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out there

Lyons as summer oasis: a river, inner tubes, sunshine and pinball

By Robin Chotzinoff
Special to the Denver Post



Lyons Classic Pinball features 31 pinball machines in a small house on Main Street. (Special to the Post / Robin Chotzinoff)

Is there a better smell of summer than hot sun hitting an inner tube? Is there a better short-term plan than lying on this very basic raft, the valve stem gouging a small hole in your backbone, and heading out onto the water?

That was our idea some weeks ago. We would find a river and go tubing. This, I thought, would prove the tenuous point that I'm a good parent. It was simple: I observed the way I was raised and embraced the opposite.

Parents were grown-up in my day. They didn't sit on the floor or eat with their fingers. Something happened when they married and began to reproduce - something that caused mothers to wear bathing caps covered with acrylic flowers as they minced into the water just once, on the hottest day of the summer.

And fathers meshed with their cars. My dad had a Chevrolet Impala. His idea of a family excursion was to get into his car and stay there for however long it took to

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cross the Hudson River, or Canada, stopping only to eat or sleep. He didn't understand the concept of adventure, which I always defined as a trip so long that if you undertook it on a bicycle, you would need to bring a sandwich. It was frustrating - adults had the key to mobility, but never wanted to do anything with it.

I vowed that when I had my own kids, we would do actual things, by which I don't mean Disney, Land or World. An excursion should involve uncertainty, the unpaved outdoors, and very little money. Inner-tubing seemed to fit the bill.

We ended up in Lyons, a foothills town north of Boulder bisected by the St. Vrain River. We arrived during the annual Rocky Mountain Bluegrass Festival, which meant no parking and perfect tubing. A decrepit school bus was cruising all over town, picking people up from outlying parking lots and dropping them at the festival grounds, and it so happened that every bus stop was right next to the St. Vrain. This service was free, with or without a festival wristband. We jumped out of the bus, scrambled down an embankment and stared upriver, where we saw hippies of all ages drifting down upon us, utterly relaxed.

Of course they were. At this time of year, the St. Vrain is peppy, yet shallow and unthreatening. Within minutes, we understood that you can't steer an inner tube, so you lie back and float. Pretty soon, your subconscious begins humming Crosby, Stills & Nash and wondering if there are any whole-wheat, carob-chip cookies to be had in this town.

At first, the trip's highlights were prosaic. My daughter lost a flip-flop in the mildly raging current, but some guy in dreadlocks retrieved it many miles later. We may have brushed up against a beaver dam, but maybe it was just a pile of sticks.

But

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then a curve in the river led us to a genuine swimming hole, with deep, still water, a sandy beach and small cliffs for cannon-balling. And then we collided with a Big Life Lesson. Here it is: Go ahead and make all the bulleted lists you want, but you really have no control over your life and should probably just chill. I tell you, it was cosmic.

How else to explain the presence of Lyons Classic Pinball? There we were, cruising down Main Street in soggy bathing suits, when it appeared: a collection of 31 classic pinball machines in a small house covered with trumpet vine. We had to stop.

Long before video arcades, pinball machines were what aspiring hoodlums did, and of course I wanted to participate, but I never got out of that Impala long enough.

We crossed the threshold into a cacophony of pings, clangs and tilt alarms, with a musical subtext of "Pinball Wizard," performed bluegrass style, running in the background. Eighty quarters later, two 7-year-olds and a married couple in their 40s had had their way with nearly every one of the classic games, some nearly 50 years old. (A history of each machine is posted on the wall behind it, exotic information for historic-pinball techno-

geeks, if such creatures exist.)

All I can say is, my wrists still twitch when I think of the extra points I scored on Gottlieb's 300, which was advertised as "a game of skill" and featured a bowling theme. The children have kept their counsel so far, but I have a feeling the

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experience was formative. At least I hope so. And whenever they're ready for another excursion, I have the keys.

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Robin Chotzinoff is a freelance writer who lives in Evergreen.

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The details

For general Lyons information, including tubing, call 303-823-5215. Try tubing in Lyons during the 2005 Rocky Mountain Folks Festival, Aug. 19-21. Contact bluegrass.com, 800-624-2422 or 303-823-0848.

Lyons Classic Pinball is at 339-A Main St. in Lyons, 303-823-6100. Open Wednesday and Thursday 5 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday 3 to 11 p.m., Sunday 3 to 9 p.m., closed Monday and Tuesday.



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