

# 24th Anniversary of the Pleasureland Massacre

## Remembering the “Oakland Massacre”

August 4, 1985: The Day the Pleasure Died in Oakland, NJ

They sit nestled in the woods of the small northwestern Bergen County town of Oakland, slowly being reclaimed by nature like some ancient Mayan ruins being swallowed up by the jungles of the Yucatan. They are reminders of summer days long gone by. Their turquoise blue paint chips and falls away like Puff’s dragon scales, fading into the past a little further with each passing year. Ladders descend, no longer into cool shimmering water, but into a fetid, stagnant soup of algae and discarded picnic tables. Rusted lifeguard chairs keep a silence vigil over the lifeless scene beneath them.

They are the long abandoned swimming pools of Pleasureland, a once thriving summer resort located on the banks of the Ramapo River. These pools, along with the few dilapidated buildings that that can still be found scattered in the woods around them, are a reminder of a more innocent time. A time when thousands of fun seeking patrons would travel to Oakland to relax and unwind on hot summer days. All of that ended on this very day, exactly twenty-four years ago.

August 4, 1985 was a day not unlike any other in the quiet town of Oakland. Business was booming at Pleasureland, its pools crowded with frolicking families who had come to beat the summer heat that Sunday afternoon. But all of that was about to change. Right next door, just on the other side of an eight foot tall chain link fence, at an adjacent resort call the FRG Sports Complex trouble was coming in from out of town—coming in by the busload. Some 3,000 people had assembled, most brought in by charter buses from New York City boroughs. They gathered at the 50-acre park to picnic, and enjoy the resort’s pools, volleyball, badminton and table tennis facilities. All seemed to going well, until a little about 4:30 in the afternoon, when all hell broke loose.

All of a sudden a man who had been sitting in a covered pavilion area, where guests were listening to music and dancing, stood up and began firing an automatic weapon into the crowd.

“We heard the shots and we saw them flying to the ground,” remembered Don Steinfeld, a 17-year old witness from Spring Valley, NY, in an Associated Press article published the day after the shooting. “The guy just went nuts for some reason. We saw at least two people go down.” Steinfeld said others in the crowd returned the gunfire. “People were running everywhere, they were knocking fences down and everything.”

“We thought it was firecrackers,” said another in attendance, “but then the man at the next table jumped up with a machine gun and started shooting. We laid on the ground and crawled under the table,”

According to Suburban Trends reporter Dorothy (KcKay) O’Connor, “A blue van moved slowly through the entrance gate of FRG Sports Complex and parked just a few feet off the driveway near the pool. Then completely without warning or apparent motive, the door burst open and several black men leaped out and sprayed the area with machine gun fire.” Then the van drove away.

“Once the shooting started, pandemonium broke loose,” Bergen County Prosecutor Larry McClure said afterward. Hundreds fled the scene in panic. Mario Drago, owner of Pleasureland heard the shots that afternoon. “It sounded like firecrackers,” he told reporters. “It wasn’t firecrackers—it was semi-automatic weapons.” Soon after, a crowd of about 500 swarmed the fences of Pleasureland in an effort to escape the melee. “We have an 8-foot fence topped with barbed wire,” Drago later told the

newspapers, “that’s gone, we just let them come over.” Many of those people sustained injuries while trying to breach the fences.

Before that horrific day end there would be two people dead and nearly twenty others injured. But what was the reason for all this violence, and how could this nightmare of a day ever descend upon a peaceful little town like Oakland?

In the 1930s Oakland was vacation Mecca where people flocked to swim and fish in the pristine waters of the Ramapo River and stay in one of the dozens of inns that lined its banks. At the height of its tourism age the number of people in the town would swell to four times that of its regular population during the summer months. The former farmland along the river’s gently sloping banks was developed into recreational facilities. Restaurants, hotels, inns, bars and gas stations sprang up to accommodate the influx of vacationers. Small cottages were built and rent out in the “Pleasureland Area” of town, sometimes referred to as “The Colony.”

