

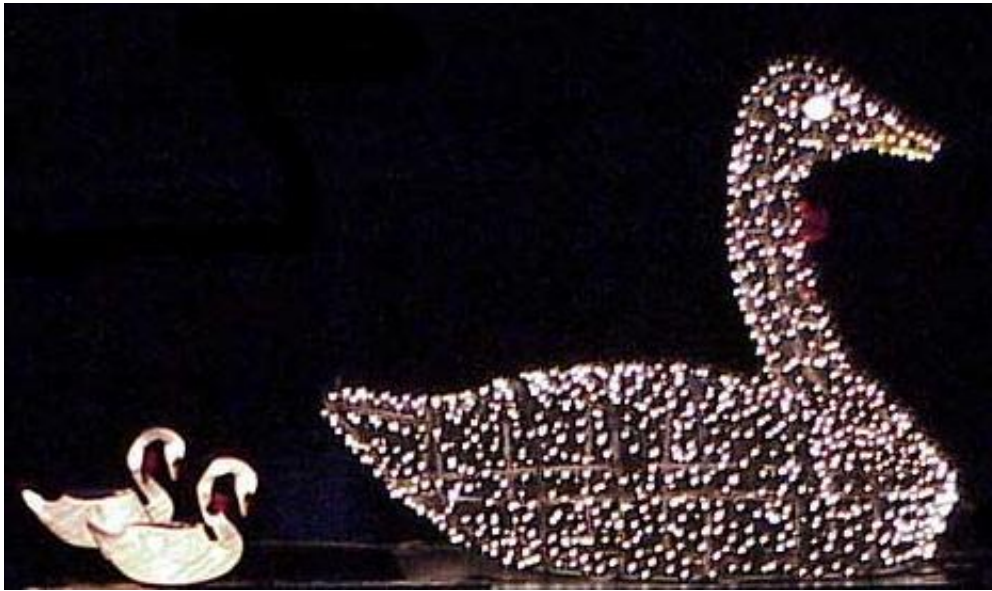
# The History of “Sparkle Plenty” of Lake Marinole

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(with edits and additions by Verne Morland)

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This is a short history of “Sparkle Plenty,” Lake Marinole’s Christmas season swan. It also includes some notes on how she was conceived, constructed, and installed.



**Original “Sparkle Plenty” with two trailing baby swans**

Back in the 1980s, the Greimans, the Sensels, and the Pages (Karen Sensel’s parents) were visiting the Cincinnati Zoo for their annual “Festival of Lights” event at Christmas time. We had heard that the light display was worth the trip and time.

During that evening, Vic Greiman and I remarked on the “floating lighted animals” displayed on a pond on the grounds of the zoo. I asked Vic, “Can we do something like this for Marinole Lake?” Vic studied the “animals” and we noted that they were well lit, but stationary.

A few days later Vic came up with a plan involving four components:

1. The swan,
2. A floating base,
3. A source of propulsion, and
4. A pivot point around which the entire assembly would rotate.

## **1. The Swan**

Vic found a picture of a swan in a magazine and asked me if I could make the image larger at my office. Vic needed to scale the small picture to the size that he wanted – a resting swan six feet tall! I “blew up” the picture and scotch-taped a series of separate images to form the complete enlargement.

From that, Vic molded a layout of PVC (plastic) piping to form the skeleton. Using a plywood form he heated and then modified each piece of the PVC into the form and shaped the skeleton that became the framework of Sparkles. That skeleton is visible today if you look at her up close.

Once the skeleton was formed, Vic wrapped it in chicken wire. Tom Cantrell and I spent a few afternoons “inside” Sparkles twist-tying 12 strings of 100 clear Christmas lights (1,200 lights in all!) to the outside of the chicken wire enclosure.

## **2. The Floating Base – a Plywood and Foam Raft**

The swan needed to float on the water of the lake. So Vic used a large sheet of plywood to form a raft under which he placed sheets of Styrofoam to increase its buoyancy. He then painted the raft and mounted the swan on top.

## **3. The Source of Propulsion**

Vic, a civil engineer from Iowa, figured out how to use a sump pump, normally used to pump water out of a basement, as propulsion device for the swan. He positioned the sump pump on the top of the raft and ran an extended shaft to its impellor below the raft. He then used wood to create channels so that the impeller would pull water in from the side of the swan’s raft and then push it straight out the back. This created, in effect, a jet of water that propelled the swan forward.

## **4. The Pivot Point**

If the swan was to move, its movement would need to be controlled. Vic figured that the simplest thing would be to have the swan rotate continuously around a fixed point in the lake – a pivot point. But there was a problem: if the swan rotated continuously around a fixed point, how could he keep the wire that supplied electricity to the swan’s lights and motor from getting wrapped up around the pivot point?

The first year that the swan was launched Vic kind of figured the swan would circulate one way one night and the other way the next night depending on the wind and the location. That didn't work out too well. In fact, it turned cold after Christmas and the swan became frozen in the ice on the top of the lake. Someone (we presume some neighborhood teenagers) ventured out on the ice and decapitated the swan. Her head was returned a few days later. Vic reattached it repaired the wiring for the next season.

