

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



The shoes that inspired this week's story. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Sum-Sum- Summertime!

Where, oh where, will your shoes take you this summer?

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

As the school year draws to a close in our region, I began to reminisce about some of the end-of-year traditions. Graduations and parties with family and friends occur as the senior look forward to a new chapter in their lives. While many feel apprehensive about leaving old friends behind, others are eager to make new acquaintances and most juggle both feelings. Underclassmen are concerned about missing their older friends and think about the 'shoes' they must fill.

This brings me to an odd but longtime tradition of throwing sneakers over utility lines. When I was in high school this tradition was far less expensive since many of us just wore \$10-15 tennies. Most of us had Keds; if you had Converse or Nike that was considered extravagant.

At the end of school it was mandatory that you clean out your lockers, including the one in the gym. After many months' use, my sneakers could have walked home on their own, and I suspect my mother was happy to see them on a wire instead of in the family mudroom. As we disembarked for the last time at the neighborhood bus stop, it wasn't uncommon to have a time of rivalry in which we scrambled around trying to get each others' sneakers to toss over the highest wire we could manage.

In case you are unfamiliar with the process, it involves stealing your friend's sneakers and trying to keep your back to the victim while you tie the laces of one shoe to the other. If you're lucky your friend's may already be lashed together as a pair, and better yet tossed precariously over one shoulder. If you got them, you would repeatedly toss one sneaker over the wire hoping they would get completely entangled and far out of reach.

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Sneakers begin to appear on utility wires when the end of the school year approaches. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

I wondered whether this was a regional or national tradition, so naturally I turned to

the all-knowing, all -seeing truth and malarkey found on the internet.

I decided to start with the Snopes.com site that tries to sift cyberspace truth from urban legends. Their researcher, Barbara Mikkelson, found there were many explanations given for the abandoned sneaker phenomenon. Her article is entitled "Do Sneakers Hanging from Power Lines Carry a Secret Message?" Some theories dealt with gangs marking boundaries, or losing a life, or crack dealers advertising their presence with "crack tennies," or boys marking their first sexual triumph, or, naturally, markings for low flying aircraft.

The last two reasons offered by Mikkelson seem to fall into line most closely with my experience: "Graduating seniors mark this transition in their lives by leaving something of themselves behind: namely, their shoes. Kids do it just because it's fun. And besides, what else are you going to do with a worn-out pair of sneakers other than tie the laces together and toss them high?" The sneakers that stayed in your gym locker for a school year are generally worn out and reeking of feet, so giving them a good airing isn't an unnatural way of disposing them.

I found a variety of customs related to the throwing of shoes as I went down the internet rabbit hole of information. Army

personnel often leave their boots over wires when leaving a post. There is also a ritual of the same when completing basic training, or when retiring from the service. Charles Dickens in his novel "*David Copperfield*," recorded a Victorian custom of throwing shoes at newlyweds for good luck. On the popular TV show *The Voice*," singer-actress Jennifer Hudson throws a shoe at contestants to compliment an outstanding performance. Evidently this is a tradition at dance competitions, or so I'm told.

Conversely, in Arab cultures showing one's sole is generally an insult, and attacking someone with a shoe is taking it to extremes.

Returning to the end of the school year and the start of summer, a number of locals spend part of their summer at the Jersey Shore, where flip flops are all you need to cross the hot dry part of the sandy beach – and then it's time set the tootsies free.

Let's face it: shoes are not always necessary apparel for the summer. As a teen I normally went barefoot, as did many of my friends. For most of the summer we sailed at Union Lake. Shoes were not needed on a small wet sailboat. By summer's end my feet were calloused like a tough pair of soles. Most importantly, we were outside enjoying the great out-of-doors.

Over the years I've noticed that the westbound side of Route 49 is often littered with footwear by summer's end. I have my own theories on the presence of these abandoned shoes. I've noted that families departing from the Jersey Shore have a ritual of wiping sand from their feet with a beach towel before "loading up." Folks prop their backs against their car and brush the sand onto the sidewalk, often put their shoes on the roof's top behind them. Then they hop into the car forgetting to reclaim their footgear. Shoes only stay perched atop the roof of a moving vehicle for so long and then, voilà, "shoobie litter."

This begs the question, "How did day trippers to the Jersey Shore become labelled as 'shoobies'?" The name dates back to the 1800s when folks caught the train to New Jersey beaches from either Philadelphia or New York City. Their ticket price included a packed lunch carried in – you've got it! - a shoe box.



The Jersey Shore is a summer favorite for fun in the sun and surf. Top Photo: D. D'Onofrio. Lower Photo: J. Morton Galetto.



The dog days of summer: Sum-sum-Summer Time! Photo: D. D'Onofrio.

This past week, on our morning walk along a dirt road, I found two pairs of high-top sneakers carefully placed by the road's edge. I suppose these triggered this story. The sneakers were far from ordinary, at least by my standards. One was covered in glitter with purple ribbon laces, the other had pink reflective trim where the eyelets are grommeted in place, a black toe, and black sides with silver amoeba-like squiggles. Wow, who wanted to abandon these beauties? I'll spare you my theories and simply say, "I hope you kick off your shoes this summer for a splash into summer and the Great Out-of-Doors." Happy Summer!

Sources

“The Talk of Long Beach Island: For Early Tourists, A Tepid Welcome at Jersey Resort,” Nick Ravo, New York Times, 1987.

“The Appalachian Trail Shoe Tree, Blairsville, Georgia, An eerie site of reverence for those who have completed an epic journey.” Jesse Miers, December 2020. Atlasobscura.com.

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Appalachian Trail

If you're thinking about walking the Appalachian Trail this summer you might take part in another shoe-throwing/hanging tradition at the Mountain Crossing, Walasi-Yi Visitors Center, in Blood Mountain, Georgia. This is the southern terminus of the 2,000 mile long Appalachian Trail which begins in Mount Katahdin in Maine. The location inspires celebration for walkers who have completed the long trek. Here they toss their hiking boots into a tree at the 1930s stone visitors' center. For those who travel from south to north the visitor's center is a place to get provisions for their journey.

Photo Credit: Jill Q, of Kansas City