

# The SOCIETY PAGES

HARSENS ISLAND / ST. CLAIR FLATS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMUSEMENT PARKS

In early America, amusement parks began as picnic grounds. Some were built by local breweries. These "beer gardens" offered the working man an inexpensive day's relaxation for the family, including plenty of open space, concerts, sometimes bathing, and always beer and food. Attendance was promoted by streetcar companies and local railroad and excursion boat operators. Many parks were developed by trolley companies and were built at the end of the line.

The early 1900's were the peak period for amusement parks and over 2000 existed in America alone. The 1920's were the era of the wooden structure roller coasters, each trying to top the other as the best. The Depression, while great for the penny arcade business - as no one had money to spend - was bad for the amusement park business. By 1933, only 500 amusement parks remained. The Detroit area boasted its share of parks with Belle Isle (1880s - present), Electric Park (1906-1928), Bob-Lo (1898 - 1993), Sugar Island (1898-1926) and Tashmoo Park (1897 - 1951).

It is also interesting to note that prior to the 1920s, the amusement park had no special association with children. Parks were for the rest and relaxation of adults and some rides - like the roller coaster - were considered too dangerous for youngsters. It wasn't until the 1950s when Disney opened, that parks catered more to children and attracted adults through their own memories of childhood.

As early as 1915, new diversions (motion pictures) and new mobility (the automobile) made their mark. Many parks closed, and the Depression that began in 1929 forced the closing of many others. By the end of the 1940s many parks were worn down by deterioration and disrepair due to the cumulative effects of the Great Depression, World War II and its immediate aftermath.

**Electric Park** was an amusement park in Detroit that was in operation from 1906 to 1928. Originally called Luna Park, it was developed on land next to the Philip Kling Brewery. The park was on East Jefferson Drive adjacent to the approach to the bridge to Belle Isle.

*continued page 5*



Some say that the first American amusement park, in the present sense, was at the **1893 World Columbia Exposition**, held in Chicago. It was the first to have a Ferris wheel and an arcade midway, as well as various concessions. This collection of attractions was the model used for amusement parks for the next half-century.

## The Society Pages

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## From the President

Dear Members,

As I started writing this, I looked at the number on this message and it is the 33<sup>rd</sup> that I've submitted to our Editor, Michele Komar. It is amazing how time goes by. In the last 33 months however, we have accomplished many things. Some of the newest accomplishments and upcoming things you may be interested in are:

- The new ***Thank-you Commemorative Wall*** in the Museum.
- The ***Buy a Brick Program*** continues to grow and more bricks are being added to the wall.
- ***Tashmoo Days 2014*** planning is well underway and in addition to the venue being moved to the site of the Original Tashmoo Park (Tashmoo Marina), we have added a number of new attractions this year. Details are at: [www.tashmoodays.com](http://www.tashmoodays.com). A late addition to activities is the ***Return to Tashmoo 5K Race and 1 Mile Fun Run***. The photo used in the marketing materials is the greatest. Get a load of what they wore then to race c. 1912! (see bottom of page 4).

Votes are being submitted for the upcoming Directors Election; please be sure to cast your ballot. It must arrive prior to the July Board Meeting.

You have been generous with your donations and pledges... ***what we could really use along with your generosity is: A few hours of your time.*** Please consider attending and working with us as a **volunteer** for Tashmoo Days. You can work at the venue in Tashmoo Park, or at the Museum...let us know your preference.

We have great music and entertainment lined up for Tashmoo Days, don't miss it! I'm personally looking forward to drinking a cold micro-brew in the c. 1900 Beer Garden, a game of chance in the Gaming Hall, and dancing in the old Dance Pavilion. I'm also anxious to hear the Cannon Roar, sitting-in on a Historical Lecture and learning more about our neighbors and the First Nations Culture.

As Salina Pramstaller and Tillie Esper wrote their message, stuffed it into a bottle and tossed it in the river in 1915 as the Tashmoo Steamer was leaving the dock; it said: **"Having a good time at Tashmoo"** ...and that is exactly what we plan to do on Saturday July 19, 2014...99 years later.

