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Resorting Women: Victorian Era Proprietors & Pastimes

Gina J. Grillo Apr 7, 2013

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Strong's Resort was one of the longest running at Paw Paw Lake, a fixture of the northwest shore from the 1890s-1950s. Photographs courtesy of the North Berrien Historical Museum, Coloma, MI

As I pack a small suitcase for another summer getaway to Southwest Michigan, as I throw in a bathing suit, sun screen, beach towel, sun-dresses, and camera...I can't help thinking about how different this trip would be for a woman traveling the same route over a hundred years ago during the late-Victorian era.

Not only was the convenience of the Amtrak express train from Chicago to St. Joseph not an option, but solitary travel for the female tourist, on train or steamer, was very rare and considered most unsuitable for "the fairer sex".

With the construction of the railroad in 1890, the "electric roads" provided a faster and more practical option from Chicago than prior transport by stagecoach or Lake Michigan steamer. The resort histories of Berrien and Harbor counties were destined for new greatness, as the lives of the areas resorting women were about to change.



Chicagoans poured into Southwest Michigan from the heat-soaked, soot-filled city to restore themselves with a breath of clean country air, sparkling lake vistas, cooling westerly breezes, and an abundance of fruit orchards and farms, all of this virtually a world away from their urban environs. As the popularity of Berrien and Harbor counties grew, so did the ingenuity of a handful of women, who went from taking on boarders and offering home-cooked meals to running small hotels and inns.

They eventually progressed to taking on an expansive role in the success of this growing resort culture. At a time when few vocations were deemed acceptable for women, in destination towns like Union Pier, Lakeside, St. Joseph, Coloma, Paw Paw Lake, and South Haven, local women were finding ways to break free from society's limiting expectations. Leaning into their natural and 'acceptable' talent for keeping up hearth and home, this small but esteemed group of female resort entrepreneurs found ways to manage their own destinies.

Mrs. O.W. Woodward, of Woodward House in Paw Paw Lake, was listed in an issue of "The Resorter". Of her reputation it said, "The Woodward House so favorably known and the credit is due to Mrs. O.W. Woodward, for her place is 'Just Like Home.'"

Lydia Wilkinson, dubbed "Renaissance Woman of Lakeside" from 1902, worked with her husband to run the Pine Bluff Hotel resort in Lakeside. Lydia, along with her neighbor Maud Perham, saw a need and so began the area's first taxi service for tourists, meeting Chicago visitors to Lakeside at the railroad station in their Model T's and offering transport to area lodgings. Mrs. Wilkinson's contributions to resort life in Lakeside were abundant, hosting open air teas and hikes along Lake Michigan's shoreline.

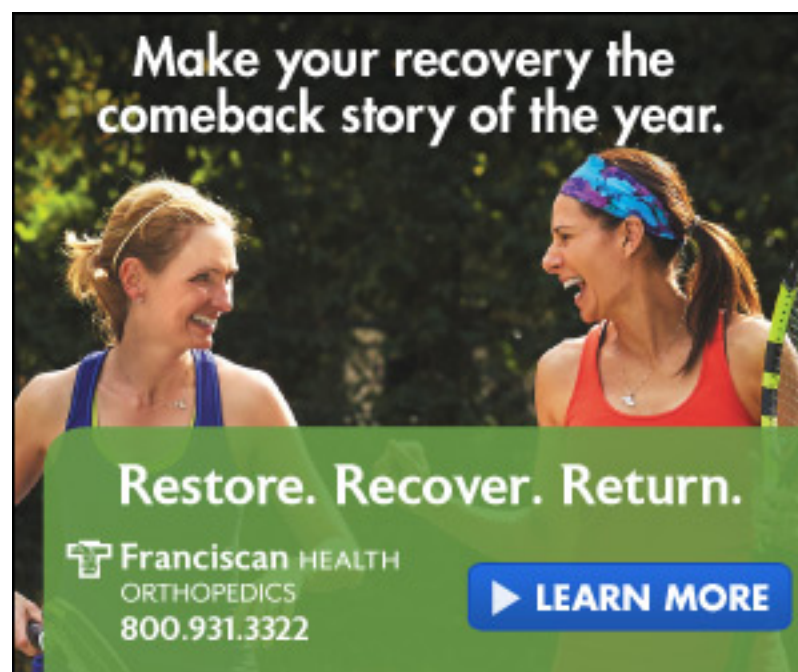
The Pine Bluff Resort would later become the Chikaming Country Club, where Jane Addams of Hull House fame would become their noteworthy first member. Jane Addams sought refuge on the shores of Southwest Michigan throughout her life, maintaining a cottage in Lakeside and returning regularly for personal reprieve from her burgeoning work with immigrants and the poor of Hull House.