There were a dozen “beach” resorts lining the banks of the river in all. While it’s not really known for sure who opened the first of these clubs in Oakland, it is agreed that Muller’s Park (a former horse farm) was one of the very first. It was located between Pleasureland to the south and Sandy Beach to the north. William Muller, developer of the park, built the first public swimming pool in town in 1935.

*Pleasureland during its heyday in the 1950s*

Oakland’s tourist industry lasted about fifty years, but started to decline sharply back in the early 1960s with the closing of Sandy Beach. The clear flowing waters of the Ramapo, which had drawn the crowds in the first place, had become murky due to the poor septic systems, which were originally built for summer cottages. Those cottages were increasingly being converted into year round dwellings. As Oakland became more of a permanent residential town, tourism dwindled and one after another the beach resorts shut down.

By 1985 there were only two left, FRG Sports Complex (located on the former site of Muller’s Park) and Pleasureland, which were immediately adjacent to each other. Because FRG no longer attracted area residents as patrons, its owner Frank R. Gallo had begun soliciting guests from New York City boroughs like Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens. On that fateful Sunday, August 4th 1985, one such group had been bussed in to celebrate Jamaican Independence Day.

To get a clearer picture of exactly what the mayhem was really like at FRG and Pleasureland when the shooting broke out, Weird NJ spoke with two people who were among the first Oaklanders on the scene. One was afore mentioned Suburban Trends reporter Dorothy O’Connor and the other was her husband Jim, who was a lieutenant with the Oakland Police Department at the time of the shooting. The O’Connors actually lived on the property just up the river from the FRG Complex, so when the gunfire began, they could hear it from their home.

“We heard the bangs and I ran out.” Dorothy told us. “My husband, Jim, grabbed his gun and went out the door, calling back over his shoulder, ‘DO NOT go over there!’ I think he knew that was futile.”

“I said to her ‘Do not leave this house!’ But that fell on deaf ears and we had some discussions about that afterwards.” Jim recalls with a hint of exasperation still in his voice after all these years.

Dorothy remembers, “I had no idea where my steno book was and no time to look for it, so the second Jim left I grabbed a yellow sticky note pad off the kitchen counter, a pen, my camera and ran through

the woods in the direction of the sound. I got in through a hole in the fence that we used to go through as kids! I was the only reporter inside the park that day.

“I found utter chaos—police arriving from departments throughout the area; members of the Ringwood First Aid Squad were assisting a pregnant woman who had been shot in the leg; other bloodied victims were scattered across the lawn; an hysterical woman ran through the field, pleading, ‘Have you seen my baby? I can’t find my baby!’”

In her initial report published in the Trend on August 7, Dorothy recalled:

*Once inside the park I could do nothing for several seconds but stand and stare. I had seen it all before many times—All the ambulances and first aid squads from surrounding towns arriving with red lights flashing and sirens blasting—the Mobile Intensive Care Units, the fire trucks, police cars, and the bloodied victims scattered across the lawn. It was the scene of any number of mutual aid drills I had witnessed in the past, but the police car radios and walkie-talkies around me kept insisting ‘THIS IS NOT A DRILL—REPEAT—THIS IS NOT A DRILL!’*

*A hysterical mob had jammed the main entrance in a frantic attempt to flee the shooting...Patrolman Clem Brown was standing guard over a black man dressed all in black, wearing gold chains around his neck—he had been shot in the buttocks and was bleeding. It looked like his hands were tied together with some type of tubing. I would not learn until later that he was one of the gunmen who himself had been shot by Patrolman Bill Brown during an exchange of fire. As I took pictures of the man being placed on a stretcher by first-aiders, an angry group of about 15 black men came at Clem Brown—he quickly backed them away. When I tried to talk to one of them, he glared at me. Showing gold-capped front teeth with tiny star shapes cut out of them and walked away.*

As former Bergen County Prosecutor Larry McClure later said, “The crowd was completely out of control. It was almost impossible to tell the players from the people hiding—trying to duck gunfire.”