Thank you,  
bernard

## Shanghai University Graduate Students Visit Harsens Island and Museum

Seven Shanghai University Graduate Students and one German Exchange Student visited Harsens Island and the Museum on Saturday, May 31. The students are in the US on a program conducted by the Macomb Cultural & Economic Partnership located in Mt. Clemens. The students do internships with local businesses in their chosen field of study and have opportunities for weekend visits with host families in the area who introduce them to American culture.

The Saturday visit was the result of two students who had previously been hosted for a weekend by Nancy & Bernardo Licata. The two young ladies Daisy and Winnie had visited with the Licata's earlier in May. They enjoyed Harsens Island so much they wanted to return with their group. Invited back, they came to *Celebrate Summer Island Style*.

The group along with Francesca Catalfo, Host Family Coordinator and another host family came to enjoy the day with a bike ride a visit to the Museum, the Waterfront Shoppe and the Sans Souci Market for ice cream.

Ken Chion, owner of the Sans Souci Market, when introduced to the group graciously offered the students a 'free ice cream' which they thoroughly enjoyed. The afternoon was filled with meeting Islanders Peggy & Denne Osgood, EJ and Rod McKnight, making their own pizza, a little beach time,



horse shoes (a new game for them), and a short walk to see a herd of deer. They fully treasured the day and did not want to leave.

Harsens Island and the Historical Society now have *Friends in Shanghai*. They will return home to Shanghai in mid-June. At this time they are traveling to visit Washington DC, New York, Boston and other parts of the US before their departure.

Another group of Chinese Law Students will arrive in mid-July and host families on Harsens Island will again be bringing students to the Island for a week to Celebrate Summer Island Style.

"It was truly heartwarming to visit with these students and compare the dramatic differences and growth in relationship between my first visit to Beijing in 1981, shortly after President Nixon opened relations with China and today" said Bernardo Licata. "None of these students were even born in 1981. When I visited then, they were significantly behind the technology curve; and, today they are as tech savvy as any American student with iPads, cell phones and Internet communications." he continued.

"They truly loved being here and they love America and Americans and especially Harsens Islanders", said Licata. The visit can be best summed up in the words of Zhuyiyun (Susie) one of our visitors who stated in an e-mail received after the visit. It said, and I quote: "Hi Mr. Bernard, I am Susie. These pictures are for you. Very nice to meet you and today we all had a wonderful time with you and Nancy. I will remember what you told me about nature. Love you. Love your island. Love America. I think I will be back." ...signed Susie.

**HARSENS ISLAND ST. CLAIR FLATS  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

BUY-A-  
BRICK  
PROGRAM

**Become a Permanent Part  
of Island History Today!**

Historical Society members and friends can show their support, and ensure the continuance of the museum, by paying one of the 200 monthly \$350 land contract payments for the Historical Society Museum Building. Donors will be recognized on - or may designate as a memorial - one of the bricks inside the museum. Of course, they may remain anonymous if they wish.

Make checks payable to **HISCFHS** with "BRICK" in the memo line, and mail to:  
HISCFHS • P.O. Box 44 • Harsens Island, MI 48028

Please provide your phone number so we can contact you about the exact wording you want on **YOUR** brick.

For more information about the program, or to sign up, contact Bob Williams at 248-388-0465 or [xharpshah@aol.com](mailto:xharpshah@aol.com).

The Harsens Island St. Clair Flats Historical Society  
is a 501-(c)(3) not-for-profit organization.

