

## Life on the Mountain

# Rocky Beginnings of Skyline Lakes

In 1968, Price-Radin Associates (PRA) purchased the 490-acre Long brothers' tract for about \$100,000. And that marks the start of the rocky beginnings of Skyline Lakes – a series of problems, broken promises and lawsuits.

PRA hired Bartenstein & Associates of Warrenton to survey, plat and subdivide the parcel, and Kibler Construction to build 11 miles of narrow, rudimentary roads at a cost of \$70,000, according to Price.

There are steep drop-offs on Lakeview Drive next to “borrow pits” with no guardrails, and dangerous, narrow switchbacks on the “Low Road” (Park Heights to High Hill.) *That section of road near Matt May's place, is still treacherous to this day, especially in snowy conditions, where vehicles get stuck regularly.*



*Rudimentary roads, circa 1969, provided by Dave Opper*

The road system includes several loop roads, and roads that change names at intersections, making navigation difficult. PRA files a subdivision report and Declaration and Plats, establishing the Skyline Lakes subdivision of some 500 lots designated as “camping only” lots, “building only” lots, or mixed-use lots. Through further subdividing, there will eventually be 526 lots. Price has similar developments throughout the region.

In 1968, PRA opens the subdivision for occupancy and begins advertising lots for sale in Skyline Lakes, promising “Private Sand-beach Mountain Lakes, Excellent State Road Access to Mountain Top, All Weather Roads Maintained, Central Water Supply, Electric and Underground Telephone, Modern Restroom Facilities with Hot Water and Showers, No Dues, No Fees.” However, PRA soon runs into problems.

Price claims that 94 percent of the lots have been sold, but the promised two lakes and bathhouse have yet to be constructed.

Price now promises the first lake and restroom by mid-May, beginning a long pattern of failed promises. Over the next eight years Price will change addresses five times.



*Original flyer for Skyline Lakes.*

After many complaints from owners, PRA begins construction of the bathhouse and also completes construction of “Lake Skyline” (AKA ‘upper’ lake). The dam was not properly engineered and exceeds allowable regulations, so as it fills it encroaches on neighboring lots. The dam is composed of substandard material, is never seeded for grass and soon begins to show signs of seepage. Price promises to stock Lake Skyline and construct the second lake in the fall of 1970. But in 1971, Naked Creek floods and washes the access road and the sand beach into Lake Skyline. Price-Radin drains Lake Skyline in order to dredge the silting from the flooding and to repair the spillway.

Price-Radin is also having problems delivering the promised central water system, and instead offers individual wells or water delivered to individual cisterns, all at the owners' expense. That same year, Ed Glick organizes Skyline Lakes Property-holders Association (SLPA.)

The bathhouse has hot water for a short time, but the wooden floor and roof soon need repair and the plumbing was shut off. In 1981, the SLPA M&I committee recommended abandoning the bathhouse, but deferred action. The bathhouse continues to suffer issues but is still operational today, thanks to the dedicated work of Richard and Linda Dreer.

By 1972, most of the 21 residents have dug their own wells for their newly built cabins. *Today, there are only 60 inhabitable cabins and 15 fulltime residents.*



*Dave Opper's family cabin, circa 1971.*

In 1972, Hurricane Agnes' runoff exceeds the capacity of Lake Skyline's spillway. Water rises and damages part of the dam. Ed Glick informs PRA that another hard downpour will destroy the entire dam.

SLPA decides to take legal action against the Price-Radin firm, to compel the developer to fulfill the terms of sales contracts, including the commitment to provide surveillance, construct the second lake and stock Lake Skyline, install a locked chain at entrance, close off the other two entrances, create sand beaches, provide trash removal, improve the restroom, install a year-round central water supply, and maintain the gravel roads for all weather.

Court issues a Consent Decree, ordering Price-Radin to provide all-weather roads, a central water supply, year-round water service, sand beaches, and trash collection. Additional consent decrees and contempt hearings will continue through 1979.

Price-Radin continue to put sand around both lakes, but it keeps dissipating. They finally give up in 1977 on the promised beaches and install decks on each pond. The upper lake's dam continues to erode.



*A rare image of the upper lake before it disappeared, circa 1972.*

In 1978, Ellis Construction estimates that the cost of making all the roads adequate is \$30,000. *Today in 2021 the SLPA spends \$35,000 to \$40,000 every year on basic road maintenance (grading, graveling, culvert repair, mowing and snow removal.)* The



*Gene Skotzko's original family cabin, circa 1972.*

roads are never improved beyond basic maintenance, and SLPA declares that four-wheel drive vehicles will always be required in Skyline Lakes.