Dorothy’s husband Jim, who was off duty that day, had to report to the station house before proceeding to the park, but arrived soon after.

“We got there within six to eight minutes of the time the shooting started.” Jim recalls. “When we first got there it was general mayhem. There were people running all over the place—going through the woods, out onto Hemlock Street, they were heading out whatever way they thought they could get out.”

According to one report published in the Trends:

*Residents of Hemlock Street—two blocks from the FRG Sports Complex, but connected to it by the wooded area of the former Sandy Beach park—also heard what they initially believed to be firecrackers. “We were out in the front yard and just a minute or two later there were hundreds of black people and little kids, all dressed in white with white scarves on their heads. They came running at us across the woods,” they said, “Some of them came out onto the street and ran up toward Ramapo Valley Road and others went down by the river... As reports drifted back to these and other nearby residents that one or more of the gunmen were still at large, many packed a bag at midnight and left town to stay with relatives in other communities for the night. “My husband has to go to work at midnight tonight,” said one Hemlock Street resident, “I’m not going to stay in the house alone with my kids tonight.*

Jim O’Connor continued, “I was one of the first law enforcement people on the scene. I was actually in charge of the command post at the perimeter to cordon off the area. We began to take names and catalog the weapons that were confiscated. The weapons were everywhere, they had been discarded,

they were at the bottom of pots full of food.

“We had cordoned off the area and whoever was inside the park was detained there until we could take their information. We found guns and machetes and knives—I mean these people came loaded for bear. It was a scary situation for all concerned because we didn’t know who had guns, who didn’t have guns, who had knives. I think the final count was that we had confiscated something like 65 handguns and/or machetes, a whole slew of machetes. So this is something that was premeditated, certainly.”

Inside the park the gun battle raged on. Special Police Officer Ted Thieben, one of five officers that had been hired by the park to provide security that day, had just completed a tour of the FRG Complex. “There wasn’t a hint of anything wrong,” he told Dorothy O’Connor later, “I had just walked up to the gate to see if there was anything I could get for (Special Police Officer) Bill Wilcox when I heard the shots. I took off toward the pavilion and took cover behind the snack bar. A man came staggering up the hill and fell in the arcade—he had been shot. With that I was on the radio asking for back up—I said we were under fire. Another special police officer came up behind me and I proceeded up toward the ladies room. I pushed everyone back into the ladies room so that they wouldn’t get shot. My main concern was that no more people would get hurt”

Later in the day, taking part in the search of the park for weapons, Thieben said, "I found a 45 and a 9 mm handgun in the ladies room that I had pushed people back into in order to protect them!"

"Having spent several years in the Navy during the early 1960's stationed in Viet Nam," Thieben told the Trends, "I've never seen anything like this in peace time."

Dorothy O’Connor: “So, police secured the area and late into the night searched each vehicle and every one of the people before allowing them to leave. I was there as they were counting and searching the people until about 3 o’clock in the morning. There were approximately 3,000 people and 1,968 of them had come out as a part of a charter out of Brooklyn. The name of the group was the West Indies Cricket Club. I don’t know if it was ever factually confirmed but it was believed to be a drug and gun group out of Florida that had links to Brooklyn.”

But how does a New York gang war break out in Oakland, NJ of all places, we wondered. Dorothy explained. “FRG was a very nice, pleasant type of area when it was Muller’s. Just families and people would come for the day. It was a very, very quiet area. Frank Gallo had owned it for ten years prior to the incident in 1985 with the shootout. Ten months before that he had gone before the planning board with a proposal to rezone the tract and construct a huge complex of 1,000 luxury high-rise condominiums. And the planning board absolutely said ‘no way.’ It was going to be high density—two nine-story buildings, at least two 7-story buildings. A lot of this property is in the flood plain and the planning board said absolutely not.

