

Living our history

Toronto Island: Paradise for all

On the hot sweltering Tuesday afternoon of Aug. 10, 1909, passengers lining up waiting for the ferry to take them to the coolness of the Toronto Islands could see a thin line of smoke rise above their destination out at Hanlan's Point.

That one stream of smoke would develop into a blaze of such intense proportions that at its finality would not only see the destruction of the historic Hanlan's Hotel but also mark the beginning of the end of the old way of doing things out on the Island.

In the days before air conditioning and weekend trips for some to the cottage, Hanlan's Hotel was the place to while away the last of the idyllic Victorian summers.

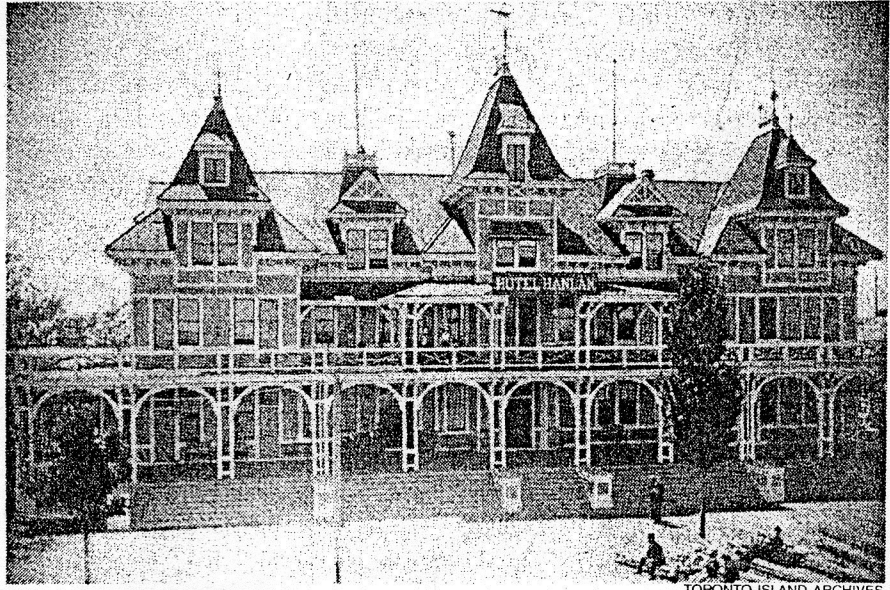
It stood facing the lagoon a short walk from the present day ferry docks and for time also known as Bailey's Hotel.

Today there's an historic plaque just west as you step off the ferry to the famous Toronto-born sculler Ned Hanlan who in 1880 won the World Rowing Championship.

Hanlan's Point, once a thin peninsula surrounded by water that the British had named Gibraltar Point upon their arrival back in the 1700s, is now named for Ned's father John, an Irish immigrant who first went to Owen Sound before arriving in Toronto.

Hanlan's today is the least built up and most pastoral part of the Toronto's Islands mostly because everything that at one time stood there was burnt, demolished or moved away.

In 1865 during a severe storm John, his wife Ann and their two



TORONTO ISLAND ARCHIVES

sons Ned and Ed were huddled in their small island shack at the eastern end when a huge wave washed them—home and all—into Lake Ontario. They floated safely to the western end where John, undeterred, started to rebuild a new home on land that the next year would be officially deeded to him.

A few years later he built his first hotel and by 1880 Hanlan's Hotel, now newly enlarged, became the centre of Island life. It would be where Islanders picked up their mail, held their first church service and had the first Island telephone installed.

Ned Hanlan began rowing when he was just a kid. He would row across the bay to St. Lawrence Market to sell his fish that he caught that morning.

He soon realized that if he could be the first to arrive at the Market his fish would therefore be the freshest. Soon, a legend was born.

**BRUCE
BELL**

conscience. Instead it's vanished and replaced with the ongoing debate of "Whatever became of our Canadian Identity?"

