

## ***Stories from Main Street: Water/Ways***

### **Season 1, Episode 4: “An Invitation to Play” Transcript**

**Episode Description:** What is it about water that can instantly improve our mood, stir up joy, and awaken our inner child? In episode 4, we dive into the joy of playing in the water as we listen to stories of swimming in summer, splashing in puddles, and letting the waves lick your toes.

#### **Stories used in this episode:**

- [One Dock at a Time, Maine to Florida](#)
- [Summers at the River in South Georgia](#)
- [A River Girl and her Fly Fishing and Outdoor Business in Todd, North Carolina--Kelly McCoy](#)
- [Learning to Swim](#)
- [Trout Fishing and the Love for Water--John Weiss](#)
- [Building the Fish Pond with Dad, Hawaii](#)
- [Camping on the Blue Earth River, Minnesota--Kimberly Musser](#)
- [Playing in the Mud, Virginia Beach](#)
- [Catching Fish in Mud Puddles, Missouri](#)
- [Baptisms at Games Lake--Carolyn Lange Hatlestad](#)

#### **Episode Transcript:**

**Mary D. Strain:** A few years ago, I was with my daughter and I took a dive off of a dock at a beautiful place on Sebago Lake (Maine). It was early June and my daughter said, “Mom, I am really proud of you. You know this is the third dock you’ve been off and it’s not even mid-June yet.” And, that’s when it started. We started counting. I wasn’t fond of cold water when I moved to Maine so going in the water in June was an accomplishment and here I was three times in. So, we started counting and looking for docks.

And, I started carrying a thermometer in the car and a towel and a bathing suit. And anybody who had waterfront property I was like, “Hi, my name is Mary can I jump off your dock?” And now I am up to 251 separate docks in a few states and all over the place. And I have pictures of most of them and stories with all of them. Whether I was alone or with friends...and that one couple, it was the day after their 64th wedding anniversary when I went to their house. I have met many people who live at the ends of beautiful lanes along the lake, some of them two and three generations. I went down one dock that you had to climb a great long staircase down to the lake to get there. I have gone off docks in salt water in New York on Long Island in Sag

Harbor. The last dock I went off was in North Palm Beach, Florida. On my next trip I hope to go off one in my hometown of Hollywood, Florida.

**Hannah:** *If you search “babies playing in water” on YouTube, you’ll find seemingly endless clips of cute little humans laughing hysterically as they splash the water with their hands or watch someone else getting splashed.*

*Water is fun. There’s something about it that instinctively invites play and sparks curiosity in humans and animals alike, and a lot of us grown up kids keep playing in the water long after we give up other forms of play...we boat, surf, swim, water-ski, queue for water slides, and dive....*

*...and sometimes we find ourselves just standing at the edge of a creek or a river or an ocean while little waves lick our toes, remembering fondly how curious and excited the water once made us feel.*

*I’m Hannah Hethmon, and this is episode of Stories from Main Street: Water/Ways, a podcast from Museum on Main Street.*

*For 25 years, Museum on Main Street, a program of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, has brought Smithsonian exhibitions to small towns and asked people in these diverse communities to make the exhibits their own. Through its Stories from Main Street initiative, Museum on Main Street encourages the gathering of stories, stories that give a voice to rural Americans.*

*Since 2016, Museum on Main Street’s Water/Ways exhibition has been traveling all over America, stopping for six weeks at a time in over 100 small towns. The stories in this series were collected as part of the programming around that exhibition. They’re raw, they’re real, and, as such, they’re a unique window into America, a country as ever-changing, multi-faceted, and diverse as the waterways that cover our continent.*

*Now I don’t know about you, but I could use a break from the stress of work and responsibilities, so in this episode, we’re going to relax and have a little fun as we listen to stories about play and the water.*

**Kelly McCoy:** So when my son was about 4 or 5 years old, he obviously loves to fish, because I do. So he was out in the backyard, and he would be out there with just a little Zebco 33 with a little Rebel Crawfish and he would fish in the backyard, and I would let him do it on his own,

and I would be in here working, and he would holler, “Mommy, I dot one, I dot one!” So he’s like four/five. So I run out and of course he’s landed a tree fish or a rock fish or a stone fish or a stump fish, he’s hooked up on something and I would have to get his hook out. It’s that boy-cries-wolf type thing. You know he’s yelling, “Mommy I dot one I dot one!” and I’m like, “OK, Finn. I’ll be there in just a minute.” I was tied up so it took me a few minutes to get down there and in the back of my mind I’m thinking, he’s hooked on a tree or a log or something. I get down there finally. He has got a brown trout about 18-inches long that he has caught. He has pulled it up onto the grass, he has taken a bucket of water and wet the grass, he is wetting the fish, because I’ve taught him that you always touch a fish with wet hands so you don’t take their slime off because their slime is their protective barrier that protects them against parasites and bacteria and so forth. So I run down there and I’m like, “Oh my gosh, Finnigan! Couldn’t you have told me that you actually caught a fish, because you always say ‘I dot one, I dot one,’ but you’ve caught a tree or something.” He’s like, “Look mommy I’m keeping him wet so he stays alive!” So I wet my hands and I picked that fish up and I put that fish back in the creek, and I actually had my GoPro camera on me so I got a video of that fish swimming away, which was pretty cool. But you know I take fishermen in this creek and they catch little ones like eight to ten inches, and my son catches one at 4 years old...18-inches long, that was pretty cool.