Southwest Michigan's coastline was growing in popularity, and at such a rate that the larger resort properties like The Whitcomb, The Naomi, Plank's Tavern and the Golfmore were becoming overrun with summer visitors, leaving tourists in search of a more peaceful getaway beyond what the popular hotels in town could provide.

In an excerpt from her family history, Jane Granzow-Miles writes of the history of the Manley Resort on the St. Joseph River.


"In the summer of 1905 a stranger knocked at my Grandmother's door," she writes, referring to the door of the Manely House, surrounded by apple peach and pear orchards. The stranger was invariably looking for a quiet country stay and a home cooked meal. By the summer of 1907 Mrs. Manley was first listed as having a "boarding house on the Joseph River Bluff, one mile from town, large grounds, good house everything pleasant, accommodations for \$1.25 per day, \$7.00 to \$8.00 per week. Meet boats or trains on request."

In the years that followed, Manley House would become a successful resort property capable of serving upwards of 120 guests. There were other resorting women of course — some not mentioned here, some listed in the September 1897 issue of the "Resorter" under the headline, "Resort Proprietors, Business Men and Men of Influence in Lake and River Resorts". The piece included Mrs. C.S. Jenks, Proprietor of Pleasant View Farm, Mrs. A.W. Rapelje, Proprietor of The Maplewood Hotel, Mrs. Spink, Proprietor of the Spring Bluff Resort. Not listed was Mrs. Cummings, who along with her husband, ran the first lodging house for travelers in New Buffalo.



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With this wave of resorts came the opportunity for acceptable summer pastimes for women, that allowed them to connect more freely with nature and rejuvenate in this setting of beaches, dunes, orchards and ravines.

"We are enjoying this lovely place and the children are growing brown and rugged," wrote a summer visitor to Lakeside.

Beach etiquette being quite different then than it is today, in areas where the water was shallow enough near the shore, it was possible for a women to bathe in complete privacy. The ladies used 'bathing machines' — small wooden houses pulled by horses into the water that allowed the women to change from petticoats into swim-wear without losing her sense of decorum. In 1890, general beach wear for women included a heavy flannel or wool dress, in black or dark color, with stockings and laced swimming slippers and caps. By 1900 it was becoming clear that the clumsiness of the bathing costume was preventing women from actually swimming.

It wasn't until 1910 that women began to enjoy swimming as sport, as the reduction of billowy fabric of bathing dresses and bloomers allowed for styles more practically adaptive to the female form. By 1915, a woman could go beyond just frolicking in the waves while holding onto a rope fastened off-shore, to athletic competition and swimming alongside the men.

Oh yes, how far we've come. When I think personally of my world travels, for me Southwest Michigan is still where I find my best summer days, the fun-loving girlish version of myself, a reconnection to the wildness of Lake Michigan, and a place that leaves me soothed and cared for whether traveling with family, friends, or solo. For this next trip, I will include a special day of solitary adventure, and as the sun reclines at the close of that day, I will order a glass of wine and drink it alfresco. Sitting within view of Lake Michigan, I'll make a silent toast to the magnificence of these resorting women — and I will do this simply because I can.

