Unexpected Amusement

By Roy Smith, Kent, Ohio

I HAD very limited swimming experience, which was confined to the old city pool in Garfield Heights, Ohio, when I was 14, in 1940.

Despite this fact, I packed my swimsuit as instructed when I was invited on an outing with my sister, her husband and their friends, Helen and Dick Schleicher.

Our destination was Chippewa Lake, a nearby amusement park and beach. I was really excited about the prospect of riding the roller coasters.

Much to my disappointment, though, we drove right past the amusement park to the other side of the lake, where Dick, a really athletic guy, had his motorboat docked.

Dick was a first-class snow skier, but waterskiing was fairly new in our area. Not much equipment was available, so Dick made his own skis, as well as his own boat.

As you may guess from the 1940 photograph (top), today's manufactured water skis are about half the size of the gigantic versions that Dick made.

Dick and my brother-in-law took turns skiing behind the boat and finally urged me to give it a try.

As much as I liked roller coasters, I really disliked being on a lake whose depth I neither knew nor cared to find out.

And there was no safety equipment, such as a life jacket. The guys told me that if I fell off, I could just grab a ski and it would hold me until they could come back around and pick me up.

At 14, I wasn't about to act like a coward. Besides, I knew how to snow ski; how different could it be?

But first I had to get started. I sat on the dock with the huge skis firmly attached to my feet with cut-up inner-tube pieces. I held a rope tied to the boat, and Dick hit the gas.

Away I went, around and around the lake. It turned out to be great fun but, eventually, I had to stop and I had no intention of falling into that water.

Finally, Dick said the next time we passed the dock, I should just let go of the towline and glide toward the pier, getting as close as possible.

He made another pass. I let go of the rope, glided to the dock, grabbed it and sat down in the same place the watery trip had started.

Nobody could believe it: My swim trunks never even got wet.

Years later, I got married to a woman who regarded water as just as comfortable as land. I improved my swimming skills and even owned a ski boat.

The whole family, plus many of the kids' friends, learned the fine art of waterskiing, this time with life jackets and all the required safety equipment.

And although I never got to ride the roller coaster that day, I can't say that I didn't enjoy an equally thrilling ride.