# Be sure to Save THE Date

For more information about  
Tashmoo Days, visit:  
[tashmoodays.com](http://tashmoodays.com)

For more information or to  
register for  
Return To Tashmoo Fun Run,  
visit:  
[facebook.com/PlaceMakeAmerica](https://www.facebook.com/PlaceMakeAmerica)  
or [placemakeamerica.com](http://placemakeamerica.com)

HARSENS ISLAND  
ST. CLAIR FLATS  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY

BUILDING  
THE *Future*  
PRESERVING  
Our *PAST*

Electric Park was originally a trolley park at the end of three streetcar lines. The park's main entrance was dominated by a large windmill across the street from the entrance to the park's boardwalk, which had a sign stating: "The Boardwalk: Just for Fun."



photo courtesy of atdetroit.net

According to Wikipedia, "*Rides and attractions included a roller coaster (one was called the Derby Racer; another featured a sign that said "Trip Thru the Clouds - Detroit's Greatest Ride"); others that appeared in the park were the Big Dipper, the Bobs, and the Dare Devil), Ferris wheel, an interactive simulation of the Johnstown Flood, a Shoot-the-Chutes around which the rest of the park is configured, a Whip ride, aerial swings, various other mechanical rides, live entertainment (including acrobats and aerialists) performing in front of a bank of bleacher seats that dominated one side of the park), a riverfront pier, a coliseum, picnic facilities, and the Palais de Danse ballroom built (in 1912) over the edge of the water of the Detroit River. Another dance hall, Palace Gardens, was destroyed in a May 1911 blaze; the Coliseum and the pier and boardwalk (site of the park's concession stands) burned down ten years later."*

The 1920s saw a series of legal battles challenging the ownership and existence of the park. In 1927 the City of Detroit condemned many of the park's structures as blight and Electric Park closed permanently. The following year, the buildings were leveled to create a new public park, which eventually became Gabriel Richard Park.

**Bob-Lo Island Amusement Park** ran from 1898 until its closure on September 30, 1993. The park was located on Bois Blanc Island, Ontario. It lies just above the mouth of the Detroit River. It was a five-minute ferry ride from Amherstburg, Ontario or a longer, 18-mile ride from Detroit. For more than 85 years, the park was serviced by the *SS Ste. Clair* and the *SS Columbia* ferry boats. They could hold over 2,500 passengers each.

During the mid-19th century, the island was sold in parcels to several private owners who built cottages, stables, and trails. Bob-Lo Park was established as an entertainment destination in 1898 by the Detroit, Belle Isle and Windsor Ferry Company. When opened as a park, the ferry company bought only a small portion of the middle of the island. Early success prompted more land acquisition, and the park eventually covered over 270 acres.

In the beginning it was a picnic spot, with beaches, athletic fields, bicycle tracks, and a spectacular 1878 Mangels-Illions carousel. Over the years it grew into a unique island amusement park, with a midway and dozens of rides.

The Nightmare, Falling Star, Wild Mouse, Sky Streak, and Screamer rides, a Ferris wheel, a zoo, and a carousel were the signature attractions. To move visitors around the island, the park constructed a small railroad. Henry Ford financed a dance hall that was designed by John Scott. The dance hall was the second largest in the world, holding 5,000 dancers at full capacity and featured one of the world's largest orchestrions from the Welte company: a 16 foot tall, 14 foot wide, self-playing orchestra with 419 pipes and percussion section.

Additional Bob-Lo Facts:

- The dance pavilion built in 1913 was the largest in North America until 1925.
- Although adopted by generations of Detroiters, Bob-Lo has been part of Canada since 1787.
- During the 1920s and 1930s, swimming contests were held that went from Belle Isle to Bob-Lo, covering twenty four miles.
- The park never occupied the whole island. Private cottages and government property remained at the north and south ends of the island.
- Several Detroit organizations held annual picnics on the island. Each year the largest gathering was sponsored by the St. Andrew's Society of Detroit, which would often draw more than 10,000 visitors to their Scottish games.

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photo courtesy of Library of Congress

**Belle Isle** was settled by French colonists in the 18th century, who named it *Île aux Cochons* (Hog Island). The Island was once the estate of General Alexander Macomb, Jr., whose monument stands in the Washington Boulevard Historic District in downtown Detroit. Belle Isle literally means *beautiful island* in French.

Prominent urban park designer Frederick Law Olmsted created a design for the island in the 1880s. At 982 acres, Belle Isle Park was the largest city island park (prior to its transfer to the State of Michigan as a state park) and is larger than Central Park in New York City, also designed by Olmsted. A ferry service to the island existed from 1840–1957, although the bridge was completed to the island in 1923.

