



Russell Island Remains A Gem

By Dave Ponke

Over 200 years ago, in the spring of 1802, a Moravian missionary named Christian Frederick Denke settled on the tiny patch of land known today as "Russell Island."

According to historical accounts, the whole idea was that Denke would set up a mission for the Chippewa Indian Tribe.

Today, the island still exists across from the City of Algonac in the St. Clair River and is home to numerous cottage and summer homes.

With the blessing and guidance of Chippewa Indian Chief Nangi, Denke ended up living for a short time with the Harsen family in their home while he built his cabin on Russell Island. Shortly thereafter, Denke was joined by John Schnall, who was also from the same Moravian village on the Thames River. Schnall's intent was to assist Denke and help if needed, since he too had the initiative to build a mission. The pair ended up living in the same cabin owned by the Harsen family.

But, as lore reveals, Denke, who avidly toted a pipe, was breaking loose some pipe ashes in August of 1802 - then the unthinkable occurred. With a thunderous "ka-boom!" the Harsen's home was leveled! Denke's pipe ashes had fallen on a bit of gunpowder close to a keg of the same content. The ensuing explosion killed Bernard Harsen and his sister, Sarah.

Denke eventually completed work on rebuilding his

home after the accident and kept working with the Chippewa tribe.

Denke was renowned for his work with Bible passages and regularly shared his faith and knowledge. He would translate Bible passages and hymns into the Indian language and shared the words with the Indian tribe.

Eventually though, the relationship between Denke and the Chippewa dissolved. They somehow blamed him for the government's action of liquor prohibition, and he left the island in March of 1803.

Children and families find leisure and enjoyment on Russell Island today, much as they had years ago. Shortly after 1900, the *Tashmoo* excursion boat made regular stops, ferrying passengers from Detroit and downriver to Russell Island.

Back in the day, the island was a resort retreat and featured the renowned "White City" tent city retreat in 1905.

Passengers arrived first in the city of Detroit via train cars and then rode on steamboats, much like the *Tashmoo* to Russell Island. From there, they enjoyed the 187 acres, which featured an array of getaway activities for the city dwellers. Tennis, croquet, bowling, fishing and billiards welcomed visitors at White City, also known as Camp Algonac. Steamships hurriedly transported those eager to partake in these activities from downstream communities.

Tents were furnished with wooden floors, cots and seats. Personal cooking was forbidden, since it was a safety hazard.

Concessions offered barbecued delicacies and treats for the youngsters.

The camp was maintained by a group of Algonac merchants, who gained control and ownership from the Detroit-based Belle Isle and Windsor Ferry Company in 1905 and created and built the locally famous summer resort.

Children today still enjoy activities on the island, except the tents are gone, replaced by cottage and wood-framed homes. Families can still be seen along beach shores and the sandy roads that connect the island. Cars are forbidden there, but bicycles and the occasional golf cart are used as well as traditional walking to get from place to place. A year-round ferry service is provided from the shoreline at Algonac, directly across the river. A canal separates the island from nearby Harsen's Island.



A child enjoys summer sand at Sans Souci on Harsen's Island in this vintage photo. Photo courtesy of Dave Ponke.



A family picnics on an island near Algonac nearly 50 years ago. Photo courtesy of Dave Ponke.

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