

HERITAGE CORNER

Once upon a time, in a land close to home...

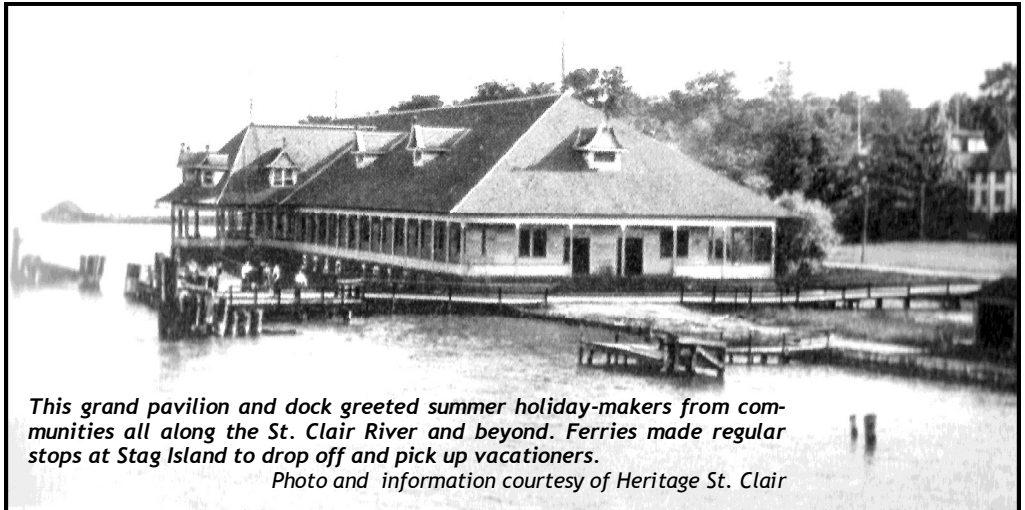
...visitors from another land enjoyed fun and frolic near Corunna each summer.

Around 1900, Stag Island was a premier holiday destination for summer holiday-makers from Detroit, Sarnia, and other populated areas along the river. A frequent parade of ferries could be seen off-loading excited guests at the dock and retrieving those who had enjoyed the elegant diversions provided by the island's hotels and picnic spots.

Much of the credit for the development of the island in the early days is attributed to Nelson Mills, an enterprising Marysville, Michigan lumberman who was able to see how marketable the small, lush island could be. Around 1900, Mills, a Canadian by birth, built a dock and pavilion on the east side of the island in hopes of attracting travelers. His risk paid off and by 1906, he had built the Grifon Hotel, a 200-guest establishment that boasted an elegant dining room, 100 guest rooms, an annex, and 23 guest cottages. Eventually, other additions such as a pool, a bowling alley, tennis courts, a park and picnic grounds, along with amenities like a sewage system, a steam-operated waterworks, and access to long distance telephone connections, made Stag Island a favourite vacation destination. Over time, a baseball diamond, bicycle and nature trails were developed as well.

At the pinnacle of its popularity, the White Star Line, the same company whose fleet included the Titanic, made four stops per day at Stag Island, and the passenger ship, *Hiawatha*, made six trips from Sarnia each day.

The island accommodated some business ventures aside from tourism; fish and garden crops provided income in the summer. In winter, harvested blocks of river ice were stored in ice sheds beneath a thick cover of saw dust to be sold to local homes and businesses the following summer.



This grand pavilion and dock greeted summer holiday-makers from communities all along the St. Clair River and beyond. Ferries made regular stops at Stag Island to drop off and pick up vacationers.

Photo and information courtesy of Heritage St. Clair

The onset of WWI caused business to decline and as the tourist business died off, the land was eventually put up for sale.

The island's contemporary use got its start in 1919 when it was bought by three fraternal associations from Detroit: the Independent Order of Odd Fellows; the Masonic Fraternity; and the Knights of Pythias. The group boasted that it had created the world's greatest fraternal resort. This ultimately resulted in the formation of the Fraternal Fellowship Association which continues to manage the island today through private land owners.

If we look a lot further back in time, the mighty little island's first recorded name was Isle Aux Cerfs, named by an early French visitor before 1800. According to the word of early visitors, the island was home to large herds of deer that became a food source for soldiers stationed at the Fort Gratiot base on the west side of the river. Early writings from that time say that local Native American residents of the area knew the island as Saw-Ge-Too-Yawn.

