

Time tracs

Jim Ingram

(First in a series on Squaw Island)

For the newcomer to Orion, Squaw Island, what little is left of it, is located directly north of Park Island, just off the Lake Street shore. The outlot for the island is at the foot of Clare Street, a short street just off Lake Street.

For this story it's necessary to start with the very beginning of Lake Orion. In 1829, Needham Hemingway, Jesse Decker and Philip Bigler built a dam and saw mill across Paint Creek at the approximate site of the current dam under M-24 at the mouth of the creek.

This was the beginning of what would eventually transform six small lakes into what we see as Lake Orion today.

The information on how Squaw Island received its name came to me through Mildred Schmidt, curator of the Northeast Oakland Historical Museum in Oxford.

Several years ago the museum received a picture of Squaw Island from local resident Jessie MacBain with a newspaper article from the Orion Review dated Aug. 13, 1887 attached to the back of the picture. This article by a local unnamed writer described the events that led to the naming of Squaw Island.

The Review credits the Hon. CK Carpenter with much of the information regarding Squaw Island in the article.

Just a note on CK Carpenter I think is appropriate. He came to Orion Township as a boy with his family in 1837. He was a lifelong resident and farmer.

CK Carpenter was instrumental in bringing the railroad through Orion in 1870 and in 1874 was one of the original developers of Lake Orion as a summer resort. He was very active in Michigan politics in the 1860s and 1870s.

It seems the three builders of the Paint Creek mill hired a man by the name of Warden to work at the mill. In the year 1832, Warden boarded at the Jesse Decker home, which was in the vicinity of Bald Mountain Golf Course. Each morning he would walk a trail through the woods the two miles to the mill.

In those early days, whisky was a common beverage and would be found in the house of nearly every settler who could spare the means to procure it.

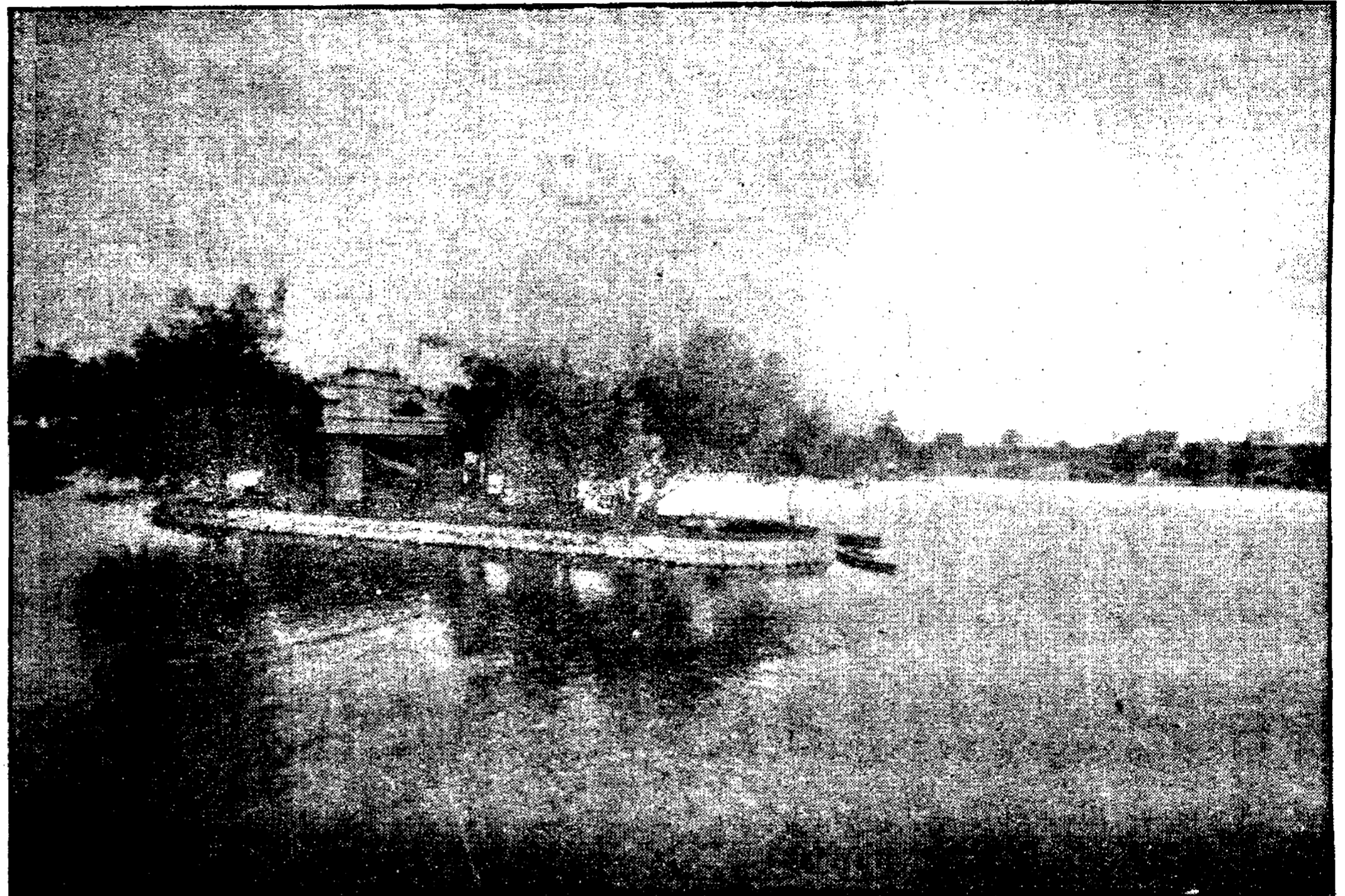
Warden also deemed it necessary as a means of keeping ague off the pond and had a goodly sized jug of it in the mill for his own special use.

