

## George Brown Becomes Mr. Russell Island

(from Don Pollard's newsletters)



George Brown (right) and Flavius Brooke III, grandson of Judge Flavius Brooke.

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George Brown who, over a period of 46 years, was "Mr. Russell Island" in every sense of the word, was born in Amherstburg, Ont., and orphaned at the age of ten. He went to live with an uncle on Harsens Island and, as he grew older, worked for various farmers in the Algonac area.

Mrs. Brown was born Mamie Genaw, in Algonac. They met, as young people do, and, in the year when both reached the age of 20, they were married.

It was seven years later, in March, 1916 that George signed a contract to become Russell Island caretaker. Under the contract he was to receive \$5 a day for days when he worked his team and \$3 other days.

"George wouldn't have had the job except that the sailor the company had planned to hire turned the job down," Mrs. Brown said. "The sailor found the money he had been sending home for his retirement had disappeared so he had to go back on the lakes."

During the first years of the Island's occupancy, the Russell Island Land Co. maintained strict control over all details of the operation.

Mrs. Brown has an illustrative anecdote.

Former Supreme Court Justice W.L. Carpenter, one of the Island fathers, frequently commuted from Detroit on the steamer *Tashmoo* and it distressed him that, when the crowded ship pulled into the dock, the passengers had a closeup view of Russell Islanders of all shapes cavorting around in a great assortment of bathing suits. He thought it lowered the Island's dignity.

"One day there was a big sign on the dock," Mrs. Brown recalled. "It said, 'No one allowed on dock in bathing suit when boat comes in.' For a while after that all the swimmers would scurry away whenever one of the big steamers pulled in."

Mrs. Brown remembers another occasion when the company staged a big promotion to show off its new development.

"The company chartered the Steamer *Tashmoo* and brought up about 800 people they thought might be interested in buying lots," she said. "There was a little real estate shack at the time on what is now the Valassis lot and there were salesmen around to talk to the visitors and serve them coffee.

"I suppose they sold a lot of lots that day but I didn't see much of the festivities because my youngest daughter Kay had been born

in our Island home a few days before and I was still in bed.”

As the great depression deepened in the thirties the company gradually withdrew from active supervision of the island and George Brown took over.

As an inducement for George to stay during the difficult time the company made an exception to its strict prohibition against any sort of commercial enterprise and allowed George to build the small store which was first a grocery and later the Pop Stand. (The original Pop Stand, now the teen's hangout).

During the depths of the depression not more than half the 50 cottages then built were occupied. It was hard going but George, doing all the work himself, with the help of his family, got along.

In fact, the prevailing Island opinion was that George had accumulated a bank account of some size during the Prohibition years.

During that era the Island was one of the easier points to cross the international border. As liquor running became a big business, powerful motor boats frequently lay after dark in the shadow of the Big Dock while Federal boats patrolled the channel.

Island children of the day viewed it as a fine game. They lay on the dock and whispered warnings to the men below when a customs boat approached.

One of the better stories of that time concerns an Islander who paid an unexpected mid-winter visit to his cottage and found the kitchen stacked high with burlap bags full of Canadian beer.

According to the story the cottager called George Brown to ask how come? George expressed his consternation and offered to remove the offending material at once but the Islander replied indignantly: “No, nobody takes a single bottle out of my cottage. Just let me know who I owe what for it.”

As the Island emerged from the depression George maintained his position as the “boss of everything.” He not only cut the lawns, collected the garbage, looked after pumps and water lines and sold ice and wood, but he also operated the ferry and the store.

However, after World War II, changing times and advancing age caused him to begin to shed his enterprises and sell first the ferry and then the Pop Stand.

But it wasn't always easy to get out. Mrs. Brown recalls that, with the advent of electric refrigeration, George wanted to close his ice

house and ice delivery business.

“But several people objected strenuously,” she said. “They said they wanted to keep on using ice because the old fashioned ice box was one of the Island's charms!”

But George did stop cutting ice in the late 1940s and another Island tradition passed by the wayside.

However, until the day of his death, George continued to spend at least part of nearly every day on the Island. He continued to do maintenance work for many cottagers and during the winter maintained a patrol service.

Appropriately—if that is the right word—he died on the Island he had loved for so many years. On June 7, 1962, while he was burning brush near the Canal Dock, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

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