

Toronto Islands taste fall's serenity



Lakeshore lesson: Teacher Sofi Schab helps students Christina Chiu and Michelle Araujo on a Toronto Islands beach. The island Public/Natural Science School, run by the Toronto

Board of Education, has about 150 regular students, and another 70 students from Toronto schools come to stay at the dormitories for a week of science and nature programs.

By Dana Flavelle Toronto Star

The Toronto Island Ferry Service terminal at the foot of Bay St. looks deserted. The next boat doesn't leave this gray, blustery place for another 1½ hours.

Gone are the long line-ups of noisy children with sticky ice-cream cones and the teenagers in sunglasses and loud shirts headed for the Islands' beaches amusement rides and bicycle paths.

The only people who venture across the water these days are the hardy folk who live there and a handful of nature lovers heading for off-season serenity.

When the hordes of fairweather friends have gone, Metro's largest park reverts to another life. It becomes a vast wilderness retreat known only to the small community of people who live or work there.

On a hot July day, the five ferries will carry 10,000 to 15,000 people to the islands, Metro ferry traffic supervisor Gary Sims said. But when it's too cold for a

picnic at the beach, when Centreville becomes a ghost town, the number of passengers falls to between 1,000 and 2,000 a day.

"It's mainly a service for the people who live there," Sims said. "About the only tourists who go across (now) are people who use Hanlan's Point or Centre Island. You see them going over with cameras and binoculars."

Nature school

Most of the weekday activity takes place at the Island Public/Natural Science School. Run by the Toronto Board of Education, the school has about 150 regular students, half from the Islands and half from mainland waterfront developments like Harbour Square.

Another 70 students from schools throughout Toronto come to stay at the dormitories for a week of science and nature programs.

"The school is at its limit now. We're turning people away," said Bob MacLean, vice-principal and

sometimes bus driver. "We wear many different hats," he explained as he drove a group of students to the ferry dock.

The only other signs of life are those connected with the 250 homes on Ward's and Algonquin Islands.

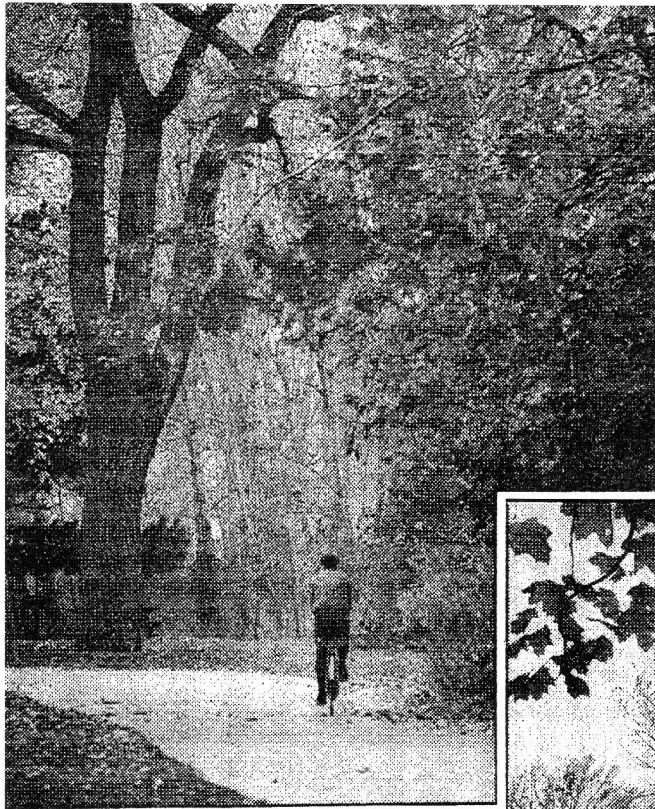
But even this quaint community, with its colorful houses nestled among a tangle of foliage, is quiet.

The residents share a willingness to live within a ferry schedule in a village with few conveniences, not even a grocery store.

You can spot them boarding the Ongiara — the only ferry that remains in service at this time of year — by their bicycles, bags of groceries and friendly demeanor.

