

History Of The Marinas

I asked all of the marinas on Dale Hollow to participate in this book by relaying as much history of their marinas to me for print. I devoted as much effort into each of their stories as they devoted to me. They are listed in the order I received them.

There are fourteen commercial marinas on Dale Hollow and the Kentucky State Park Marina. There is no Corps reservoir in the country with more marinas per mile than this. Despite the number of marinas on this body of water, it seems a very long way around it. No matter how you drive to a marina, it is quite a drive to the next. It isn't so bad by boat. The proximity is much closer. There have been many colorful individuals operating these marinas over the years, and that has given rise to the diversity of them all. Each has found its niche on this lake and survives accordingly. It has proven difficult to obtain historical information on most of the marinas. Most have changed hands a number of times, and with the change, the history was often lost. But, we've scraped together a little for you. I hope you enjoy.

Willow Grove Resort



Willow Grove Resort, 1948

Willow Grove started out like most of the marinas on Dale Hollow. It was little more than a place at the end of the old road where people pulled their old wooden boats onto shore. Willow Grove was probably a little more elaborate than some, having rental cabins early-on. Most had no place to stay until a good bit later. Mr. Bill Wimer and his wife Lucy purchased Army barracks used in the making of the lake. I'm sure it was a pretty good deal for both they and the Corps. The Corps didn't have to move the buildings after the project and the Wimers got a set of instant rental cabins. They were a little crude but were more than sufficient for the fishermen of the time. There were very few pleasure boats in those days. Although there were houseboats on Dale Hollow since the very beginning, they were still primarily used for fishing. The fishing was fantastic in the early days. Some of the old pictures I've seen over the years have reflected the rich source of large fish that filled these waters. They say that the fishing is not as good now as it once was. I think the fish have just gotten smarter. I know that there are hundreds more bass boats flailing the shorelines now with far greater mechanical

equipment. Many of the old timers from way back would be amazed at the advancement of fishing tackle and digital equipment. I fished many nights with old Tommy Gray of Livingston. That old toot had nothing but a piece of string and a lead weight for a depth finder. He could be driving his boat full blast...in the dark...in the middle of the lake. He'd reach over and shut off the motor...make three steps to the front of the boat with pole in hand...and make a cast...all of this in the elapsed time of about four seconds. What amazed me even more is that we would be sitting directly over one of the many moss beds, on exactly the proper portion of it. I'll never know how he managed to find those moss beds in the dead of night like that. He would normally have one fish in the boat before I could untangle my line and make a cast. Neat guy.

Sometime during the 1950's, Willie P. Speck and Dr. Norris purchased the dock. Somewhere just before then, a man by the name of Jim Sickelino owned the place. He only owned it a short while when the pair of Speck and Norris bought it. They ran it for several years, up through the mid-1970's. It was Dr. Norris' son, Gary, that first studied the moved graves of Dale Hollow in depth. Gary D. Norris has compiled books of information about the old foundations and moved graves. It was years before anyone would believe his story about the exposed graves on the Clark Bottom flats. I'm glad he was persistent.



Willow Grove Marina 1958

In the middle 1970's, the marina was purchased by two businessmen from Livingston. Johnny Fred Coleman and Kenneth Winningham bought the dock and began building some larger slips. A man by the name of Dan Stewart operated the place with the other two men being silent partners. Mr. Stewart left after a few years, and the marina was then turned over to Mr. Roger Mabrey. Roger, or Roy, as he was often called, was a very colorful fellow. I got to know him over the years and truly enjoyed his friendship. Most of his family worked at the marina as well. That whole family fit in very well at the place. They were a very closely-knit group and still stick together like glue. Great family.



Willow Grove Marina, the Freeze of 1977/78

Another of the men working at the marina at that time was Mr. Al Brannock. Al was an older fellow with a bright white flat-top hair style. Everyone at the marina felt as if he was Grandpa Al. I think he kind of liked it that way. The man was retired, and he came to Tennessee from his home in Ohio every year during the summer. He lived in a tiny little camper in the far edge of the parking lot,

overlooking the back of Colson Creek. He worked nearly everyday of the summer, and he worked for free. The man simply would not accept pay. I'm not sure exactly why he did it, but I am sure that Dale Hollow and Willow Grove were his favorite places on Earth. He died in 1985, in his little camper in the edge of the parking lot...right where he wanted to be. He was a neat old fellow.



Al Brannock 1982

In January of 1982, Larry and Sheryl Shell purchased the marina with partners Keith and Audrey Harrison. After a few years, the Harrisons left the business, partly due to Keith's declining health. Keith was a very dry man. If you didn't know him, you might miss his strange, dry humor. He really was a funny guy once you got to know him. He and I had a long conversation one day about the longest day of the year. We determined that the longest day wasn't some mid-summer day. Since Keith worked when I was off and I worked when he was off, we determined that the longest day of the year was *the other guy's day off*. Funny guy.

The restaurant at Willow Grove opened and closed constantly. The management of it changed hands more times than a whiskey bottle in a frat house. Betty Mabrey did a nice job for a number of years. Don and Sherry Long did well for a short while. Jim and Mary Jo Slinker probably held out the longest, and made a good go of it. Tom and Linda Maxwell and their kids, Candy and Mike, ran it a couple of years. My Uncle John and Aunt Mary Shell did well a couple of years. The restaurant business is an extremely difficult business to operate. They all have my respect.



Compton girls 1960

Tommy and Linda Maxwell and their children, Candy and Mike, have run the Dive Shop for two decades. Mike now works at the marina, and plays there when he isn't working. They are a very dedicated lake family.

Larry and Sheryl still own the marina at this time. They live peacefully just up the road one mile. They still take great interest in

the marina, and love it as much as the day they bought it...or maybe a little more. Their daughter, Marla, has moved on from the marina to pursue her career as a veterinary technician. She is now a part of another family business, Ragland and Riley Veterinary Hospital. Their son, Darren, and his wife, Beth, and daughter, Lauren, operate the marina with the help of Mickey and Lori Ledbetter and their children, Blake and Shaela. Darren and Mickey have both served on the board of directors of the Tennessee Marina Association, and both jointly act as President of the Dale Hollow Dock Operators Association.

Brian and Betty Lennon have worked at the marina for a decade. Lou Nell Wilborn and Harlene Melton have been on the staff for over a decade, as well. The familiar and favorite face of Darla Cummins has smiled at customers for many years as well.



Willow Grove Resort 2002