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Love and Terror at the Virginia Beach Hotel

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Deegan, Mary Jo. 1999. "Love and Terror at the Virginia Beach Hotel." Pp. 40-41 in *A History of Little Paw Paw Lake and Deer Forest, Michigan*, by Roderick L. Rasmussen. Coloma, MI: Southwestern Michigan Publications. [Brief account of the resort hotel owned and operated by Mary Jo Deegan's great grandmother, Ida Cora Hughes, during the 1920s and 1930s].

(This excerpt from an essay titled Love and Terror at the Virginia Beach Hotel is reprinted with permission by the author, Mary Jo Deegan, Professor of Sociology, University of Nebraska).

The Virginia Beach Hotel was a Victorian summer resort: Its white clapboard big house and herd of little cottages clustered at the end of a bay in Little Paw Paw Lake. It looked like hundreds of other such hotels built to serve tourists escaping the heat of summer in the city; in this case, Chicago. My great grandmother, Ida Cora Hughes, owned the Virginia Beach Hotel; and my mother, Ida May Deegan, spent her childhood and teen years there for many, many summers beginning in 1923 and ending in 1935.

To my mother, this spot was a dream, a bubble of happiness, sun, water, family and friends. She knew every family who owned a cottage on the higgly-piggly shoreline and crowded little streets next to the inn. When I could persuade her to go there in the 1960s and 1970s, she would rattle off their names, occupations, hobbies, and idiosyncrasies as if that little community was an open book -- always populated by families from the 1920s who frolicked and played as they did in her child's mind. She would spice up these stories with a soupcon of sarcastic humor, but she mostly loved these people, the lake, and their lives together.

As my mother matured, she assumed more and more responsibilities at the hotel. My mother was soon cleaning all the bedrooms in the big house, and knew all the "regulars" who stayed there every summer for a week or two. She knew a lot about their lives, too, including romantic assignations and stories about bootleg liquor and illegal goings-on in Chicago. One of her favorite guests was a Chicago reporter who followed such crime stories. He was later

murdered during one of his investigations, and he became part of the lore and my mother's adventures at the Virginia Beach Hotel.

Meanwhile, my mother had taught herself to swim and she wanted to swim across Little Paw Paw Lake, a distance of about a quarter mile. My grandfather was shocked at the idea and said she could never do such a ridiculous thing. My great grandmother supported him and said this was a foolish and dangerous idea, but my mother just got more determined to do it. Crossing that stretch of water became more and more important to her, and forbidding her to do it just made her more and more adamant. One morning she talked one of my great grandmother's "hired men" into taking a rowboat out on the lake and accompanying her in her daring feat (I think she bribed him with a dollar). Exhausted and spent, she dragged herself onto the other shore: She was a new woman, triumphant and victorious.

She immediately went to her grandmother with a non-negotiable demand: She would swim across the lake every morning before the guests woke up and accompanied by a rowboat or she would work no more. My great grandmother was flabbergasted and resisted such an uprising with considerable threats and yelling. But she was also practical: She would manage soon-to-be-enraged father and keep her diligent, unpaid worker. Thus my mother felt powerful and proud all her life that she had accomplished this amazing goal -- stood up to her domineering father and grandmother, accomplished a strenuous physical task, and became a Woman To Be Reckoned With.