

Rock island

a place without people

by George Vukelich

The chip of land called Rock Island consists of 900 timbered acres lying a thousand yards—and a thousand years—beyond Washington Island in the cold, clear waters off Door County. 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.

The beaches and bluffs of Rock Island have witnessed the campfires of fur trappers and fishermen, illiterate Indians and a millionaire who was a genius. The men have all vanished, as have their fires and their footprints, but the island remains. The truth of the matter

is that no man owns Rock Island. Perhaps no man can. And perhaps no man should.

A person has to be at peace with himself to appreciate Rock Island. If he is not, the island will have an unsettling, perhaps even a frightening effect on him, for to visit Rock Island is to view, through a small crack, the immensity of eternity. There are the ageless herring gulls wheeling and crying in the ageless winds. There are the inhospitable limestone coasts scoured in stretches to the smoothness of a poured patio by the wave action of a million storms over a million years. And there are the great inland seas, pulsing and pound-

photographs by Vern Arendt



A magnificent, white, sand beach stretches along the southeastern shore of Rock Island. It was on this shore in the mid-1830's that fishermen built a settlement of stout log cabins. But in the 1850's most of them moved to Washington Island, whose harbors offered better access to lake shipping.



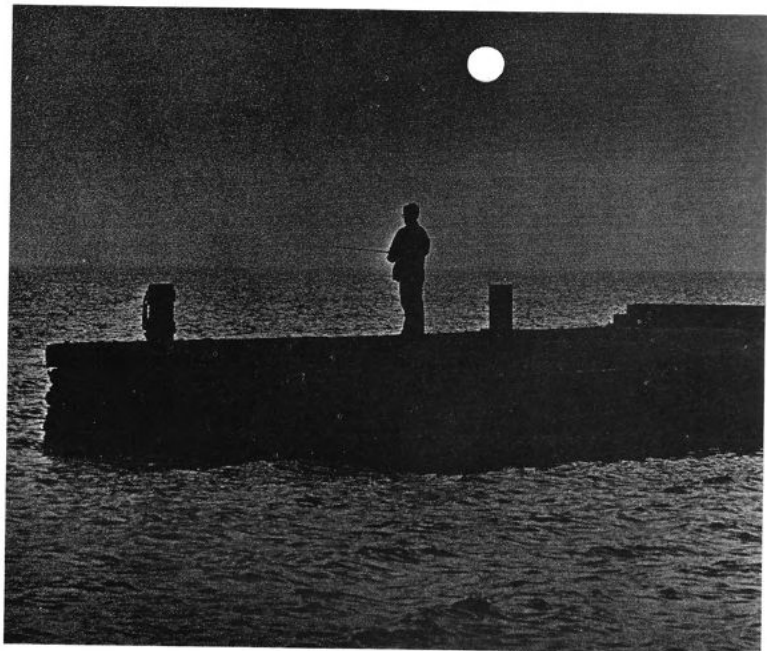
Along most of Rock Island's shoreline layered limestone cliffs rise tier on tier. And today oceangoing ships follow the well-worn inland sea-lane past Wisconsin's first lighthouse—still standing high above the lake on Rock Island's north point.



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The island, also, works its subtle magic along winding hiking trails through the heavily forested interior where fragments of light shimmer through the treetops.

Today, fishermen try for big black bass. But one hundred years ago these waters teemed with whitefish and lake trout the likes of which we'll never see again. In 1862, with hook and line, a fourteen-year-old boy caught seven lake trout and the smallest weighed forty pounds.



ing and gnawing away at the reefs offshore.

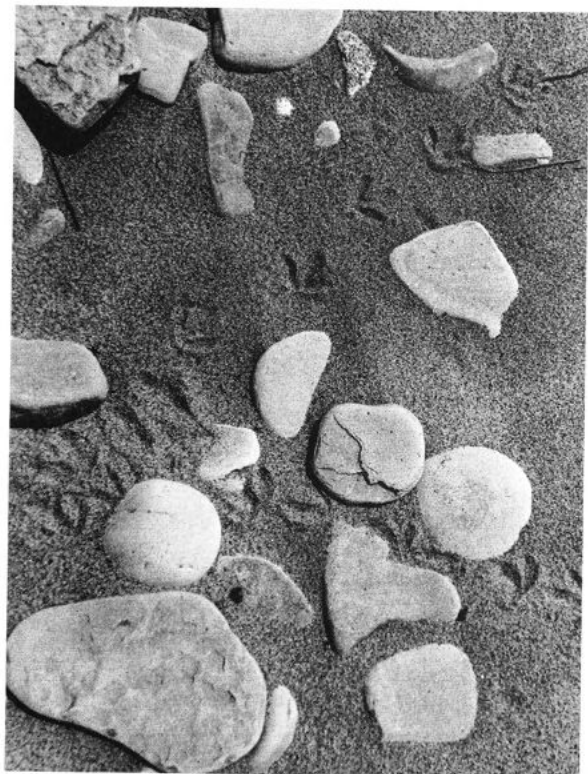
To camp the night on Rock Island, a stone's throw from the burial place of a pioneer and a millionaire, is to confront in the deep and booming darkness a very important truth. You must go and find it for yourself.

