

One-time resort Russell Island remains old-time playground

Where the St. Clair River bifurcates into the North and South Channels sits a jewel. It is a treasured little island that has hosted dozens of families for a lifetime of summer memories.

It is called Russell Island (after one of its founders). I had the great privilege of growing up spending my own summers there.

People talk about places being one big, happy family; this one really is. Cottages have been passed down from generation to generation, and along with them cherished traditions. Family members have married other islanders, thus continuing a strong sense of community.

This all goes back to 1915, when the island was made into a summer resort colony for planned vacations. Our forefathers came from Detroit on excursion boats including Bob-Lo and the White Star Lines.

Camp Algonac (as it was known then) brought families from as far away as Indiana. They could have a one-week excursion with the use of a tent and a cot during the outing.

All of this came at the unbelievable price of \$10.50. I guess you could say that it was the first all-inclusive resort. The tented island accommodated 1,500 people and offered all of the amenities. You could even get a substantial meal for 25 cents. Camp Algonac was discontinued in 1909, but the people who loved the little island still came and some of these same people built the first permanent cottages.

My family settled there in 1923 when my father was only 9 years old. He and his brother and sisters had a



KIM SMITH
COMMUNITY
COLUMNIST

wonderful childhood on Russell Island. They all learned to swim like guppies, and, goodness, they did. One of Gar Woods' time trials in one of his famous race boats proved to be a near disaster. He was plucked from the water by those very same guppies.

The island is rich in history for other reasons, too. My grandfather (a chief inspector at Ford Motor Co.) hosted Henry Ford himself at the family cottage. Mr. Ford was fascinated by the fact that there was such a wonderful place only one hour from Detroit.

It was rather ironic that there were no cars on the island, and so it remains today. No cars, no noise. None of the mainland's hustle and bustle. Just a place to kick back and enjoy a slower pace.

The island isn't altogether devoid of transportation. Golf carts and bicycles are allowed. Why, they even have street signs.

The only way to get to Russell Island is by private boat or passenger ferry, and if you live to shop, you are out of luck. There are no stores on Russell Island. In fact, there is only one business. They have a private yacht club. Since no one has a yacht and it isn't on the water, it is sort of an inside joke. It is a bar, plain and simple, just like the island itself.

Our wonderful island remains very much the same as it was way back when. This makes our little jewel priceless.

Kim Smith is a writer, avid golfer, poet and humorist. She lives in Algonac. Community columns appear on Sundays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.