

Powell, Sallie: Mr. Dewitt's Lake ^[1]

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Sallie Powell: Mr. Dewitt's Lake

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 4/29/2007. Copyrighted.
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I visited Sallie Powell in Elizabethtown to learn about an all-but-forgotten landmark of African-American history: the swimming beaches and campground at Jones Lake. Created in 1939 [Jones Lake State Park](#) ^[3] was the state's first all-black state park and one of the very few public beaches not off-limits to blacks during the era of Jim Crow racial segregation. Black families from as far away as Raleigh and Durham took their vacations there. Many still recall how much they cherished those summer idylls.

Now integrated, the state park is 100 miles southeast of Raleigh, just outside of Mrs. Powell's hometown, Elizabethtown. She and her husband, Dewitt Powell, a park ranger and superintendent, lived in the state park for 30 years.

This is the second part of my interview with Mrs. Powell. The first, on her career as a mathematics teacher, appeared in my column in February.

In Sallie Powell's words:





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My husband and I met at Jones Lake the summer between my 11th and 12th grades in high school. His name was Dewitt Powell and he was older than me, because he was in the service. He just started talking to me. He wanted to know if Jones Lake was owned by the state and always and always it had been a black beach. There was no integration in those days. The sign said, "Jones Lake State Park. Negroes Only." That was out by the road. I would have to go to Jones Lake. People enjoyed being at Jones Lake though. The children from here would go over there and they had no money. I don't remember what it cost to go in the water, but I think it was about 35 cents. My husband would tell them, "No, you can't go. Then he would turn right around when nobody was looking and tell them, "Now, you go on in the water and you better not get drowned!" They called it "Mr. Dewitt's Lake."

He was a stickler for rules, but then he had his soft side. He had his soft side! But they knew they had to obey.

On weekends, oh my Lord! It would be crowded all weekend. There would be big groups of people. Churches would have picnics over there. School groups would come out in the spring.

They enjoyed the atmosphere there. There were picnic tables. It had a bathhouse and a refreshment stand. I worked in the refreshment stand as a teenager. I sold hot dogs, hamburgers, pork chop sandwiches. You just came to the window. They had a place roped off for swimmers. They had lifeguards. They would play volleyball, and some people would bring their tennis net and they would play tennis. Sometimes they played softball. You could rent rowboats there too, and the Churches baptized at Jones Lake too. That was the place for baptizing. If they scheduled a baptism at, say, 10 o'clock in the morning, my husband would have people stay out of the water until after the baptism.

I saw many baptisms there. The preacher would wear a white robe, and the people being baptized would wear street clothes. They would sing. People would get happy out there.

My husband went there first as a ranger, and then later he was the superintendent. He was the first person, of any color, that stayed there year-round. We moved there December 1953, and we left there Dec. 22, 1984. Our house was on the lake. My children loved the lake. In the summertime, when they were diaper babies, I would take them after everybody was gone and set them in the water. They could splash around all they wanted.

Oh, my husband loved working out there. He loved it to death. He liked outdoors. He would fish sometimes too.

I'm laughing because I remember, one time, I was expecting and I went fishing with him. I carried some sewing along with me. He said, how in the world are you going to watch your hook and line and you're going to be sewing at the same time. I remember very well when integration started and the "Negroes Only" sign was taken down. The sign disappeared. You know, whatever you can't have, you want it.

See, at White Lake, there were places where you could go and spend the night. And there were places where you could go inside and dance and eat. But we didn't have anything like that at Jones Lake. So whenever integration came about,

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