

North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

Howard Mead, who publishes Wisconsin Trails magazine, reminisces in the current issue about one of his favorite places in Wisconsin: Rock Island, 900 timbered acres lying a thousand yards and a thousand years beyond Washington Island in the cold, clear waters off Door County.

"My love affair with this beautiful chip of land," Howard writes, "began fifteen years ago when I visited the island with writer George Vukelich and photographer Vern Arendt. We were preparing an article about the place, which was then Wisconsin's newest state park...."

Then he quotes from that article:

The island is by turns moody and sunlit, somber and serene, very like the men—now long gone and buried—who at one time claimed the land as their own.

A person has to be at peace with himself to appreciate Rock Island...for to visit Rock Island is to view, through a small crack, the immensity of eternity.

"Rock Island had a powerful effect on me at the time," Howard recalls. "I don't know if George or Vern have ever been drawn back to the island, but I couldn't stay away...."

The very next year, he returned with his family to spend an unforgettable week experiencing the "island feeling"—a sense of aloneness and isolation, a feeling that time itself is suspended. Day by day, the family's usual frantic pace slowed and slowed again. Its scheduled existence switched off as all the familiar sounds of civilization—motors roaring, doors slamming, telephones ringing and radios blaring—abruptly vanished. In their place was a new sound—the rhythm of waves rising and falling, clicking, swishing on the sand, rolling pebbles together or striking rock ledges with a thud. It was a new music for the family, and it was ever-changing.

You should never go back to a wilderness place, Aldo Leopold insisted. It will not be the same.

I think that's why I never went back to Rock Island.

It wasn't a primeval, virginal wilderness. The earliest human settlements in Wisconsin were here, and current archaeological digs suggest the early explorers from the Old World touched these beaches on their way to the mainland.

The Potawatomi Indians were here first, and it is said that some are buried in the ravine below the lighthouse bearing their name.

Legend has it that one of the earliest settlers was David Kennison, the last survivor of the original 24 troublemakers who staged the Boston Tea Party in 1773. The story is that Kennison was 110 years old when he and his son lived on Rock Island in a fishing village. Kennison had four wives and 22 children, and for a while it looked like he might outlive everybody. He died in Chicago at the age of 116 and is buried in Lincoln Park, his grave markers a granite boulder and a bronze tablet.

One of Rock Island's earliest settlers, a John Boone, lies buried in the island's tiny cemetery along with two of his sons. It is said that John was the brother of the famed Daniel Boone.

And next to Boone, they buried the ashes of Chester H. Thordarson.

Thordarson was the millionaire-genius—"the electrical wizard of Chicago"—who bought 770 of the island's acres in 1910 (the remainder was owned by the federal government and administered by the Coast Guard) and who left his mark upon this island as no other human has.

"The tracks of the others," I wrote 15 years ago, "have been obscured by the wind and the seasons and the long years....Perhaps they were then, as we are now, inconspicuous in life with no grand dream to dam the flow of eternity. Thordarson was different. He had a grand dream...."

At the height of the Depression, he built his famous stone boathouse and great hall at a rumored cost of \$300,000. The impressive structure, which stands stolidly today, was in the style of the Althing, Iceland's parliament building. In this great hall, Thordarson installed a priceless 25,000-volume library containing rare scientific and Icelandic texts. The collection was eventually purchased by the UW for a quarter million dollars.

What I remember most vividly about the trip 15 years ago is the remains of a stone fence bisecting the island, upon which cedar posts strung with hog wire were once implanted to keep the island's whitetail deer away from the exotic seedlings and plantings that Thordarson was trying to establish in formal gardens.

I think Chester Thordarson truly loved nature, loved his island, and his fence was an attempt at co-existence. When the fence failed to keep the deer out, he had had great deer drives organized, and the locals from Washington Island were permitted to hunt them. When I saw the island, the exotic gardens were gone, and from the signs, the deer were thriving.

Perhaps the lesson was: To love something is not necessarily to possess it. And to possess something is not necessarily to be loved by it.

If I could speak to Thordarson, I wrote once, I would like to know simply this: Old Man, we have been to your island. There are others coming. To walk the wild beaches. To view the great dark gulls over the timeless reefs. To spend a quiet moment at your grave and tell you how it is with us.

Your markings are here, kept with honor.

We who come now take nothing away from Rock Island. Not a stone. Not a flower. Not a single, solitary dimensional thing. And yet, what we take away from Rock Island can never be taken away from us.

That's why I don't go back to Rock Island. I never really left it.