

Time Tracs

by Jim Ingram

(Sixth in a series on Orion history from 1800 through the 1920s)

Many picnics were now being held in Orion with free use of Park Island being granted to the resorters. Special trains brought thousands out from Detroit.

Big celebrations were held at the park on the island, especially on holidays such as the Fourth of July, Decoration Day and Barbecue Day when even the governor was present. The Spiritualists were among those who camped on Island Park each year.

Summer cottages were built along the shore in the 1880s. Villagers took summer borders and the hotels, Lake House, Emmons House and Swift House were filled.

Rev. Squires of Detroit purchased Park Island for the purpose of converting it into a permanent assembly grounds in 1897. The following year, 1898, was the beginning of the greatest boom Lake Orion has ever had.

The success of the previous year and the idea of a permanent place for religious conventions and chautauquas, so near the center of the greatest population, appealed to the churches.

Reverends John Sweet and JT Haller, John Winter and others organized the Assembly Resort Association which purchased Bellevue Island, all the other islands and much of the lakeshore.

A bridge was built to Bellevue, a large auditorium seating 2,250 was erected, a canal was cut from the small lake on the island to the main lake, several naphtha launches were purchased, docks were built and within a year 100 cottages were erected.

Thousands soon visited Orion's shores in search of the entertainment, education and relaxation offered by the then-fabled chautauqua.

The construction of the Interurban, Detroit Urban Railroad, to Lake Orion in 1900 made travel to this center of culture especially easy. One could travel here by train, either steamer or electric, depart the train depot, walk across Green's Park and board one of the passenger launches.

The launches would take people to their hotel or cottage on the lakeshore. This was excellent transportation for the first 20 years of this century, before the wide accessibility of the automobile.

When Emmon's Mill burned in 1901, Winter and Dr. O. Lau acquired the water power rights and constructed a small power plant near the corner of South Broadway and M-24.

This company, the Orion Light & Power Company, furnished electric lights for the assembly and the Village of Orion.

The double deck boat "Chautauqua," later "City of Orion," was purchased in 1901. The Bellevue Hotel was enlarged in 1902 and a second hotel, the Lakeview, was constructed on the west side of Bellevue Island.

The undertaking proved too large financially and the 1906 the Lake Orion Assembly Resort sold out to the Lake Orion Power and Improvement Association which went into the hands of the receiver in 1910.

The Lake Orion Summer Homes Company, with Winter as its head, purchased the bankrupt organization and in 1911 Park Island was inaugurated as an amusement center. It comprised 15 acres packed with every desirable amusement, including the sensational roller coaster, "The Thriller," a \$12,000 carousal enclosed in a pavilion and various other motorized rides.

A 5,000 square foot dancing pavilion attracted the top orchestras of the day. There was a roller skating rink and a penny arcade with mechanized strip shows, Japanese Rolling Ball and other games.

Adjacent to the main dock, with its four proscenium arches, where the various launches deposited their passengers, was the bathing beach. It had both a mens and ladies bathhouse in addition to a two story observatory.

It had a large "L" shaped dock with several diving boards and platforms. The highest of these at the very end of the dock was 42 feet.

It boasted the largest water slide in Michigan. There was a spacious picnic area on the island that hosted a balloon ascension every Sunday evening. On the mainland near the bridge was the athletic park with baseball fields and a race track.

resid
nam
this

usua
for
glor

loca
fuse
resi

tos
of li
was
inju

sup
ser
sup
co

ex
No
cy
be
th

bi
fo
w
th

a
h
e
y
g
a

t
t
t
t

t
t
t

t
t
t

t
t
t

t
t
t

t
t
t

t
t
t