

History

by Deborah Lange

The Baltzley Brothers Establish Glen Echo - 1889

Glen Echo began in 1889 when two brothers, Edwin and Edward Baltzley, purchased land along the Potomac River from Cabin John Creek in Maryland to the Walhonding Road area and named it Glen-Echo-on-the-Potomac. They envisioned stone castles on their land and referred to the area as "The Washington Rhine." To provide the stone for the castles that they hoped people would build, they opened five local quarries, one of which is still operating on Seven Locks Road.

What was the lure of Glen Echo? Montgomery county had a higher elevation than DC, giving it cooler summers. Trains provided easy access. The Baltzley brothers even founded and promoted the Glen Echo railroad to bring customers to their property. And the natural greenery along the Potomac was an attraction in itself.

The Baltzley brothers were able to finance their investment with the money Edwin had made on the invention of an improved mechanical eggbeater, patented in 1885, that reversed direction halfway through each turn of the crank. In 1888 they sold the egg beater factory and the patent and began investing in real estate.

At first, property in Glen Echo sold well. To further enhance their community, the brothers built a magnificent, fanciful restaurant called Pa-taw-o-meck Cafe. As a showcase example of the Victorian back-to-nature movement, the restaurant used 30,000 cedar logs in the construction. The brothers opened it to the public in July 1890. Unfortunately, four months later the restaurant burned to the ground in a spectacular fire. The brothers vowed to rebuild it in stone, but they never did. Not long after that, rumors of malaria began drying up lot sales, and almost nothing was built on the lots that were already sold.

But the Baltzleys did not quit. They came up with another idea. They aligned themselves with the Chautauqua movement.

An Alliance with the National Chautauqua - 1891

The Chautauqua was an educational movement that sought to unify the Protestant churches by bringing people together for classes, discussions, entertainment, and physical activity. The movement started in 1874 with the first Chautauqua Assembly at Lake Chautauqua, NY. The Baltzley brothers deeded 80 acres of their land to the National Chautauqua of Glen Echo, which became the 53rd Chautauqua Assembly.

The Baltzleys soon began building the Amphitheater, the Hall of Philosophy, and the Academy of Fine Arts. A curriculum was set, lecturers were arranged, and the Chautauqua opened on June 16, 1891. It was a huge success. A thousand people attended opening day. Three hundred to four

hundred stayed for the summer session, living in tents and picnicking in the park. The season, scheduled to end July 4, was extended to August 1 because of demand.

The Chautauqua attracted many prominent scholars and social leaders. [Clara Barton](#), who had established the [American Red Cross](#) in 1881, bought land on Oxford Road for the Red Cross headquarters in July 1891 and built the house that year. It was first used as a Red Cross warehouse, and then modified for living quarters and offices in 1897. When the house was donated to the National Park Service in 1975, it became the first site in the National Park system to be dedicated to the memory of a woman.

The success of the first Chautauqua was not to be repeated. In the spring of 1892, there was another outbreak of fever and several employees succumbed. Then when the well-known head of the Chautauqua business school, Dr. Harry Spencer, died of pneumonia, rumors spread that he had died of malaria. The National Chautauqua was doomed.

Again, the Baltzley brothers did not quit. In the following years, they rented the property to different fund-raising organizations for concerts, recitals, and other events.

The Glen Echo Amusement Park Opens - 1899

In 1899, the Baltzleys rented the park to the Glen Echo Company, who put in a merry-go-round, a bowling alley, a band pavilion, and picnic grounds. But in 1903, deeply in debt and with liens against the property, the brothers finally let it fall into the hands of the building association holding the first trust. Alonzo P. Shaw, who had built the huge elephant at Coney Island, was brought in to manage the park. He installed a Ferris wheel in Clara Barton's front yard and a roller coaster that came screeching by her window. He was hoping to drive her out of her house so he could turn it into a hotel. Clara Barton was happy to see him replaced.

The Washington Railway and Electric Company eventually became the new owner in 1911 and they made Leonard B. Schloss the general manager of the Glen Echo Amusement Park. Under Schloss's direction, the park became hugely successful. He added a major amusement each year. These included the Crystal Pool, the Spanish Ballroom, the Midway, the carousel, a dodgem, skeeball alleys and shooting galleries, a penny arcade, the Pretzel, the Whip, the Coaster Dips, and the Flying Scooter. Glen Echo Amusement Park became a family playground with wholesome attractions.

In 1933, all of the street railroad companies were absorbed by the Capital Transit Company of Washington, DC. Schloss continued his management of the park until 1948, and in the years initially following World War II, the park was every bit as successful as it had been earlier. People came to ride the roller coaster, swim in the Crystal Pool, dance in the Spanish Ballroom, and dine on hot dogs and cotton candy.

The Dentzel Carousel Arrives - 1921

One of the most popular attractions was a carousel made by the Dentzel Company of Philadelphia and installed in 1921. Today it still runs and is the only carousel of its age and

quality that has remained in its original location. When the amusement park eventually closed, the carousel was sold to a Virginia collector. However, local residents became concerned that it would be subsequently sold piecemeal and, in 1970, raised \$80,000 to purchase it back. The carousel is now being painstakingly and lovingly restored.

The Amusement Park Closes - 1968

In the 1950s attendance began to diminish as theme parks like Disneyland started drawing the crowds. The park was sold to Continental Enterprises in 1954, then to Rekab, Inc., in 1955. The park, however, was deteriorating seriously. The Midway became termite-ridden and was burned down by the fire department. In 1966, after an outbreak of vandalism, there was a dramatic drop in attendance. The park finally had its last season in 1968.

A Chautauqua Again - 1970

Glen Echo Park was transferred to the US government on April 1, 1970 in a land exchange with Rekab, Inc. It eventually became part of the Department of Interior, administered by the National Park Service. Since 1971, National Park Service has been offering year-round activities in dance, theater, and the arts. Today Glen Echo Park is again a Chautauqua, a center for learning and entertainment. Classes are offered in painting, ceramics, sculpture, photography, ballet, ballroom dancing, folk dancing, textiles, enameling, puppetry, and many other arts. Weekend dances and theater events are once more delighting the nation's capital.