

The old adage, “an east wind is neither good for man nor beast,” was especially relevant for Wilmette in the summer of 1967. That was the year that a particularly heavy die-off of alewives washed up on the beaches. The prevailing east winds pushed the decaying bodies of these small, silvery fish ashore in droves. By July, the Wilmette Park District was hauling six or seven truck loads of alewives out to a landfill in Des Plaines every single day. Next door at Winnetka’s beach, the dead fish were piled up one foot deep and ten feet wide, while Highland Park hauled sixty tons of dead fish away in just two days. Accompanying the sharp smell of decay was an influx of flies and mosquitoes. All in all, not a great beach year for Wilmette. Beach attendance was already hitting record lows—down almost sixty-five percent from its high in 1960—before the alewives arrived. Then things got even worse.

Alewives are a member of the herring family. They are small and boney, and become unpalatable to humans once they reach fresh water. Alewives are native to salt water but began moving into the Great Lakes in the 1940s through the St. Lawrence Seaway. There are several theories surrounding the annual die-off, the main one being the sharp changes in shoreline water temperatures caused by violent spring storms.

Nobody who was living on the North Shore in 1967 will ever forget the terrible stench on the lakefront that year. The Wilmette Park District labored mightily to clean up the mess as early as they could each day, encouraging people to return to the beach. Some park officials believed that the cool weather that summer, not the thousands of dead fish, accounted for the low attendance, but this may have been wishful thinking in a time of crisis.

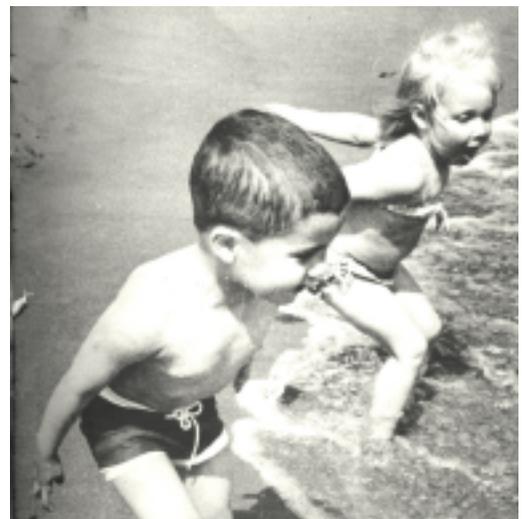
Judging by the dearth of stories and photographs, local newspapers were not eager to cover this stinky situation. In July, at the height of the die-off, the cover of the *Wilmette Life* (at right) showed two young children happily splashing in the surf at Wilmette Beach. Looking closely, you can just make out an alewife, belly-up, at the far left edge of the otherwise perfect shot.

The alewife die-offs continued sporadically through the 1980s, until salmon and other alewife predators were re-introduced into Lake Michigan to help control the population.

~Rachel Kubn



*Dead alewives wash up on a broken Wilmette pier in 1985.*



*Wilmette Life, July 13, 1967*