By 1979, HUD is investigating Price-Radin and some 31 developments they own, including Roundhead and Battle Creek. The Association offers to drop litigation in exchange for transferring title to the Common Areas. Price-Radin sells 28 lots, including three common area lots, to L and L Management Company, which is an RPA shell company, for \$10.

In 1980, SLPA is incorporated as a Virginia non-stock corporation, and the Association files Articles of Incorporation and amends the Bylaws. In 1982, SLPA wins a lawsuit against Price-Radin. Judgment is executed by conveying the Skyline Lakes subdivision from Price to SLPA. And in 1984, L&L grants a Quit Claim deed to the Association, conveying all the common areas originally set aside by the developer. This was a significant event in the on-going saga of SLPA versus PRA. But the Association would continue to be plagued by lake issues.

In 1985, Hurricane Gloria, followed by tropical storm Isabelle, dumps 10 inches of rain. Flooding completely washes out the access road to Lake Skyline and damages the dam again. Less than a month later, Hurricane Juan causes the third worst flood in Page County recorded history. The Shenandoah River crests to 27 feet.

Between 1985 and 1989, contractors and M&I Chair, Lehman, work on Lake Skyline, but first they have to drain it. They are hampered by water from multiple sources. Rain fills the lake. Because water feeds into the lake from upstream, it must have a drain gate and that is damaged, causing water to fill the lake. Finally, there is evidence that a natural spring is in the dam itself, causing water to leak into the lake. But by March of 1989, the lake is fixed, filled, and restocked.



In January of 1996, a three-day Nor'easter dumps 47" of snow on the Development. Melting of the snow in a 24-hour period causes flooding that exceeds the drainage capacity of the road to Lake Skyline. Floodwater erodes and breaches the dam, bringing it down 10 feet, and its as damaged as it was in 1985.



18" ruts in Skyline Lakes roads after Nor-easter of 1996

Residents of Weaver Hollow, located downstream of Lake Skyline, file complaints with Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) Dam Safety Program regarding problems caused by the large amount of runoff, which was exacerbated by the sudden release of water during the dam breach.

Dam Safety Program officials, accompanied by Town of Stanley Fire Chief Terry Petit, make a field visit and determine that the Little Meadows Lake dam poses no imminent danger, but the Lake Skyline's dam does pose an imminent danger of breaching.

The Page County Board of Supervisors directs SLPA President Orv Lee to drain down the lake immediately. It was drained once again.

A dam engineer advises that the dam should be taken down and rebuilt with a clay core, and the auxiliary spillway should be routed around the dam instead of over it. But before any work can be done, Skyline Lakes suffers another catastrophic weather event.

In September of that same year, Hurricane Fran drops 15 inches of rain, causing the second worst flood in Page County recorded history. The Shenandoah crests over 27 feet. Page County is declared a Federal Disaster Area. The Lake Skyline dam is further eroded bringing it down another 10 feet.

The budget for 1996 was \$24,000 but more than twice that was spent between routine maintenance and Lake Skyline repairs, to no avail.

By 1997, erosion of the Lake Skyline dam had reached the breaking point and was no longer holding water. It was no longer compliant with Dam Safety requirements and preventative maintenance was no longer possible. Lake Skyline simply disappeared into the earth.

But SLPA continued to explore restoration options through 2010. Estimates ranged from \$145,000 to \$239,000. SLPA settled on a contractor that estimated \$200,000 for a full restoration. Farmers and Merchant's bank approved a 5-year ARM for \$200,000 that would renew 3 times for a 20-year loan. Now it was up to the membership to vote on the restoration project options in the 2010 election.

Option A: Pay a one-time special assessment of \$229 per lot, plus the \$78 per lot annual assessment. Then pay an extra \$20 per lot per year for the next 19 years.

Option B: Do not fix the upper lake.

The membership voted for Option B. The Declaration states that the board has the **right and authorization** to maintain the common areas but not a **duty** to repair anything that may prove to be too costly for its membership or not a priority of its membership. In a poll, members overwhelmingly voted that the road maintenance is the highest priority for SLPA.



Recent image of Little Meadows Lake, 2019

Today, the lower lake, Little Meadows Lake, is slowly leaking water through its dam. SLPA has been exploring repair options, which have ranged from \$10,000 to more than \$100,000. 🍃

So, the saga continues...

Sources: Various Skyline Lakes documents, Dave Opper, Gene Skotzko and Orv Lee.