

Time Tracs by Jim Ingram

(First in a series on assorted islands of Lake Orion)

Isle of Babette is located off the southwest shore of the lake. It's connected to its outlot on King Circle by a short footbridge.

In the early 1920s, the husband and wife vaudeville team of Clare and Babette Evans were canoeing on Lake Orion where they were impressed with a small vacant island just off the shore.

The next summer, the ever romantic Clare bought the island and christened Isle of Babette after his 16-year-old wife.

Babette had grown up in the theater; both her parents were actors in the 1800s. She met her husband, 20 years her senior, while a singer in a roadshow musical.

Clare was a comedian with the Ziegfield Follies and obtained a number for Babette in the show in which she sang the blues while pretending to sniff cocaine before a waterfront set.

During the Depression both Babette and Clare found themselves performing song and dance routines in small southern towns to pick up some money.

Their only real source of income was the island in Lake Orion on which they had built several cottages to rent during the summer. Each of the cottages on the inside had been designed to resemble different hotel suites that the Evans frequented in their travels throughout the country.

When they returned to Lake Orion in the summer they were hosts to many show people traveling out from Detroit. The parties which were held every Saturday night attracted many, the Great Houdini allegedly among them.

Clare died suddenly in 1940. I can recall Babette Evans summering on the island in the 1950s. In fact we installed a space heater from the hardware store in the cottage that she occupied so she could spend more time there.

The island has had many owners in the last 40 years. Two of these I recall are Ernie McManus and Harold Roberts. Only one of the original cottages remain.

Preston Island is adjacent to the sandbar to the west. It's named for the family who purchased it in the 1920s.

The Prestons owned the cottage at 24 Highland Avenue on Bellevue Island for many years. Their son Don Preston and daughter Ruth Preston Trick and her husband Bill built the two existing cottages on the island in the mid 1920s. This information is courtesy of Bill O'Brien.

The island was purchased by Eugene Jasunas in 1952. Being a young man in his early 20s, it became his party island. I recall its notoriety for long and wild parties in the 1950s and 60s.

Later the island was divided with a cottage in each half and Eugene sold one half to Gerald Barton. The outlot remains on King Circle.

For the past several years, the island has seldom been used. Eugene tells me he is now retired and his family has little interest in the island. He plans to fix up the cottage and breakwall and sell it within the next two years.

I do want to make note of a couple of interesting asides to this story. According to Harvey Wilson, the current sandbar was a separate island next to Preston Island in the 1920s. I remember the small dock on pilings in the middle of the sandbar in the 1950s and 1960s.

Bill O'Brien tells me the Preston cottage at 24 Highland became the infamous Purple Gang Cottage in the 1930s. Bill reports they were very good summer neighbors.



The Isle of Babette is located off of King Circle.