...Algonquin Island was a sandy desert in the 1940s and until the trees finally grew

On the other hand ask any Canadian kid who Babe Ruth is and you get a completely different answer.

After the great fire the hotel was never rebuilt but the wooden baseball stadium next to it was—this time in concrete—and on Sept. 5, 1914 a young Babe Ruth hit his first professional home run in the newly opened Hanlan's Point stadium.

On a small rock hidden behind some bushes by the fence that separates the airport from the ferry docks there is a plaque mounted on a rock commemorating this event.

Using an 1910 city map I counted 122 cottages lining its beach—that one day would evolve into the Island Airport—and it also held the giant baseball stadium, two merry go-rounds, a board walk, a theatre and a dance pavilion. Islanders even had a bowling alley.

By the time Sunnyside Amusement Park opened in the city's west end in 1922, Hanlan's

Point was in a steady decline.

In 1937 the enormous stadium was demolished and in 1956 the last carnival ride was dismantled.

Today Hanlan's Point (with the exception of its vibrant nude beach) is peaceful, quiet and serene.

Long time Island resident Jimmy Jones told me once when he comes down to the docks to greet friends he can still hear swirling around in his head the sound of the carousel and children's laughter he first heard back in the 1930s when Hanlan's Point was known as Canada's Coney Island.



Ned Hanlon

If you continue up the road from the ferry docks past the languid lagoons and the wide expanses of playing fields you will stumble across an oval shaped clearing about two acres in size facing the lake. There are a few picnic tables and some chunks of cement on its lakefront.

It was here from 1883 to the late 1950s that the Lakeside Home for Little Children once stood. It was built as a summer retreat for underprivileged children mostly suffering from tuberculosis in Toronto's crowded inner city.

In 1891 John Ross Robertson, founder of the Evening Telegram newspaper who lost his own daughter to scarlet fever, built an enormous addition and surrounded the entire home with a veranda to overlook the lake.

Every June these children, some still in their hospital beds, would be paraded in a long line of carriages from the Hospital for Sick Kids—then on College Street—down to the Island docks. In September crowds would form once again to see their return.

The building was heavily damaged by fire on April 22, 1915 thankfully before any of the children arrived.

Robertson ordered repairs and this Island refuge continued to be a fresh-air haven for thousands of children up until 1928 when a new country home operated by Sick Kids opened in Thistledown.

The rambling mansion was for a time used as emergency housing during WWII and by the time of its destruction in 1956 was a housing complex known as Chetwood Terrace.

That patch of grass where the home once stood is the one corner of Toronto Island that haunts my soul.

How many poor and destitute children had laid in their cots on the veranda that once stood on this very spot and gazing out onto the lake wondering if they'll live or die.

But for some it must have been a wonderful place what with cool breezes blowing in off the lake, having grass beneath their feet and eating healthy food for the first time.

A plaque to this noble home that at one time stood on the Island's western tip would be deserving.

Toronto Island was formed over thousands of years by wind carrying sand off the Scarborough Bluffs, depositing it into the bay and eventually taking the shape of a peninsula.

As the centuries rolled on the Mississauga First Nation used the newly formed neck of land as a healing place and to fish for salmon, pickerel, bass and sturgeon. By the time the British arrived to establish the Town of York in 1793, Elizabeth Simcoe wife of Gov. John Graves Simcoe, would take her horse and gallop out onto the wilds of this her favorite sands as she noted in her diary.

...Island house prices range from \$30,000 to \$300,000

In 1858 a huge storm ripped through its eastern gap and thus created an island. Today Toronto Island is made up of approximately 18 lesser islands and of those, only two are inhabited year round.

The first time I saw the homes on Ward's and Algonquin islands my jaw dropped.

I felt I had found paradise. I have always heard of this tiny community and their struggles to survive but it was only last year after living in Toronto for 30 years that I went to take a look for myself.