The haze had burned off when the three of us—Howard Mead, photographer Vern Arendt, and I—made the mid-morning run to Rock Island on the motor launch "Bounty" out of Gills Rock. We could have waited for the ferry to Washington Island and arranged for transportation to Rock Island from there, but (as Vern put it, squinting into the sun) it was too nice a day to stand around for anything.

We stowed our gear aboard the "Bounty," sleeping bags, tents, food, and Vern's duffel—which consists largely of the army back pack and cartridge belt that he had acquired way back in the Philippines with Wisconsin's 32nd Division. The pack, belt, and canteen cover had been dyed a very unmilitary cocoa brown.

Once we were under way, the skipper offered us coffee and talked of Rock Island. "Since the Conservation Department bought it for a state park," he said, "we're making more runs out there all the time. Scientists and experts. One of them was even counting the plants."

I asked the skipper if he knew anything about the legendary millionaire Thordarson. "Only that he died in 1945," he replied. "He was before my time really. You hear talk. I guess he made a fortune designing electrical transformers and that sort of thing and he owned



As they have always been, Rock Island's beaches are walked by the tiny, shy, shore birds and the raucous herring gulls.

Rock Island. The family stuck pretty much to itself.”

All I knew about Chester H. Thordarson I had read in the papers. I knew that his heirs had sold the island to the State of Wisconsin for \$200,000. The purchase included 770 of the island's 900 acres. The remaining acreage is owned by the federal government on the island's north end, surrounding Potawatomi Lighthouse, the oldest in Wisconsin. I knew that Thordarson had been regarded as an engineering genius in his lifetime, and some called him the “electrical wizard of Chicago.” He held patents on more than a hundred inventions and owned an electrical appliance manufacturing firm.

“What happened to the family?” The question was Vern's.

“Wife and one son are dead. The other son lives in Sister Bay with his wife. He was the youngest. Must be in the seventies now.”

We fell silent and the muffled throb of the engine filled the cockpit. “I guess Thordarson's all alone on the island now,” the skipper said, his sunglasses glistening. He turned to look at me. “He's buried there.”

I took my coffee and went back to the stern, watching the white unswerving line of our wake. When I finally looked up, the coffee was cold and Gills Rock had dropped below the horizon.

Washington Island lay off our starboard side as we skirted the headland in the very shadow of the towering limestone cliffs. We rounded a point and the skipper extended his arm. I raised the binoculars and

looked at Rock Island for the first time. As the minutes passed and the yards swirled behind our stern, I stared at the huge building that dominated the shoreline. As we closed in, it appeared to be a castle, then a boat house, then both. The architecture was gross. It was like something out of Beowulf or the Vikings. I lowered the glasses.

The skipper throttled down the engine. The bottom rose up all around us as he nestled us into the slip at the side of that overwhelming boathouse. We made fast with bow and stern lines and the skipper cut the engines. In their absence, the air was filled with feverish voices of the hundreds of cliff swallows who swirled around the mud nests that plastered one wall of the boathouse from the eaves down. Their droppings streaked the great gothic windows.

The skipper began to hand up our gear. “Quite a birdhouse, isn't it?”

We carried our duffel up the pier and set it down on a grassy knoll. The skipper pointed to a neat, trim cottage to our left. “Caretaker and his wife stay there, but I don't see the truck around so he's probably down at the camp sites. They're that way.” He pointed to a road that ran down to the right. “I'll see you in two days.” We thanked him and shook hands. “You've got good weather,” he said.

We cast him off and the “Bounty” backed tentatively into the channel, then swung slowly around and picked its way back toward Washington Island. By the time



And the deer, whose ancestors Thordarson unsuccessfully attempted to drive from the island to protect his formal gardens — they are still here too.

The ubiquitous, cold, clear, freshwater sea, in turn sparkling and friendly, then murky and murderous is always washing or pounding with an ever-present, pulsing sound.



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we packed up the rest of the gear, the "Bounty" was in deep water, her engines open and singing. We went to find the caretaker.