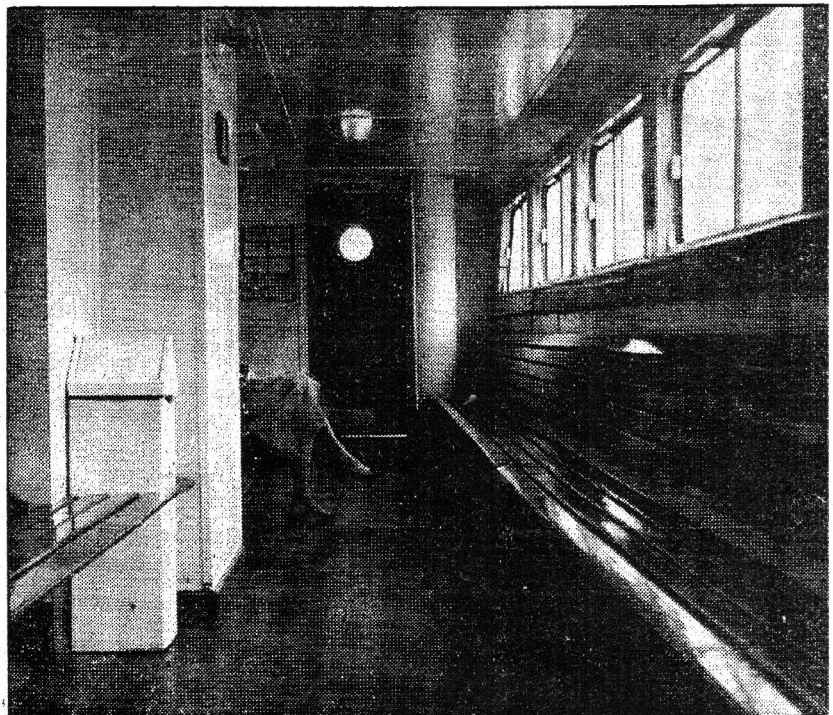
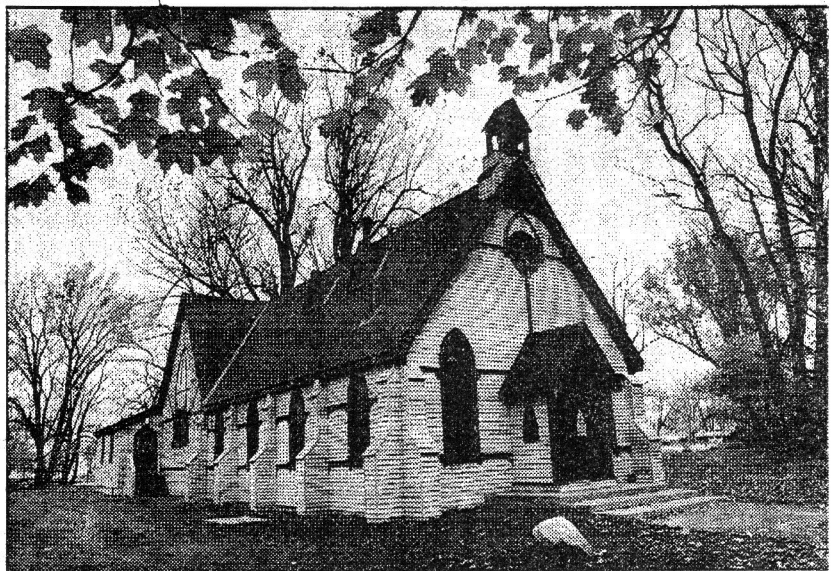
TORONTO STAR

Toronto Islands taste fall's serenity



PHOTOGRAPHY BY
BORIS SPREMO

Harbor haven: A cyclist, above, enjoys God's handywork, while visitors can give more formal thanks at The Island Church, right, circa 1884.



Lonely passage: A sole passenger, above, rides the ferry. On a hot July day, the five ferries carry up to 15,000, but it's now down to as low as 1,000. Fireman Cliff Patterson, left, looks in vain for an emergency for the island firehall.

Toronto Islands taste fall's serenity

'You borrow'

"When you run out of things, you borrow from a neighbor and return it next time you go shopping," said islander Jim Jones.

Like many residents, Jones has lived here most of his life. His father was a clown at the now-defunct amusement centre on Hanlan's Point and his mother ran the box office.

They do have a church, a police station and a firehall, where Capt. William Wainwright and his two-man crew wait for an emergency. Sometimes it's a rabid raccoon or dog that's fallen through the ice.

"You still get some tourists," said Kathy Gallagher, who drives the tram from Hanlan's Point to Centre Island.

"A lot of people come here who haven't been here in 20 years. One guy asked us where a certain street was. He wanted to see if the tree was still there because it had his name — him and his girlfriend's — carved in it."

The tram's route winds past boats waiting to be hoisted out of the water, empty tennis courts and a lone fisherman.

And everything is smothered under a blanket of leaves.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
BORIS SPREMO