The place was directly on the highway from Detroit to the Saginaws. Then, however, the highway was a well trodden Indian trail used almost every day by the then "mothers of the forest."

It happened one day that one of their tribes of about 30 Indians and squaws stopped at the mill and desired something to eat. Warden had already eaten his dinner and had not a crust of bread to divide with them but they seemed dissatisfied and doubted his word.

To appease them he brought out the jug of whisky from its hiding place and gave it to the Indian leader. He drank and passed it to the next with great expression of thanks to the white man. The jug soon touched the lips of every Indian in the company.

The squaws, on learning the jug contained whisky, hastily gathered all the weapons they could get from the Indians. They left for the woods, knowing well the danger



Squaw Island, pictured above, has a long history in Lake Orion. A gentleman whose surname was Warden played a big part in the naming of the island. He had gotten into a difficult situation with some Indians after drinking some whisky, and had to make a quick getaway. The next morning, to his surprise, he discovered that some squaws had unarmed the Indians while they slept off their hangover, and he named it Squaw Island in their memory.

of being with a drunken Indian gang.

All went merrily with the Indians and Warden until the jug was dry. The Indians called for more, which of course Warden could not get. In their drunken fury they would not believe him and threatened to kill him if the whisky was not brought.

Their angry faces convinced Warden they meant all they said and flight was his only alternative. So down from the mill and into the bushes he ran for dear life with half a dozen young Indians warriors close to his heels, but thanks to the squaws, unarmed.

Warden being more sober than his pursuers soon outstripped them and instead of going back to the settlement hid away and lay in the woods all night near the lake. The Indians returned to the mill and in their disappointment and rage set fire to it and burned it up.

Early the next morning Warden cautiously made his way back towards the mill keeping further north, that he might approach his enemy from a different direction. On his way back he saw a squaw coming from the bushes on

what we now call Squaw Island.

The water in 1832 had never been high enough to surround it. On the north side there was a low strip of land connecting with the main land, over which a person could pass dry footed.

After consulting a map showing water depths of the lake in that area, I would judge the strip of land to have gone north from the island to approximately the foot of what is now Clare Street.

Warden carefully approached the swamp without being seen and to his surprise found the squaws were camped with the weapons taken from the Indians the day before.

Warden quietly withdrew and made a circuit near the mill where he saw the Indians still sleeping off the effects of the whisky. He then made his way to the Deckers for breakfast.

Warden felt he owed his life to the forethought of the squaws in disarming the Indians and to their memory he named the place of encampment Squaw Island.

Natalie Mazza