**South Georgian:** I think the funnest place that we went to when I was growing up was this river. So the rivers in South Georgia have tannic acid in them from all the Cypress trees and the pine trees, and the water's basically black. So, we'd either be skiing or knee boarding or we used to have literally a swing rope area. My buddies used to swing out and splash or whatever, but I brought back a skimboard from the beach area, 50 miles to the coast. And so we learned how to swing out and skim a few tricks or whatever . . . and then just look at alligators---the same alligators that you didn't realize you were just swimming in the black water with. That was pretty nice.

**Hannah:** *Kids can turn anything into a playground. No creeks, lakes, or beaches? No problem.*

**Carolyn Lange Hatlestad:** I grew up on a farm in North Dakota where there isn’t a lot of water. My memories of water and any kind of enjoyment were running through a sprinkler or the stock pond, which in North Dakota is a man-made hole in the pasture where the cows drink water and defecate in the water, and that was my summer swimming hole—swimming along with the cow pies.

**Hannah:** *Oh the joy of a good mud puddle. Can any kid resist it? Apparently not in North Dakota. And if the next story is any indication, apparently not in Missouri either.*

**Lawson, Missouri Local:** Well, I worked on a small family farm at [Place Name] growing up. My brother-in-law that's a big city boy was back for a little bit and he walked up to a mud puddle at [Place Name] and asked my two twin brothers what they were doing poking around the mud and they looked at him and they said, "We're going fishing!" He says, "Right. Tell me another one." About that time they reached in there, pulled out this great big old catfish out of that mud puddle. He didn't realize that the pond above had flooded the week before and all these mud puddles had fish that had been trapped. So, his eyes just shot wide open, and after that he never knew what to believe and what not to.

**Hannah:** *When I was 11, my family moved to a rural area of Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C. That area is largely wetlands formed by tiny fingers of the Chesapeake Bay watershed. As a kid, I'd cross the country road in front of our house—sometimes alone and sometimes with my little brothers and the family dog—and head into the woods, where I'd spend hours following the curves of the creek and playing in the sandy coves. One day, when I was probably a freshman in high school, I was back in the woods with some friends after heavy rainfall, and we discovered that our favorite spot on the creek had been turned into a giant mud bath. Mucking around in that mud is one of my most vivid memories from that time in my life, and honestly I don't know that I've ever had as much fun as I did that day.*

*It turns out, I'm not the only former kid in the Chesapeake Bay area who has fond memories of watershed mud.*

**Virginia Beach Local:** So, this is a story about mud. Growing up around the Chesapeake Bay, tidal regions around the Chesapeake Bay, there was always a lot of mud, and it was a thick, slippery, slimy, gray-brown smelly mud that I have come to learn is called "pluff," and if you're not from the coastline, the East Coast, or from a region that's affected by tides, it's hard to imagine the smell of this mud. It smells like rotten eggs, and at low tide you get this very distinctive rotten-egg smell that permeates everything.

And some people find it to be pretty egregious. I think it smells great. I think it smells like home because that's where I grew up, and that's where I played in the summertime was in the pluff. When you get in the pluff, you're likely to get stuck in it. You're likely to lose your shoes in it. You're likely to come home covered with slime, but it's a lot of fun for a kid, and the best thing about the pluff were the fiddler crabs that made their homes in the pluff in tiny little burrows.

They would come out at low tide, and as a kid one of the most exciting things was trying to catch the fiddler crabs and not get bitten by them or pinched by them because they have larger pinchers ...but a very exciting thing, and it wasn't until a year or two ago that I actually learned that there was a name for that mud, the pluff mud that's so pervasive along the east coast in

the United States, and I was so happy to finally put a name to the mud that had meant so much to me as a kid.

**Hannah:** *For many parents, adventures in and around our waterways are a path to bond with children over shared interests and hobbies.*

**Kim Musser:** My name is Kim Musser and I work with the Water Resources Center at Minnesota State University - Mankato and I have three wonderful triplets.

Triplet 1: I'm 10 yrs old.

Triplet 2: And I'm 10 years old.

Triplet 3: And I'm 10 years old.