The Belle Isle Conservatory was built in 1904, designed by noted architect Albert Kahn, and rebuilt 1952-1954 with aluminum replacing its original wooden beams. In 1953 it was named in honor of Anna Scripps Whitcomb, who left her 600-plant orchid collection to the city. The conservatory site contains formal perennial gardens, annual flower beds, a rose garden, and lily pond garden.



photo courtesy of Library of Congress

The Belle Isle Aquarium originally opened on August 18, 1904, and was the oldest continually operating public aquarium in North America when it closed in 2005. The 10,000-square-foot building features a single large gallery with an arched ceiling covered in green glass tile to evoke an underwater feeling.

William Livingstone Memorial Light is the only marble lighthouse in the United States and is on the east end of the island. It was named for the president of the *Lakes Carriers Association* who advocated safety and navigational improvements in Great Lakes shipping.

Riding stables were housed in an 1863 market building that was relocated from Detroit to the island in the 1890s. The building was disassembled and stored by Greenfield Village in the 2000s. The park headquarters and police station are each located in 1860s houses.

At one time, the island housed a canoe concession, which provided rental canoes and stored private ones. Canoe riders often stopped at the nearby Remick Band Shell which hosted regular concerts from 1950 to 1980. The band shell replaced an earlier facility and provided more amenities for performers and audience members. It was constructed at a cost of \$150,000 and was named for resident Jerome H. Remick, who owned the world's largest music publishing house at the time.

The Detroit Boat Club rented facilities on the island from 1902 until 1996. The marina and building are currently closed and only rowing activities still occur at that location. The Belle Isle Golf Course opened in 1922. The Detroit Yacht Club building dates to 1923 and still houses an active private sailing club also offers swimming and other country club amenities. The Scott Fountain was finished in 1925.

Today, Belle Isle is host to many events and offers many recreational options including a nature center, wheelchair accessible nature trail, fishing piers, playgrounds, picnic shelters, and handball, tennis and basketball courts, baseball fields, and cricket pitch.

**Sugar Island**, named for a stand of sugar maple trees, is a parcel of land lodged between Grosse Ile and Bois Blanc (Bob-Lo) islands. In the 1880s, Sugar Island and nearby Hickory Island were popular destinations where small pleasure boats put in for picnics and camping. On Sugar Island, there were a dance pavilion and a baseball diamond. Beginning in 1898, the amenities on the island were greatly expanded. The dock was enlarged and a restaurant was built. The improved dance pavilion was a covered, open-air space with a hardwood floor.

A number of large excursion boats, including the *Riverside*, the *Wyandotte*, the *Greyhound* and the *Tashmoo*, made regular runs to the island. The last of these steamers is best remembered.

By the 1920s, a large roller coaster, a merry-go-round, a bathing beach and rowboat rentals established Sugar Island as a major weekend destination. The years that followed were the golden era of the park.

That changed on June 18, 1936, when the *Tashmoo* departed Sugar Island in the late evening on a trip back to Detroit. The 1,500 passengers had no reason to doubt that the vessel would arrive at its intended destination. Not long after leaving the dock, the *Tashmoo* struck a submerged rock. A 30-foot gash in the hull meant that the ship was in imminent danger of sinking. As the ship neared the Canadian shore, it began to list in the water but managed to dock at a coal wharf above Amherstburg. It quickly sank into the muck in 18 feet of water and never sailed again.

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By the 1940s, the park on Sugar Island fell into disrepair and was overshadowed by nearby Bob-Lo Amusement Park. Various plans to revitalize the island came and went. A group of African-Americans eyed it as a possible resort, as did developers in Toledo. Still another plan proposed extensive landfill and homebuilding. None of these came to pass.

In 1954, the dance pavilion burned to the ground and a visible connection to an memorable past was lost. Today, just as they did 130 years ago, small watercraft beach or drop anchor to picnic and explore.



photo courtesy of Michele Komar

## Tashmoo Park

In 1897, a group of investors called the White Star Line bought land just below Sans Souci for a permanent picnic ground called Tashmoo Park. On June 27, 1897, the steamer *Greyhound* conveyed the first excursionists to the island. The park was a strategic move for them. Hotels, as a destination, were losing their popularity and picnic grounds with a dance hall and all the amenities of the time were the rage. They could accommodate huge crowds and the financial gains were enormous.