Two things came to mind as I biked through this exquisite neighbourhood on the Island's eastern end; the first was that I couldn't believe that people actually lived on this piece of heaven-on-earth and the second was why would anyone want to destroy it?

Back in 1883 when Hanlan's was booming over at the western end William Ward built a hotel on the Island's eastern side near the ferry docks facing the city.

It had long deep verandas where the guests could sit and drink to their hearts content even though the sale of liquor was banned on the Island.

Ward's Hotel, the in place on the Island to party as the sun set on the nineteenth century, surprisingly kept operating until it was demolished in 1964.

Near the hotel was Wiman's Baths, a change house that at the turn of the twentieth century was converted into an apartment building. Soon campers began to migrate over to Wards when the city banned camping overnight at Hanlan's.

In 1904 there were 10 campers who pitched their tents for the entire summer. By 1906 the numbers grew until 1912 when 685 campers summered on Ward's.

From this rustic setting a community was born.

In 1913 the site was graded, lights were strung, water pipes and plank sidewalks were installed and by 1916 Ward's Island was laid out on streets looking much like it does today.

In 1931 Toronto City Council agreed to allow permanent homes to be built to replace the tents.

Then came the bizarre restriction that no home could be more than 840 square feet and must be always kept in a well-maintained condition. Hard to do when in theory you weren't really allowed to maintain your home at all.

By 1937 there were 130 cottages on Ward's and by the time WWII came around no campsites were permitted.

The second island to have homes, Algonquin, was originally named Sunfish and began life as a YMCA camp in 1918.

In 1921 the Queen City Yacht Club was built on the east side of Algonquin and remains there today.

When the Island airport opened in the 1930s it was decided to float down 31 homes from Hanlan's to Sunfish Island and by 1938 the city had laid sidewalks, planted trees, built a bridge to connect it to Ward's and changed its name to Algonquin.

My good friend the late Pat Scott told me that when she lived on Algonquin in the early 1940s the place resembled a sandy

desert and remained so until the trees matured that today give the Island its lush appearance.

There has always been a fight to save the 262 remaining Island homes.

In 1994 the province signed a 99-year lease deal with the Island Toronto Island Residential Community Trust manages the buying and selling of homes on the Island. The Trust is to ensure that the sale of island homes and leases, which still sits on public land, does not result in huge windfall profits for the owners. If you want to buy a home on the Island you must, for a fee, put your name on the Purchasers' List.

By law there can be only 500 names on the Purchasers' List and when a lease does come up for sale usually a buyer is found within the first 150 names. Since 1994, 40 homes have been sold.

Currently a land lease is worth \$39,000 for Ward's Island, and \$49,000 (because the lots are bigger) for Algonquin Island with the price of homes ranging from \$30,000 to \$300,000.

Those who have homes on these islands have got to be resilient.

With no grocery stores, banks, pharmacies, movie theatres, nightclubs, all the stuff that I like to know is within walking distance, living on the island while in theory might appeal to me I think I would eventually go out of my

...Island house prices range from \$30,000 to \$300,000

mind. It's also one of the least ethnically diverse communities in Toronto.

In 1960 after the bulldozers razed the communities on Centre and Hanlan's, the residents of the remaining islands were wondering how they could ever be saved from the political bulldozer that not only was devastating Toronto Island but that too of the old Downtown core back on the mainland.

In 1963 Metro parks commissioner Tommy Thompson laid out his \$12 million plan of leveling every single building on the Island and developing it into one enormous park (including a private golf course) by 1968.

However the one building that Tommy Thompson never had any intention of getting rid of—and the biggest place on Toronto Island that if you enter uninvited you may be fined, imprisoned or both—is the Royal Canadian Yacht Club better known as the RCYC.

But it wasn't just a building that Tommy wanted to save; it was a way of life for a privileged few who especially in the late 1950s didn't have to play the survival game. Next month part two of the Toronto Island story.