

Time Tracs By Jim Ingram

(First in a series on Park Island)

ER Emmons built a large mill on the former site of the Edison Company, now Elegant Eras Antiques, in 1856. It was he who first noticed the resort possibilities of Lake Orion.

In 1872-73 Emmons improved a natural park on the north shore of the lake, probably close to Green's Park and used it for picnic purposes. He placed a small steamer on the lake and christened it "Little Dick" in honor of his son Richard.

Emmons offered picnics and excursions from the park to the many islands of the lake. With the advent of the Detroit and Bay City Railroad in 1872, travelers fast discovered the beauties of Lake Orion.

Several prominent Lake Orion farmers and businessmen purchased the "Little Dick" steamer and Park Island, then known as Island Park, in 1874.

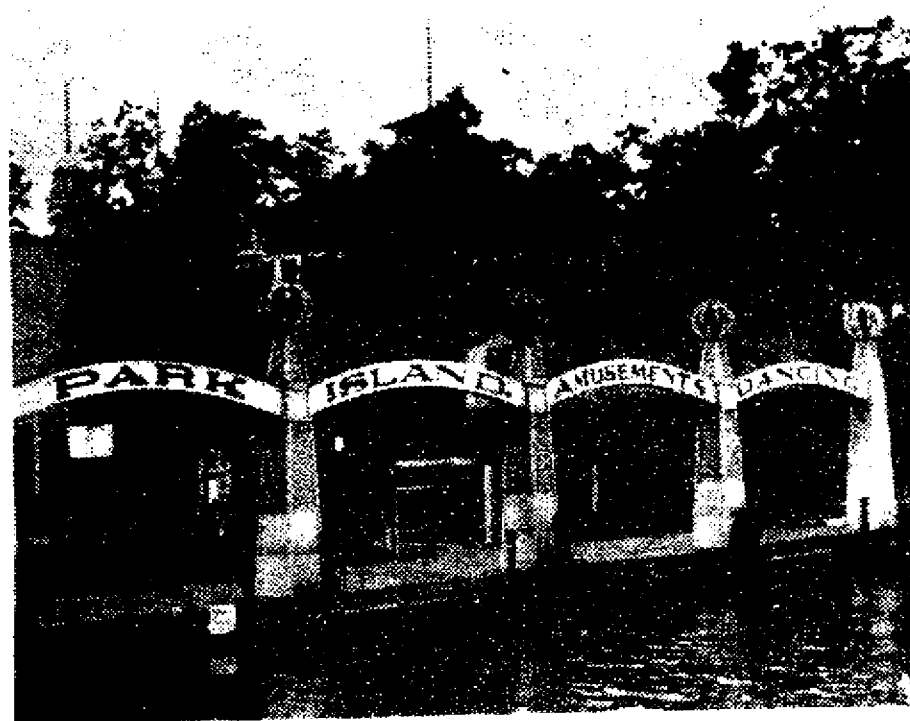
These incorporators were CK Carpenter, LL Treat, John Lord, Simon Andrews, Isaac Kitchen, Robert Sims, CF Whitcomb, Isaiah Bradford, Lewis B. Hemingway, Alanzo Predmore, Ira Carpenter and Hiram Andrews.

They named their organization Orion Park Association and immediately began a series of improvements. A bridge 150 feet long was constructed to connect the island with the mainland. On the island they built a reception hall 100 feet long, surmounted by a tower 84 feet high from which a magnificent view of the lake and the surrounding country could be had.

In a natural amphitheater west of the tower, a rostrum and seats for an audience of several thousand was erected. A wharf and boathouse opposite the island in what is now Green's Park was constructed. Regular trips to the island were made over what one early historian termed, "one of the handsomest sheets of water in the state."

Many excursions and picnics were held on Park Island. Special trains brought people here by the thousands and they were allowed free use of the island. There were big celebrations on the Fourth of July, Decoration Day and Barbecue Day. The Spiritualists were among the first religious groups to camp on the island.

In 1897 Rev. Squires of Detroit purchased Park Island for the purpose of converting it into a permanent assembly ground. Rev. Seth Reed had charge of the program in the first summer of operation and excellent speakers were brought from far and near. From the very first outset of religious



assemblies, it was resolved not to sell any intoxicating liquors on the premises.

The following are some geographical bits about the island gleaned from the 1908 Atlas of Oakland County.

A footbridge is shown on the south side of the island leading to the mainland at about the spot where Algene Street now ends. A small lake named Arena Lake is shown on the island.

It also shows a Howard Island at the end of the point opposite Park Island to the southwest. It's now occupied by the house at 204 O'Conner Street.

Gladys Van Wagoner recalls going to Van Wagoner family reunions on the island. It was largely a picnic ground in the 1900s. She said three cottages on the island were owned by her aunt and uncle, Carl and Maude Rufus.

Marie Miller Shoup has some very fond memories of Park Island from the time she was a small child, approximately 1912-13. She went to the island with her father's aunt and uncle, Nell and Holt Beemer (from the Beemer and Carleton General Store).

Marie describes the pavilion as a large, open, roofed building built on the high point of the island, next to the carousel.

"I remember all the high society ladies -- Mrs. Letts (Letts Lumber Company), Mrs. Speaker (Speaker and Son Hardware), Mrs. Carleton -- sitting in rocking chairs in the pavilion, crocheting and tatting while visiting with each other," Marie says.