

What a Turtle Can Do in a Century or Two for Sport

HAROLD L. RAY

Western Michigan University

Many Indian tribes believed that the great spirit, Gitchie-Manitou, lived on a sacred island in what is now Michigan. Because of their reverence for the turtle as a symbol of the earth (to be addressed as mother) the Algonquins believed the island emerged from the water in turtle shape. They named this lovely site Michilimackinac. The development of sport on the island was the focus of this study.

From its beginning as an Indian refuge Mackinac's history encompassed seventeenth to eighteenth century French missionaries, a British military presence ending in 1815, a role as fur trading capital (featuring colorful voyageurs and soon-to-be millionaire Astor) until that market collapsed in the 1840s, a role as a thriving fishing industry into the 1880s and a final role as tourist mecca. As early as 1826 President Madison's Supt. of Indian Affairs, Thomas McKenney, posited, "Mackinac is really worth seeing. I think it by no means improbable that it will become a place of fashionable resort for the summer." At least by 1838 it was an established "watering hole" with visitors being turned away due to lack of accommodations. Over the next two decades distinguished guests such as W.C. Bryant and Horace Mann extolled the virtues of the island's healthy environment and recreational opportunities. By mid-century the island had become a summer retreat for elite from Detroit, Chicago and other midwest cities. The expansion of railroads to the Straits in 1881 augmented the bustling steamer trade. When the Grand Hotel opened in 1887 financed by railroads and a steamship company, the ultimate in Victorian recreation and accommodation was achieved.

The second manager of the Grand Hotel, James Hayes, took over in 1890. Hayes told a reporter that excitement should be created at a summer resort, "I think it's necessary to give them something to do." That has been the message on Mackinac Island ever since. Hayes promoted hops, musicals, lectures, and not incidentally sports. By 1894 resort publications trumpeted, ". . . at no resort in the West is so much done for the amusement of the guests as at Mackinac Island." The following summer the popular Samuel Clemens added his wry observations to a receptive Island audience. Bicycling, boating, camping, fishing, ball games, hops, concerts, and even "Cigar and Umbrella" races were available. Historian Eugene Petersen noted that Hayes brought guests ". . . out of the parlor and onto the terrace." Small wonder the media referred to the Grand as the "Newport of the West". Fishing, racing, excursions, and entertaining were all functions served by the yachts of

wealthy guests. In 1875 the island had been named as our second national park. By 1898, with the debut of the Chicago to Mackinac run as the longest fresh water yacht race, the preeminence of Mackinac Island was firmly in place.

The twentieth century has seen a steady influx of celebrated guests drawn to the island. Legislators, governors, military leaders, and entertainers joined Presidents from Teddy Roosevelt to Ford in enjoying the healthy atmosphere. Islander's sportive pursuits have kept pace with those of summer visitors, now termed "fudgies". Residents whose lives spanned WWI, Prohibition, and the Depression years recall a lively pot pourri of dances, fishing, ball games, Halloween pranks and winter sports; mixed with accounts of tragedies, the island has paralleled society in general. Since 1979 organized, seasonal recreation programs for the youth of the island have been provided. With June's Lilac Festival and summer yacht races, the area is a focal point for recreation in the region. The Grand and dozens of other well established hostelrys provide vacationers with a truly special ambiance.

In studying historic Mackinac Island we glimpse a cameo of the social history of midwestern America – in its evolution from Indian rendezvous to one of the famed resorts in the nation. One nineteenth century observer put it in perspective thusly, ". . . there is no place in the world possessing half the attractions as Mackinac and its surroundings, while the 'Mackinac trout', with the 'Mackinac boat', and the 'Mackinac blanket', are famous over the world." Because of the special significance of the 100th anniversary of the Grand Hotel with its celebrated porch, and the 1987 sesquicentennial of statehood, this was a timely look at the "Jewel of the Straits". Mackinac Island has earned the special sobriquet, the Great Turtle, where sport indeed is found.