“Well, right after that, which was the summer of 1985, the make up of the guests (at FRG) changed dramatically. Gallo went into New York and solicited from the Bronx, from Brooklyn, these big parties and started bussing. That summer, all of a sudden, there was the music, the amplifiers, that type of Jamaican music, BLASTING! It became crazy and there were a lot of complaints from residents. There was speculation that Gallo was doing this on purpose, potentially becoming as annoying as he could, so that he could get his thing.”

Jim O’Connor added, “Apparently this was some sort of gang feud from New York and they decided to come out here thinking that there certainly wouldn’t be all that many policemen on duty in this small

town. There was one group call the Showers (Jamaican Shower Posse) and there was another called the Spanglers.”

Wikipedia describes Jamaican drug gangs or “posses” this way: Posse members have little regard for public safety or human life. As part of their code, extreme violence is directed at anyone they feel has disrespected them or is in their way.

Jim continues, “There was a group sitting in the picnic area and somebody got up and opened up with a Mac 10. That’s a weapon that’s been converted to a machine gun. It seemed like an open gang fight. I don’t think there was any one person in particular that had been targeted. They wanted to randomly open up and shoot who ever it was that happened to get in the way. One of the people killed had been the bus driver who brought a group out from the city.

“Two of the officers inside the park had engaged individuals in a running gun battle. One of the officers was later given the Combat Cross, which is one of the highest awards in police work.

“There really weren’t a whole lot of police officers on duty on a Sunday, it being a small town. But thank the good lord, that day off duty police officers from all over New Jersey that happened to be passing through that area jumped out of their cars and came in and helped our guys. Then there were the Bergen County police and police from other towns who left their duty posts when they heard about it on the radio and their sergeants and lieutenants said ‘Go!’”

One of the fatally shot victims, the bus driver, was an innocent bystander in his 30s who was found lying on the ground near one of the swimming pools with a gunshot through his chest. A second victim, Hopeton Reid, 28, died on the operating table at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center in Paterson at 11pm that night. A woman eight months pregnant suffered a gunshot wound to the leg underwent surgery at Clinton Memorial Hospital. A four-year-old sustained a bullet wound to the foot. Several others victims were admitted to the hospital, some in critical condition with gunshot wounds to the abdomen, chest, neck, arms and legs. Other wounded were taken to Wayne General Hospital and Valley Hospital. Several others were treated for wounds they’d received when they were trampled in the ensuing panic.

Seven men, many illegal Jamaican aliens, were arrested and held at the Bergen County jail, charged with possession of handguns, aggravated assault and attempted murder, with bail being set at \$100,000 to \$150,000.

According to the book “A History of Oakland: The Story of Our Village,” by Kevin Heffernan (The History Press 2007): “After the gun battle Mr. Frank Gallo, who owned the facility and who wanted to build a housing development on the property, was reported to have remarked to a town official, ‘Maybe now I’ll get my three hundred units.’ As a point of historical fact, he didn’t get them.”

FRG never reopened after the day of the shootout and the land on Route 202 remains vacant to this day. Frank Gallo reportedly moved to Florida. Pleasureland, the last remaining vestige of Oakland’s bygone era as a resort town, closed soon after. Jim O’Connor became Chief of Oakland’s Police force a year after the shootout. Reflecting on that day twenty-four year ago now he says, “I can say certainly that it was a most horrific day. Probably one of the worst that Oakland has ever seen and hopefully will ever see.”

Dorothy O’Connor retired from the Suburban Trends four years ago. “After covering so many stories over 30-plus years a lot of them become a blur after awhile,” she says, “but the FRG shootout is as crystal clear as if it happened yesterday!”

*Special thanks to Suburban Trends reporter Bryan LaPlaca for providing additional information for this article.*

*To hear the song "Pleasureland" inspired by this infamous NJ location, as performed by Oakland*

*natives* The Swales, go here.