Phil Peterson is a big windburned man who fools you. Crow's-feet, pressed khakis and all, he looks much younger than he is. Though heavysset, he moves with surprising ease and grace. As a Chief Petty Officer in the Coast Guard, he wound up his career at the Plum Island station not far from here. Now retired, he is employed by the Conservation Department as caretaker of Rock Island. Peterson has watched over these islands for many years. He knows the islands and the waters intimately. And he loves them both.

When the two tents were up and the camp squared away, Vern loaded a camera and we hunkered down and had coffee and a cigaret and began to learn about the island. Peterson told us that the Conservation Department had brushed out two areas for primitive camping and that we were among the first in what promised to be an ever-growing number as the word got out. "A lot of visitors come over from Washington Island during the day," he said, "to swim or picnic or just look around. But you're the only ones camping here now."

Peterson said that the department's plans called only for the two camp sites, the picnic area, and a system of hiking trails. He was also supervising the drilling of another well and rehabilitating the boathouse.

I had a sudden impulse. "Did you know Thordarson?" I asked.

"Well, I knew him, but not that well. I was in the Coast Guard then. And he was here on the island." Peterson smoked and chuckled. "It was quite a place then. You know he built that boathouse during the depression. They say it cost almost \$300,000."

I shook my head.

"I'll show you the inside. The great hall. They say," Peterson went on, "that at one time he kept thirty-five stonemasons busy. They even built a wall. I'll show you that too."

I commented on the boathouse being out of Beowulf. "Well, it's Icelandic," Peterson said. "Thordarson was an Icelander. He came to this country in the 1870's when he was five years old. He was a brilliant man. Inventor. Businessman. He bought Rock Island, except for the lighthouse land, around 1910. You know, there are a lot of Icelanders on Washington Island."

"The skipper," I said, "who brought us out said the Thordarsons stuck pretty much to themselves."

Peterson smiled and crushed out his cigaret. "I would say that's pretty much the way it was." He got to his feet.

I told him I had read somewhere that Thordarson was an electrical genius. Peterson smiled again. "He was a scholar too. He collected Icelandic literature. The University of Wisconsin bought his collection after he died. For a quarter of a million dollars. He was something."

"Will you take me around before we go?" I asked. "And show me his buildings."

"Sure," he said. "I'll take you."

We slept that night, and the nights that followed,



One of the monuments left by Chester Thordarson, the Chicago millionaire and inventor who bought Rock Island in 1910 and turned it into a baronial estate, is this water tower that stands like a sentinel near the site of the first fishing village.



Loading the "Bounty." There is no regular boat service to Rock Island, but arrangements for transportation to the rugged, isolated island can be made at Gills Rock.

below the sheltered ridge of a sand dune that ran along the beach like a dike. By flashlight, I checked my notes and drowsed and dreamed of the men who once settled this land. The Potawatomi Indians were here first and it is said some are buried in the ravine below the lighthouse that bears their name.

Fur trappers and fishermen lived here as early as 1835. Legend has it that one of the earliest settlers was David Kennison, the last survivor of the original twenty-four who staged the Boston Tea Party in 1773. They say Kennison was 110 years old when he and his son lived in a Rock Island fishing village.

A John Boone lies buried in the island's small cemetery along with two of his sons. It is said that John was the brother of the famed Daniel Boone. Chester H. Thordarson himself lies buried near Boone in a grave unmarked save for a flat Door County beach stone.

The story of Rock Island is largely the story of Thordarson, for no other human set his mark and his will upon this island. The tracks of the others have been obscured by the wind and the seasons and the long years. They were men like us, here for a stay, and then gone. 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. I went round his works and his island. The great hall with a handworked chandelier of wood and horn and a fireplace large enough to burn a whole tree. The remnants of formal gardens in a place where formal gardens, in my view, should never be. The remains of a

stone fence bisecting the island upon which cedar posts strung with hog wire were implanted to keep out the deer — they ate the gardens and the exotic tree seedlings that Thordarson attempted to introduce.

I think, and Peterson agrees, that Thordarson truly loved nature. Loved his island. But on his terms. He might even have loved his deer, but if they consumed his gardens and seedlings they had to go, and not the gardens and seedlings. So great deer drives were organized and the deer were pushed into the water.

Today the deer are abundant, and the formal gardens are gone. Perhaps the lesson is this: 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 would like him 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 and our sons.

We do not plunder your island even as you did not plunder it. This wilderness was a comfort to you and it is a comfort to us and to those who will come after us. Your markings are here and they will be kept with honor. Gulls, flowers, loons, and deer are here yet, each living according to his nature, even as you lived according to yours.

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 from us.

Thordarson's famous boat house and great hall was built in the style of the Althing, Iceland's parliament building. Here he installed his priceless 25,000-volume library containing rare scientific and Icelandic texts and dreamed of turning his island domain into a retreat for scholars.

