

I S L A N D I T E M S

The unseasonably cool spring weather which followed George C. Webster's take-over of the Russell Island Ferry, May 1st, didn't phase George in the least.

"After piloting the Harsen's Island ferry through the months of December, January and February for five years, I find this positively balmy," he said.

Before joining the Champion Line, George owned the Bayview Marina, for two years, now the Piers on Dyke Road. Before that he lived in Union Lake, Michigan, where he operated an excavating and trucking business.

The family immigrated to the St. Clair River country "because we spent some summer vacations in the area and decided it was where we would like to live," he explained.

George and his wife, Marion, have two sons, Spud, 19, attending the Ford Rouge Plant apprentice school, and Russ, 17, an Algonac High School student. The boy who is helping on the ferry this summer is the "little" one.

George served on PT boats in the Pacific for 3 1/2 years during World War II. He was in the same group as the late President Kennedy, but did not know him -- at least not by name.

The affection in which George's predecessor, Russ McCartney, has been held by the St. Clair River folk was shown in stories that appeared in both Detroit and Port Huron papers after he announced his retirement.

Russ's nephew, Allan Blanchard, winner of this year's Detroit Press Club Foundation award for the best job of reporting in a Michigan newspaper during 1965, wrote a feature story about his uncle.

(Allan spent a few summers back in the forties as jumper of Russ on the old Island Queen. His award was for his coverage of the Dominican crisis).

The Sunday the story appeared several total strangers came to the Algonac dock with copies of the paper and asked Russ to autograph them.

"Too bad fame came to me so late in life," he commented.

Helena, who just at the end of her tour of duty mastered the trick of throwing a clove hitch from the ferry door, was miffed because none of the stories mentioned her as the ferry's first mate.

Russ is going to continue to live in Algonac and this is hardly an obituary but perhaps it is in order to mention that he was born in St. Clair 62 years ago, began to sail the lakes at the age of 15 as the steamer Wauketa's cabin boy; served as boatswain on the passenger steamer City of Detroit III and wheelsman of the freighters D. C. Mills and J. A. Campbell; was chief of police at St. Clair for three years, and operated our ferry for the last 19 years.

During the latter career he pulled a goodly number of careless boaters out of the water, including some Islanders.

Continuing Mrs. George Brown's recollections of the early days of Russell Island:

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For the first four years after 1916, when they moved onto the Island, the Brown family had no other home and lived there year round.

"During those first winters we sometimes had a lot of trouble getting across the channel to Algonac," Mrs. Brown recalls. "And there were various other worries.

"I remember one December when there was a bad storm that blew down 35 big trees. I was so frightened I put out all the kerosene lamps in the house. I was afraid some part of the house might fall in and catch on fire.

"But I don't ever remember being lonesome. With so many little girls I was too busy. I did all my own sewing and just about everything else."

And there was fun along with hardship. Judge Flavious Brooke, one of the Island fathers, kept a riding horse on the island and it was stabled behind the Brown house summer and winter.

"To exercise the horse in the winter, George got a cutter," Mrs. Brown said. "When it was possible we would drive across the ice to Algonac in style. It was very jolly!"

Prior to 1915 no permanent buildings ever had been erected on the Island, so far as anyone knows.

(However, there have been cases of old, presumably Indian bones, having been turned up by the Bob Fleischers, for one, when they were digging their cottage foundation.)

"When we moved onto the island the roads had not been built but they were marked out and cleared so you could get around fairly easily," Mrs. Brown said. "The cut separating the upper and lower sections of the island had been dug and the dirt used for fill, but the canal running behind the lower island and the canal separating the west section of the island were still to be dug. As a result the west section which we used to call Anderson Island was nothing but marsh. And it was full of fish. I remember George going over there with a pitchfork and simply spearing all the fish we could use."

Mrs. Brown said that, while the middle of the island was thickly wooded, the lower island was bare and there were few trees north of the vicinity of the present Carlson cottage. "People today don't realize how many of the big trees were planted after the island was subdivided," she said. "All the big poplars on the lower island and all the larger trees on the north end were planted after 1916. They shipped saplings in by train to Algonac. I don't know how many, but it was a large number and planting them was one of George's first big jobs.

(All the big elms George planted have been killed in recent years by the blight, of course. Most of the poplars planted on the lower island also have disappeared over the years.)

Among George's other first chores were building roads and clearing the heavier thickets. He also cut ice in the canals and channels each winter and stored it in an ice house behind his home. The ice and cords of firewood he cut were for his own use and also for sale to the growing number of cottagers.

"George always kept a team of the prettiest black horses he could find and he had plenty of Indian help," Mrs. Brown said.

After 1920 the Browns had a second home in Algonac and Mrs. Brown and the girls spent most of the winters there to make it easier for the girls to get to school. But they still spent varying lengths of time each winter on the island, depending on the weather and ice conditions.

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"I remember during the winter of 1940," Mrs. Brown said, "when ice was good all winter, we spent the three mid-winter months from December 17 to March 17, on the island. We had a car by then and the girls who were still in school drove back and forth to Algonac on the ice every day. We could drive anywhere we wanted to and our friends could come to see us. Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon our yard was full of cars and it was just like living in town."

Mrs. Brown continued to spend the greater part of each year on the Island until her husband's death in 1962.

(More about Mrs. Brown's recollections in our next).

The Buesser family has been unusually busy of late. Lela has returned from an around-the-world tour, one lap of which was a half-mile trip up a mountain, on elephant-back, to visit an ancient temple. Tony became a partner with his big brother, Fred, in the new law firm of Buesser, Buesser, Snyder and Blank in the Penobscott Building. Shortly, thereafter, Tony began getting front page publicity for the first time when he represented Northern High School's principal in the late unpleasantness.

Fred, III will graduate from the University of Michigan law school in August and join his father and uncle in the new firm. Younger brother, Bill, will enter Wayne State University law school in the fall. Tony also has some sons growing up. How many times can you add the name Buesser to one office door?

Fred's daughter, Anne, also was making news. She was chosen the Detroit News Teen of the Week and also received her schools annual DAR award for outstanding scholarship and leadership. Anne will enter college this fall. She was accepted at Wellesley but has chosen, instead, to enter the U of M honors college.

Congratulations also to Hobey Loomis on his appointment as principal of Cass Tech, one of the top jobs in the Detroit school system. Hobey graduated from Cass himself and later taught there. He has been principal of Southeastern High in present years.

One of the island old-timers, Oscar Carlson, died suddenly in May at his winter home in Hallandale, Florida. Funeral services were held in Miami, May 17. Before his retirement, Oscar, for many years was Chrysler Corporation Superintendent. His wife, Jeanette, has offered for sale the cottage they occupied for many years.

Trader Ferd Reich says he has his lot immediately west of the Truax cottage still for sale at a bargain price. He has another bargain on a 17 foot Chris Craft Cavalier utility, 131 horsepower inboard. Also he has good twin beds he would like to swap for a double bed. His phones are: Cottage 748-3260 -- Office TR. 5-9200 and Home TU. 1-4168

Don't forget the annual meeting of the Russell Island Property Owners Association on Monday, July 4, 1966 at 11:00 A.M. at the Pop Stand.