

Ackermann's Nursery School/Swim Program

As told by Beverly Shoop

In 1941 Alice Ackermann founded the Happy Times Nursery School for children, ages 2-5, on the second floor of her Kirkwood home at 1044 Curran Ave. Later, the lower level garage was finished into a play room. This was only the second nursery school operating in St. Louis County. Kindergarten teachers and parents alike praised her work with children and said that they could always see the difference in those that had attended. She continued the nursery school (now called pre-school) until 1975 when her husband Al retired from his position as Public Utilities Manager with the City of Kirkwood.

The nursery school was run on a shoestring budget as money was tight. Supplies were basic and consisted of easily obtained (sometimes collected freebies) objects. Children spent their time on the home-spun playground every day. Old large wooden wire spools and huge old truck tires made for great climbing fun, and upright piano crates were placed facing each other with the fronts being used for a roof between them to form a playhouse. There were several sand boxes, slides and a swing. Indoor activities included easel painting, finger painting, and building with a large assortment of wooden blocks. Of course there was a play-kitchen with a stove and dress-up clothes, stored in collected orange crates, to be enjoyed. There was always a large assortment of wood puzzles and many other fun things to do.

Halfway through the morning Alice would serve milk (from the nearby Woodlawn Dairy) and graham crackers always placed on a paper towel which she then taught the children to neatly fold with the crumbs inside, when they were finished. On birthdays she made pink icing for the graham crackers. Lunch was

prepared by Lorene Clark, an across-the-street neighbor, brought over and served in the back porch. After lunch was down time, and each child (much to their dismay) were to get their rug and lie down for a short rest.

In 1949 Alice decided to open the Happy Times Swim Program. She had a special concern for children and water safety. This began as a summer program at the same location but during summer when the nursery school was closed. It started off very small again with a tight budget and one inflatable pool. Then soon after as popularity grew, Alice with the help of her husband, Al Sr., began digging their first in-ground pool. The camp continued to grow, and three more pools and a covered play area would be added.

Continuing with the homespun/homemade philosophy Alice decided that no electronic toys would be allowed. As with the nursery school, Alice loved to visit salvage yards to find unique items. One of Alice's favorites was the turn-style from the old Forest Park Highlands entrance.

A sea shack was built to house her collection of shells from all over the world. Climbers were designed specifically for the camp. Their favorite is the pirate ship which was built over the family water skiing/fishing boat. Other things that the kids enjoy are hula hoops, jump ropes, a rope swing, checkers, chess, Legos and many other challenging toys.

Over the years the camp became known as Ackermann's Swim Program where literally thousands of children have learned water safety along with the fundamental swimming strokes. Children have come from far and wide: the St. Louis Metropolitan Area, St. Louis County, surrounding counties and Illinois - even children from Europe and China when they come home to visit with grandparents because their parents and grandparents learned

to swim at Ackermann's.

Through the years we continue to pull from past campers to staff our program with a few exceptions. Beyond giving them a safe, fun summer job, it also gives them a rich learning experience - dealing both with the kids and the parents. It is also a great reference for college and future jobs. Many who took their first strokes at Ackermann's Swim Program are currently or have competed successfully at the high school and collegiate levels. Several of them went on to set national records and tried out for the Olympics.

Alice and Al's three children - Beverly Shoop, Janet Zucker and Al Ackermann, Jr. - all taught and helped Alice run the camp until Janet and Al moved out of state and began their careers. Upon returning to St. Louis, Bev joined Alice to help run the camp. Grandchildren, Mike and Carol Lynn (Carlstrom) Shoop, grew up working at the camp and continue to be a part of the program. Upon his retirement, Bev's husband, DeVere Shoop, became a part of Ackermann's, too - a job he says is the best one he has ever had!

Alice Ackerman passed away in 2007. The swim program is continuing as "Mrs. A" (as she was referred to) wanted. It is now co-owned and run by Bev Shoop and her son, Michael, with the help of Bev's husband, DeVere, and daughter, Carol Carlstrom. A new in-ground pool was built in 2015 with a water level of only 30" for 4 and 5-year olds.