Kim: Along the Blue Earth River just below the dam, there is a lovely county park. So our tradition is to go and camp along the river. We love the spot. We do bonfires along the edge of the river and people are fishing there and so it's fun to see what they caught.

Triplet 3: Usually we play in the river. There's an island around the campsite where you can walk over.

Triplet 2: And usually when we waded across we had to watch out for like the rocks with moss on it because it would be really easy to slip.

Triplet 1: One time when we went there the tide was up and it was really hard to get across because the water kept on rising and there was like, where they rocks were, it would go up.

Triplet 3: And then once we got there, we ate food over there like cereal and stuff in the morning.

Triplet 1: The mud is also really fun. I don't know why but it feels good.

Triplet 2: And usually when we go in the mud we put our feet in and it sinks way down and that's really fun. ...

Kim: And then finding critters along the side of the river is always a delight. There is one pond that always has frogs, so that's an important stopping place on our little adventure.

Triplet 2: There's like this big rock you can go walk to, it's really big and we always go up there.

Triplet 1: We call it pride rock.

Kim: It's a little bit dangerous and you have to scramble across these huge old downed trees and climb up over the brambles, so to actually reach the top of pride rock is an accomplishment.

Triplet 3: Yeah.

Kim: More than anything I want to inspire that curiosity in them to try and understand the natural world and understand the critters that we share the planet with in hopes that they'll also work to try and help improve the environment throughout their lifetime and have that be an ethical piece of who they become.

Triplet 1: When the trees are moving and the leaves, I don't know what it sounds like, but it sounds really cool.

Triplet 2: Sometimes you can hear ripples of water. It's actually kind of calming.

Triplet 3: When it's at night, it's so cool to hear it because you cannot hear anything else. Like there is no talking you can just hear all the animals and creatures and water.

**Hannah:** *If the Museum on Main Street story collection is any indication, spending time with parents in and around the water as children are memories that we carry with us for our own lives. That's certainly the case for Kelly and her childhood in Hawai'i.*

**Kelly Luis:** Aloha. My name is Kelly Luis. My connection with the ocean stretches back to my childhood. My parents separated when I was very young. I lived with my mom. However, during the times when I wasn't with my dad he spent most of his afternoons building me a fish pond. All that really means is piling a bunch of rocks in a semi-circle around the shore. It created a safe space for all the kids to swim but it also attracted a lot of marine life. I remember the days I got to spend in that fish pond looking at the fish, poking at the rocks. That was my most formative memory of just spending time with my dad, and just having that space for us.

**Hannah:** *Childhood experiences with water can easily turn into a lifelong love of the boating and fishing, like they did for John Weiss.*

**John Weiss:** I grew up in the lakes country of Brainerd right in central Minnesota. We went out to a place called Gilbert Lake, my dad would take my two brothers and I out, and we would catch a whole mess of sunfish. He would row out in a wooden boat. Of course none of us wore life jackets. We survived. We went and cut willow poles, let them dry a bit and put some of the old black lines on, and we caught some really nice fish.

I came down here in 1975, I was supposed to be the business writer, a job for which I was magnificently ill-suited but at the same time the outdoor writer, Gordy Yaeger, who was outdoor writer for the Post Bulletin since the mid '50s was very ill and in fact he died less than a year later, and they took pity on me and 40 years ago they made me the outdoor writer.

But the strange story is I grew up on a lake, my wife, I met her on a lake near Brainerd, and we were in Rochester and it had this river going through it but no lakes, it was just a freaky experience. And so we asked Gordy Yaeger, the outdoor writer, "What should we do?" and he said go out towards St. Charles to the east and take a left on 74. We did it...farm country and all of a sudden went four or five miles and all a sudden "wow" we dropped down into the Whitewater Valley, a mile and half long drop, and it was just these huge beautiful bluffs just sitting there and the rivers, and that was the beginning of a love affair, and as much as I love lakes, they sit there, and they're really kind of...I shouldn't say boring...but rivers move, they are alive, they have this flow to them that is just fascinating.

[muttering about fishing] The water is about perfect right now. It's slightly stained, actually I should be getting down lower. When the water is clearer some guys actually sneak up on their hands and knees and cast from their knees. So the fish can't see them. I'm just using a small b-head nymph, it's a small, just a 16 or 18 weight and it just drifts down there and hope it thinks it is something edible. Let's see if I can catch one, just to see what a fish feels like [sound of casting with a fishing rod, water]. Boy, water makes me smile all the time. Like today it's just beautiful out, not the best time for fishing, but eh beats sitting at home.

