



notes on summer

Rock Island is one of my favorite places in Wisconsin. I've been there often, but not too often, since overuse tends to destroy a bit of the island's mystique. And one thing that prevents you from overusing the island is its inaccessibility: You must really want to visit the island, because it requires either one longish boat ride or two shorter ferry rides to get there.

My love affair with this beautiful chip of land 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. Bits and pieces of what George wrote still float through my mind:

"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 this 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. 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 I returned with my family to spend an unforgettable week experiencing the "island feeling" – a sense of aloneness and isolation and a feeling that time is suspended. Day by day our usual frantic pace slowed and slowed again. Our 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, night and day, and it was ever changing – soft in the evening, gentle at sunrise, and whipped to a thunderous froth by a wicked northeast wind. We have all, I suppose, read of islands and oceans and the inland seas. But to really experience them – well, that's something!

On yet another trip in June, we headed out to Rock Island on the *Karfi* ferry from Jackson Harbor. As usual, we landed near Chester Thordarson's huge, ungainly boat-house with its clouds of darting swallows. It looked just as it did in 1910. But the island looked unfamiliar; there were no leaves on the trees. "Army worms," the skipper told us. "They are eating the top right off the island." And they were! Millions of finger-sized green caterpillars were devouring the leaves of every deciduous tree. While lying in our sleeping bags at night, we could hear them chewing. Occasionally one would fall with a thump, bouncing off our tent. Can you imagine thousands of caterpillars, which had consumed all of a tree's leaves, crawling down over the backs of an equal number of caterpillars, which were climbing up in search of a meal at the top? We were horrified. It seemed impossible that the island could ever recover. We watched our dream world being eaten alive: it was like a scene from an Alfred Hitchcock movie, only it was real. Even today I can close my eyes and hear them chewing.

Nature is indeed resilient, however; when we returned to the island two years later, the leaves were in place. Instead of waking to the sound of worms, we awoke to a world of almost complete silence. The lake was so still that it seemed as though wind had not yet been created. But as we watched the sunrise, the entire lake rocked gently as though moved by a giant, unseen hand. Little ripples began to nibble at the sand. And by noon our island world was filled with the clamor of waves crashing on the shore.

While we ate lunch during another visit, we watched an enormous thunderhead building and billowing higher and higher. As the cloud expanded upward, the children thought it resembled a

monstrous, sinister cauliflower. Deep inside the belly of the giant, thunder rumbled. Huge clouds blossomed and expanded upward, and lightning darted back and forth at their bases. When the sound of thunder was nearly one continuous roar, we broke off watching the menacing march of the clouds to secure our camp. We scurried about tucking things away, covering the kindling and firewood, and looking anxiously into tree tops, wishing we had chosen a more open spot for our tents.

It became noticeably darker and the first raindrops, as big as dimes, popped off the tent and made craters in the sand. Suddenly, as if tired of playing games, the storm ripped open with a blinding flash of lightning and a jarring blast of thunder. We huddled together in the bigger tent, feeling very much a part of the storm. Powerful gusts of wind shook the tent and us within it. The rain slashed down in sheets, and the noise was deafening. If you can imagine how an ant feels just before its stepped on, you'll know how we felt waiting in the middle of that monster storm cell. But for all the intensity, the storm's onslaught was brief, and the drumbeat of the thunder soon retreated. We emerged to watch the storm's black mass move across the lake as blue sky filled in behind.

But it's not always stormy on Rock Island. On clear days you can position yourself to see both sunrise and sunset. Sunsets are best, of course, because you don't have to make the extra effort of getting up while it's still dark in order to watch them. But on island time, with no appointments to keep, you may want to get up with the first tentative bird sounds and walk through the dewy grass in the half-dark to await a sunrise. We watched the best sunset ever from the dock in front of Chester Thordarson's Viking hall. The sun seemed to be a big red hot penny, dropping slowly, closer and closer to the lake. As the fiery sun met the horizon and seemed to slip into the water, you could almost hear it sizzle.

Rock Island is one of those unforgettable, hard-to-get-to places. You know, now that I've written all this, and shared my favorite island with you, I'm a bit sad. Please, don't all of you go there at once! But when you do go, I'd like to hear from you. I'd like to know that our island hasn't been devoured by caterpillars or washed away by waves.

Howard McCall