat and sanctuary.

First, there was the season ticket book that sold for a song. If you used the book up in midsummer, the state would provide another one, and another one — free. The price of entry 35 years ago was 25 cents without a book. Ball playing, beer drinking and loud radios were not allowed at the state park beach when I spent my youthful summers there.

As soon as my father's 1947 blue Plymouth came to a stop in a parking field and all the beach paraphernalia was out of the trunk and the car was sealed tight, the world switched rhythms and time was bewitched.

Children ran through the concrete underground tunnel toward the ocean side of the park shouting in the dark echo chamber. After we emerged from the tunnel, the air was scented with the sweet ocean smell of summer roses and petunias. Pansies were neatly planted along the walks and looked like the colors of a rainbow.

My sister, who was a teen-ager back then, took the Jones Beach bus from Freeport every morning to take swimming and diving lessons at the pool. She had the $5 season locker pass to the West Bathhouse. But for even greater status, she wore on her ankle the black, washed-out elastic band with a brass key dangling from it — a badge to show she was one of the chosen who had a season locker at the pool.

The pool, surrounded by brick walls and stunted trees, had canvas lounging chairs and a second-story awninged veranda where nonswimmers could watch the diving and swimming activity below.

When we tired of the horseplay in the pool and our lips turned purple, and our fingertips shriveled and turned a pallid pink, we headed for the Indian Village of Princess Summerfallwinterspring. The village spread out over the grass in front of the outdoor roller skating rink, next to the bandshell, near the Central Mall. The Princess, attired in a deerskin dress, moccasins, feathers and real black braids, taught us arts and crafts in genuine tepees.

Out on the beach, the lifeguards were dressed in one-piece swimsuits of black with an oval patch on the chest in shades of green and rust, the colors of Jones Beach. In the center of the emblem was the Jones Beach marine-green sea horse. The lifeguards never went bare-chested. But often one would sensuously drop a shoulder strap to reveal a broad golden brown shoulder and muscular arm.

My sister worked at the West Bathhouse for several summers as a cashier. In the 1950's, a person bought tickets for hot dogs and sea-breeze burgers — the absolute best because they were touched by the salt air. She had to learn a complicated numbers-code system to work the ticket machine. Like all cashiers, she wore a black and white uniform.

It was my turn, 10 years later. At the beginning of the 1960's, I was a summer waitress at the Jones Beach old Boardwalk Restaurant, with its fieldstone facade and casement windows.

At that time, the West End beaches didn't exist. College kids assembled at Field One. That was ours. Fields Two and Three were for out-of-towners and were never visited by the regulars. Field Four, the pool and the Central Mall were for the bus people and the kids who were taking swimming lessons. Fields Six and Nine (with the replica of a captain's bridge for a refreshment stand) were family beaches. and Zachs Bay — ugh — the mucky bay — was for out-of-space aliens, or so we said to each other.

I still remember the time I was switched from the sedate Boardwalk Restaurant at the Central Mall to the Marine State Theater Dining Room. It was a buffet affair for people who attended the Guy Lombardo productions at the state theater. That particular year, the show was "Paradise Island," an original musical about Hawaii in commemoration of its statehood in 1959.

More than two dozen Hawaiian teenagers — a professional dance troupe — spent that summer living in Freeport and performing every night at Jones Beach. They did the hula and feverish Tahitian dances. There was a fire-eater among them, and a young diver who jumped from the top of a tower on the stage — 40 feet high — into Zachs Bay — ugh — the bay.

During the intermission, the waitresses and busboys manned the refreshment stands, poured the freshly made coffee and made hot dogs for the theater crowd who, by then, were chilled and clammy from the offshore breeze. When our work was done, the crew from the theater dining room went out back, behind the old wooden stands, and watched the fireworks that were the finale to every Guy Lombardo production.

The penultimate ending, of course, was the appearance of Guy Lombardo — in nautical white cap — in his famous wooden speedboat. A few years later, a huge red and white striped tent was set up so that theatergoers could dance to Guy Lombardo and the Royal Canadiens — for free — after the show broke.

The only other summer job for a young woman that was better than being a marine dining room waitress was being an usherette at the Marine Theater.

It must have been the uniforms and the good pay for the four hours of work that made the job so attractive. Most of the usherettes were young school teachers. They had smart caps of white with navy blue brims and a New York medal-emblem affixed to the front. Wearing pale blue cord suits with navy blue piping, crisp white blouses and sensible black heels, they escorted people courteously to their seats.

That's all gone now, along with the fresh urns of coffee. The winter solarium for naked sunbathers at the Central Mall is gone, too. Now, some 20 years later, I have to get up at 6 in the morning on a summer weekend to get into the park before 7 A.M., when the state starts charging a whopping $3.50 to park at the Atlantic Ocean.

The lifeguards now wear black brief suits; you can no longer rent a tank suit or get a locker and shower for 10 cents. Guy Lombardo and all those inexpensive musical evenings at the theater have gone, too. The usherettes now wear black skirts and are surly instead of courteous. Short Beach, a wild cove where boats anchored, has become a fancy marina with a building for snacks and instant coffee.

