

THE HISTORY CORNER

“The Cat Ladies of Pells Island”

By: Jan Huntley

BACKGROUND: One of the earlier cottages on the island was built by Warren Burlingame Stimson, the chief civil engineer employed by the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad Company at the time the rail routes were being laid out connecting the basically unsettled northern regions of the Lower Peninsula with the more populated southern communities.

The railroad line was slated to pass through Petoskey and on to Mackinaw City. Multiple land grants along the proposed route were acquired by William Pell, who had purchased these tracts in the hope of developing them for farming and manufacturing enterprises once the line was completed. Mr. Stimson, also the acting land agent for the railroad, was to select the specific depot locations along the route, one of which he situated at the site of the present Pellston Depot. At that point, Mr. Pells plotted and laid out the village of Pellston.

Thereafter, a friendship developed between the two men, ultimately resulting in the gift of two plots of land in the middle of the Pells Island to Mr. Stimson, who had already built a summer cottage for his family along the bluff in the Rosedale area of Bay View. Mr. Stimson later became the general manager of the GR & I Railroad. It is noted that the Pellston street paralleling the rail line along the course of US 31 was named for him, although it is currently misspelled as “Stimpson.”

In 1899, railroad carpenters from the GR&I built the two Stimson cottages, using plans and construction techniques then being used to construct the railroad stations along the northern route. It was intended at the time that the cabins were to serve as fishing cottages for Warren and his fishing buddies. However, within two years the home in Bay View was sold and the senior Stimsons and their five children were spending their summers on the island in Douglas Lake. (The cabin on the northern tip of the island had been built one year earlier by the Fitzgeralds, a then-prominent Michigan political family who purportedly hosted a Douglas Lake visit from Teddy Roosevelt, memorialized in a newspaper clipping that adorned the walls of that cabin until the early 1950s).

A marvelous series of photographs taken that next summer showcase early Douglas Lake life from that era.

THE CAT LADIES OF PELLIS ISLAND:

Among Warren Stimson’s children were two daughters named Blanche (“Aunt Bun”) and Dorothy (“Aunt Dot”), born in approximately 1882 and 1895, respectively. A circa 1900 photograph that foreshadows the years ahead shows a five-year-old Dorothy tightly

clutching three cats as she stands barefoot at the very end of the dock at Douglas Lake.

Though the years, Blanche and Dorothy continued to spend their summers at the Lake, their love for cats progressing unabated. Following the deaths of Warren and their mother, Gertrude, the two sisters inherited both “South Cottage” and “North Cottage”, eventually staying in the larger “South Cottage” until turning it over to the next generation of Stimsons in 1966.

Each year, they would arrive, bearing boxes and crates of cats, which they unloaded from their sizeable station wagon and placed on the boat that would transport them over to the island. Trip after trip would be required to ferry the yowling cats, still confined to their boxes, to the lake cabin, where they would be gratefully released to wander freely for the entire summer. The sisters would arrive with at least 20 cats each year, one summer reaching the astonishing maximum of 23 cats. Neighbors along the shoreline would line up to watch the incredible parade of feline travelers. The process was even more interesting at the end of the summer, when Blanche and Dorothy would be wandering up and down the island paths calling the names of straggling cats who were totally uninterested in being confined once again to their miniature prisons for transport back to the mainland on their homeward journey.

The Cat Ladies were generous hostesses. Every week or so, from the mid-1940s on, I would walk out to the far tip of the island, passing the Stimson Cottage along the way. Long before arriving at their door, I would encounter cats in the woods and along the pathways, stalking mice and birds or just lying in sunny patches. The cat population grew a bit denser the closer I got to the front porch, with those I had encountered now following me like the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Once inside, there would be cats adorning most available surfaces, on chairs, couches, tables, or on the laps of their loving owners. One of two would have to be shooed away to create a space for me to sit down. Then, sometimes, I would be offered fresh-baked cookies, a real incentive for return visits for a very young girl. They continued to offer Island Hospitality to their visitors until their final summer in 1966. Those of us who ventured onto the island during their nearly seventy years of residence will recall these unique visitations with the kindly but eccentric Cat Ladies of Pells Island.