By 1905, The White Star Line had 5 ships – *Tashmoo*, *Greyhound*, *Owana*, *City of Toledo* and *Wauketa*. The best charters were assigned to the *Tashmoo*. Benevolent societies, church and youth groups, political moonlights and business companies took advantage of Tashmoo Park and its many amenities.

To transport four thousand people often took 2 or 3 ships working in tandem to get everyone to the island. The White Star Line transported 508,000 passengers that year. By 1907, they serviced over 700,000 passengers plus a large volume of package freight.

There was a rush off the steamer to enjoy the pleasures of the day. Baseball was popular and most groups brought along a roster of players; sometimes enough to field several teams! The park had an athletic director

and provided sporting equipment for games and for exercise. The park boasted a running track and two ball diamonds.

Organized games were popular for children and more often than not, the adults. Pie eating contests, races for men, ladies, boys and girls; sack races and tug-of-war were played for prizes. The prizes were furnished by the companies that sponsored the excursion for the day. Island folk looked forward to and often participated in these events.

If sports didn't appeal, there were rowboats to oar and swimming in the river. A large bath house provided nearly full length dark blue cotton swim suits, stockings, bathing caps and towels for rent.

A stroll among the woods led to a carousel powered by steam. It featured both jumping horses as well as menagerie animals including a dragon, lion and rooster. Rides were only a nickel. In the 1920s other rides were added including a Ferris Wheel and a Whip. There were swings and slides for the kids as well as tandem rockers that would seat two comfortably. There were plenty of benches and picnic tables under the trees to shade the sun and take advantage of the cooling breezes off the river.

Trinkets, souvenirs and postcards were available for purchase. A photographer was on site to capture the day's events. A nursery offered all the amenities to take care of small children and babies; mothers often left the children in charge of the matron so they could participate in the frivolity of the day.

In June 1936, the steamer *Tashmoo* struck an underwater object and sank at the Amherstburg dock while on her way back from a moonlight cruise to Sugar Island. Tashmoo Park started catering to the automobile crowd in the 1930s and 40s but could never recapture the crowds it had in its heyday. The Park went through several changes of ownership in an effort to revitalize but eventually closed its doors in 1951. Currently, it is known as Tashmoo Marina, with the dance pavilion and casino the only remnants of a bygone era. ■



photo courtesy of Michele Komar



PO Box 44  
Harsens Island MI 48028

## Harsens Island St. Clair Flats Historical Society 2014 Calendar of Events

*subject to change*

Members are welcome to attend any Board / Membership Meeting to keep apprised of Society activities and to bring issues before the Board.

### Museum Hours

**July through September** – Saturdays – 10 AM – 3 PM and Sundays – Noon – 4 PM.

### July

- 4th – Friday – Museum open special for the holiday.
- 11th – Friday – **Social Hour** – 6 to 8 PM.
- 12th - Saturday - 10:00 AM – **Board/membership meeting** at Museum .
- 19th – Saturday – 5K & 1 Mile Fun Run. Registration from 7:30 – 8:45 AM. Race at 9 AM.
- 19th - Saturday - **Tashmoo Days** – 10 AM at Tashmoo Marina.

### August

- 8th – Friday – **Social Hour** – 6 to 8 PM.
- 9th - Saturday - 10:00 AM – **Board/membership meeting** at Museum.
- 16th – Saturday – 5 to 7 PM **Annual Meeting** followed by spaghetti dinner.
- 30th, 31st – Saturday, Sunday– Labor Day Weekend – Museum open.

### September

- 1st –Monday – Labor Day Weekend – Museum open
- Lecture Series TBD
- 12th – Friday – **Social Hour** – 6 to 8 PM
- 13th - Saturday - 10:00 AM – **Board/membership meeting** at Museum.