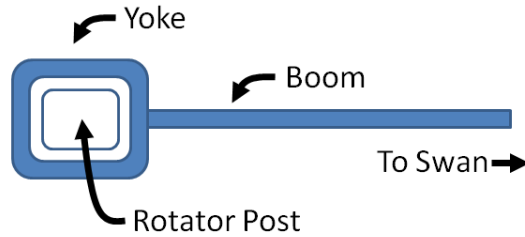
To Vic it was obvious that he needed a more advanced method for getting power to the moving swan. He had a friend who was an electrician assigned to several of the local General Motors plants. Vic asked him if he ever came across an electrical rotator for delivering continuous power to an object moving in a circle. A few days later, the electrician showed up at Vic's with exactly what he needed – an electric rotator. Apparently this part had been inspected and GM had classified it as “about to fail.” That was about thirty years ago and it's still going strong!

Vic placed the rotator on the top of a wooden post that he designed to fit into a long piece of PVC pipe that was 6 inches in diameter. He mounted the PVC pipe vertically and very securely on a 4 x 4 foot piece of plywood and anchored it with cement blocks to the bottom of the lake at a point near the center.

The PVC pipe into which the post with the rotator fits is about two feet below the surface of the lake. This was necessary for several reasons. First, for cosmetic reasons Vic did not want the top of the PVC pipe to show at or above the surface. Second, and more importantly, if the top of the pipe was at or near the surface, then when the lake freezes as it often does in the winter, the ice would entrap the pipe and break it off when the ice began to melt and the ice flow moved.

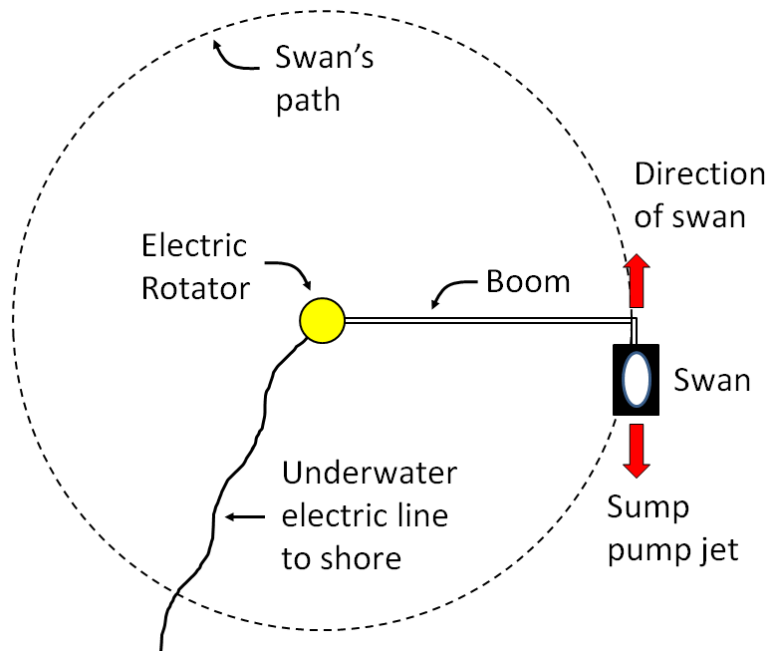
So the top of the PVC pipe is below the surface, but now Vic faced another problem. If the top of the PVC pipe was not easily visible at the surface, how would he find it each time he wanted to insert the rotator post? Vic solved this problem by installing two permanent eye bolts in the concrete sidewalk that encircles the lake, one of each side of the lake, and temporarily stringing a long rope between them. At one point in the rope Vic tied a knot and in the water directly below the knot is the mouth of the PVC pipe! So each year when the swan is installed in the lake, the rope is strung between the two eye bolts and the PVC pipe is found.

Finally, to complete the assembly for continuous circular motion, Vic constructed a “boom” about 40 feet long out of 1 inch PVC pipe. By attaching the boom to the rotator post with a yoke that would slip around the post, the boom with the electrical wire to power the swan can rotate continuously without hanging up (see diagram below).



**The Boom and Yoke assembly**

Here is an illustration of the complete swan assembly. By calculating the speed that the sump pump propelled the swan on its raft through the water, Vic figured that the swan would make a complete revolution about every 3 ½ minutes or so ... depending on the wind!



**The main elements of the "Sparkle Plenty" assembly**

### **Electrical Connections**

Vic wired Sparkles so that there were two circuits, one for the lights and one for the sump pump. This made it possible to keep the swan rotating through the water on freezing nights without having to have the lights on all night. (When the swan keeps moving the movement stirs up the water enough so that it doesn't freeze and this creates a large circular opening in the ice even when the rest of the lake freezes solid.)

## Naming the Swan

Those of us of a certain age remember a newspaper comic strip called “Dick Tracy.” It first appeared in 1931 and was continued by the original artist until 1977. At one point in the life of the comic the author introduced a new character, “Sparkle Plenty,” a beautiful woman who, according to historians, “caught the public's imagination like wildfire!” Seeking a name for his sparkling Christmas swan, Vic dubbed her, “Sparkle Plenty.”

## Current Status

Our lake neighbor Bob Mitsch bought Vic’s house when the Greimanns moved away and in so doing Bob “inherited” Sparkle. He agreed to keep her for the first year but really wanted someone else to tend to her thereafter. Fortunately, in that first year Bob, also an engineer, fell in love with Sparkle.

Today, we Marinole residents are indebted to Bob for not only installing and storing but also for repairing, replacing, and improving many of her components. Over the summer of 2022, Bob, assisted by Mike Webb, replaced all of the original incandescent lights with LED lights (over 1,000!) and he also replaced the sump pump motor, impeller, and mounting assembly.

Sparkle Plenty continues to light up our lake for both the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Thank you, Vic and Bob!



Photo credit: Bob Mitsch, November 2017

**“Sparkle Plenty” at Sunset**  
(photo credit Bob Mitsch, November 2017)