**Hannah:** *Not everyone learns to love the water as a kid. Sometimes fear gets in the way. But it's never too late to make that connection, and fall in love.*

**[Katrina Lashley](#):** My relationship with water is a bit of a contradiction. I'm originally from an island in the Caribbean famous for its beautiful beaches and beautiful water. As a plane flies into the airport, you can actually see the water getting lighter as it gets closer to the coast, and it kind of glows. It's very beautiful. My grandmother's house is located very near to the beach. Basically, you're on the road and you cross the street and you're on the beach, so at night, you can hear the waves crashing. Despite all of this, I didn't learn to swim until maybe seven years ago. As much as I loved being in the water, I was always terrified of having water cover my face. Even to the point as an adult, sometimes in the shower, as water covered my face there was a moment of panic. Additionally, my grandmother had a very fearful relationship with water as well. She is traditionally from the countryside of Barbados—the idea that water was dangerous; you had to be very careful--That water and fire take away everything. So, we'd go to the beach, and I'd get in the water, and I'd splash around, but I never really learned how to swim officially.

So, I moved to the United States, and I spent my summers in Barbados. Even if I was here in New Jersey, we didn't go to the beach in New Jersey because why would you go to the beach in New Jersey if you knew what the beach in Barbados was like—we were very snobby about our water, our beach choices. And so you know years passed, and I moved to D.C. about eight years ago, and I was talking to a co-worker of mine, and his mother is Cuban, being from the Caribbean, and I mentioned that I didn't know how to swim, and I kind of looked at me and he laughed, "Katrina, such a stereotype." I laughed and said "Okay, let's make a deal, if you teach me how to swim, I'll feed you." He was someone in early 20s, I'd just feed him. So, we did. We went to the local pool in Montgomery County, Silver Spring, and he taught me how to swim. It was a very liberating experience because I knew I loved being in the water, near the water. It's very soothing, you know I can splash my hands in the water and just lose time. But the ability to move through the water, to feel weightless, is something you just cannot describe. I remember the first time he got me into the deep end, and I did my doggie paddle or my elementary breaststroke back and forth across the pool. It was really exciting. And then this one afternoon, he couldn't meet me, so I just went by myself. I figured there were lifeguards if anything goes wrong, someone will notice!

The shallow end was crowded with kids and their families, and so I ended up in the deep end. I just went back and forth across the deep end, and I just felt this really liberating, free, kind of weightless...I think I actually had a grin on my face...this idea of moving through water. There's something very peaceful, very calm about it that is very hypnotic. So, even though I came to it late in life, I can say that water really is a very beautiful, very pleasing, very soothing thing. Hearing it crash on the beach at night and standing and letting the waves roll over your toes and to feel the sand, or standing and looking out across the water, you can see it getting a deeper blue the farther out you go, but there is something quite magical about water.

I think that's why so many people are drawn to water and so many communities are really concerned and fearful about the future of their waterways because it's something that I think is instinctively and innately a part of our make-up, that we crave the connection to the water around us.

*Thanks for spending this time with me listening to these stories. If you have your own water story that you would like to add to the Smithsonian collection, you can learn how to record and share it by visiting [museumonmainstreet.org/stories](https://museumonmainstreet.org/stories). That's [museumonmainstreet.org/stories](https://museumonmainstreet.org/stories) or you can use the free Be Here Stories app to upload a story directly from your phone. That's the Be Here Stories app. In both places, you can hear the full collection of stories from all over America. On the Museum on Main Street website, you can view hundreds of stories contributed to the Stories from Main Street initiative and watch documentaries created by rural youth through Museum on Main Street's [Stories: YES](#) project.*



*Museum on Main Street is an outreach program of the [Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service](#) that engages small town audiences and brings revitalized attention to underserved rural communities. In partnership with state humanities councils, Museum on Main Street brings traveling exhibitions, educational resources and programming to small towns across America through their own local museums, historical societies and other cultural venues.*

*These exhibitions are designed to engage communities and become a catalyst for conversation about life in small-town America, to start dialogs, build excitement, facilitate connections, and open doors to your community's history, culture, people, and sense of local pride. See a full tour schedule for Museum on Main Street exhibits and learn more about the program at [museumonmainstreet.org](http://museumonmainstreet.org).*

*Thank you to our storytellers whose voices can be heard in this episode, and to Museum on Main Street collaborators who helped collect these stories.*

*Thank you to our storytellers whose voices can be heard in this episode. Several of the stories in this episode were recorded by Pamela Ferris Olson as part of the Women Mind the Water project, the Minnesota Humanities Center, and the Water Bar and Public Studio.*

*The rest of the stories in this episode came from the main Stories from Main Street archive*

*You can see a full list of story credits, links to all the stories used in this episode, and an episode transcript in the episode description on your podcast app.*

*A special thanks to the MuseWeb team, Nancy Proctor and Heather Shelton, who have been instrumental in gathering and curating stories for Museum on Main Street.*

*This episode was produced for the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service by Better Lemon Creative Audio. It was produced, written, narrated, and edited by me, Hannah Hethmon. See you next time.*