What we have left is the ocean: the terrifying undertow and the waves — the best on the East Coast — ferocious and forbidding.

I still see the tower over the marshland on this island that juts into the ocean. But I just hope someone in the upper reaches of the state government maps off one of those beaches for people like me who go to the seashore as one would go to a house of worship or a library.

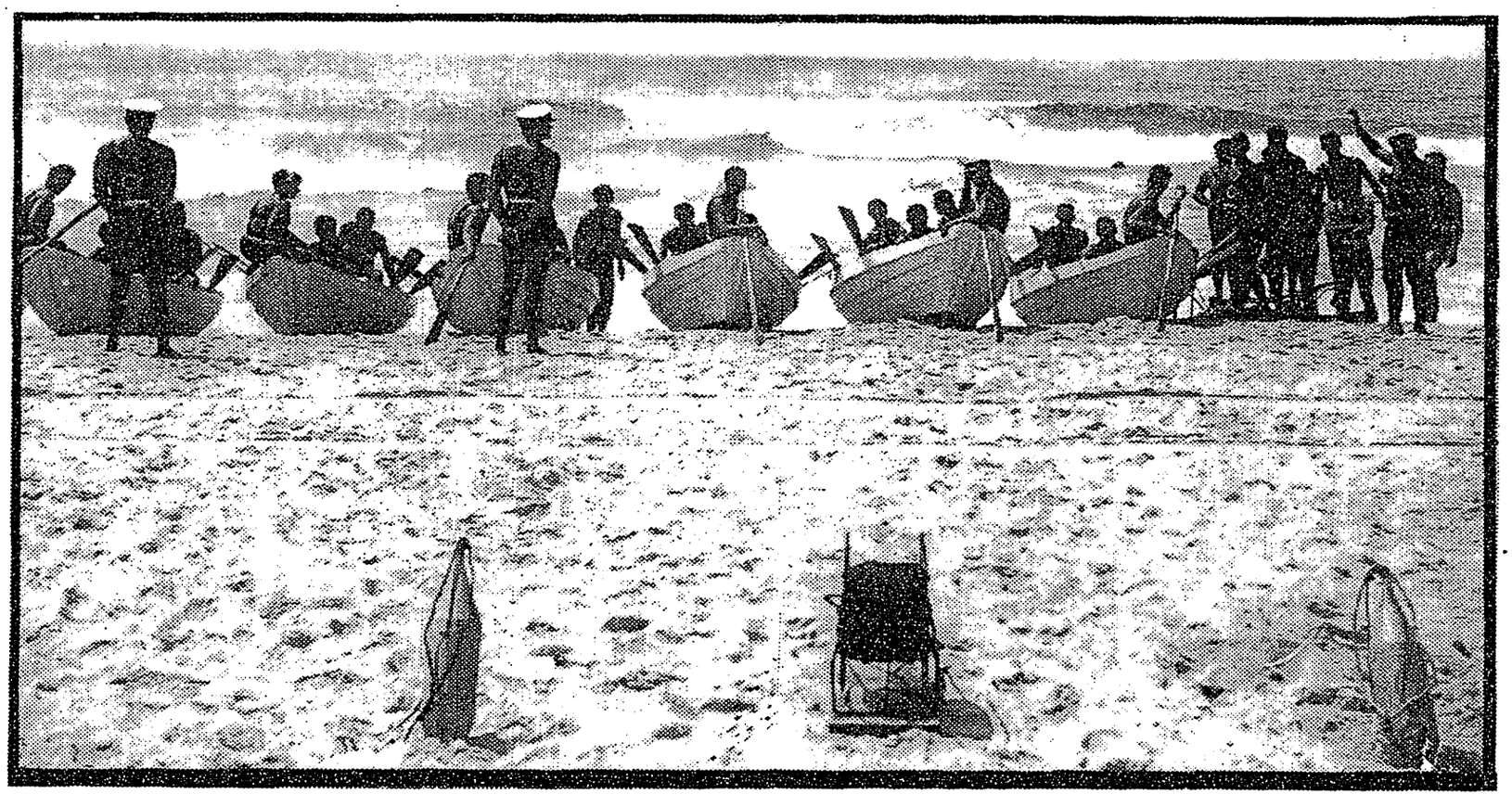
I'm not asking for a return to style and standards. But I do want the silence of waves and gulls, of children shouting into the surf, and the sound of happy voices. No radios. No drinking. No ballplaying.

I want a protected place for people like me who remember the beach as a sanctuary and not a slovenly playground. There are thousands of Long Islanders who would love a field at Jones Beach that is quiet and sober.

Just recently, there was a middle-aged couple who had to get up from their chairs and leave the beach because some teen-agers behind them had their radio playing so loud that you thought you were in the Nassau Coliseum at a rock concert.

The middle-aged man politely asked one of the kids to lower the radio. With that, the teen-ager turned it up louder. For people who have been going to Jones Beach longer than these youngsters are old, there should be a place for us — so we can hold on and enjoy the timeless grace of summer. ■

Sharon Monahan lives in Long Beach.



Lifeguards at Jones Beach preparing for competitions in 1938