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More names of local men who served during WWI

Editor's Note: The names of three local men who served in WWI have recently been discovered and will be added to the names currently listed in *St. Clair Allies In Arms*, a book that was published by in 2014 to coincide with the 100th anniversary of World War I. Although the book's editorial staff did their best to find and research all of these servicemen and women, records and information about them were, at times, difficult or impossible to find. It was inevitable that some would be left out. However, for those who purchased the book *St. Clair's Allies In Arms: The Men of Sombra and Moore Townships in WWI*, we encourage you to amend your book by clipping this item and affixing it inside the book. Should more names be discovered and published, they will appear here in Heritage Corner.

Bragg, William, farmer

(Henry Bragg, father)

Reg # 127444

William Bragg, 23, joined the army, enlisting Aug. 2 in London to serve with the 7th Fusiliers. Although he was living in Blenheim at the time, he settled in Sombra Village after the war. He is buried in Riverview Cemetery, Sombra.

Ewans, Tom

"Pte. Tom Ewans, who enlisted from here with the First Battalion, returned from the front 'honourably discharged' as medically unfit for further service. He was wounded at the Battle of Ypres and did his bit well. It is useless for us to attempt to tell his experience but Tom said that he would go back at once if able. He was both wounded and gassed on the same day, and describes the latter experience as terrible. He says the Canadians have saved the nation and he was proud to be one of them."

—From the Thursday, Nov. 18, 1915 issue of the *Sombra Outlook*

Lockyer, Alfred James

(Married)

Occupation: Moulder

Reg # 472092

Alfred Lockyer, 38, joined the army as part of the 65th Battalion, enlisting on June 29, 1915 at Wadena, Saskatchewan. He is buried in Riverview Cemetery, Sombra.

~ Lest we forget ~

MORE HERITAGE CORNER

The mystery of the golden treasure of the Moore Township Her-

Josiah Clark is not a familiar name in St. Clair Township today, but in the pioneer era of 1835 to 1858, "Old Clark" was a fixture in Moore Township. He was a combination tramp, hermit, and recluse. His unkempt appearance and strange clothing made him memorable and frightening to local residents.

But appearances can be deceiving. In reality, he was a harmless and peaceful man who simply had his own lifestyle. He lived in the woods along the Second Line in eastern Moore Township in a strange dugout covered with logs, but his "home" had a garden bordered by two pine trees that were not native to the township.

His comings and goings were unpredictable; for many years, he was seen traveling and visiting along the Bear Creek Valley, then veering off to and along the St. Clair River. Yet he would disappear for months on end. He never talked about himself or his background, but local residents eventually realised he was a harmless soul.

Rumours spread about him being a rich man and one cold winter's eve in February, 1842, there was proof. After he had spent the night with the Whittet family, they discovered he had 82 five dollar gold coins in his possession.

Early in the winter of 1858, everyone in the township

was shocked to learn that Old Clark had died suddenly, in great agony, in a lumber camp on Lot 9, Concession 6.

Although his body was initially buried, the suspicious death was immediately thought to be the result of foul play. The suspicion was so compelling that the coroner had the body exhumed and an inquest was held.

Josiah Clark's stomach was removed and sent to Toronto for analysis. The results confirmed what the community had suspected - Old Clark had been poisoned. His stomach contents contained prussic acid.

Two people, Thomas Simpson and Dr. Alexander Thom, were arrested for murder and a sensational trial, which was reported across Ontario, ensued. However, the accused were ultimately acquitted of Old Clark's murder.

No one was ever convicted and punished for the murder of the Moore Township Hermit. Furthermore, no one ever discovered what had become of his golden treasure. It remains a mystery to this very day.

-This story is a summary of a copy of the Reminiscences of Rowland Whittet, the son of the early pioneers of Moore Township. The original story appeared in a 1914 edition of the Brigid Progress, a weekly newspaper that ceased publication long ago.

-Submitted by Heritage St. Clair

Doors Open Lambton County seeks unique heritage sites

The Doors Open Lambton County event is slated for June 11 and 12 this summer. In preparation for this event, organizers are asking the owners of unique heritage sites to consider participating. This is the third year Doors Open has been held in Lambton County; the 2012 and 2014 events attracted over 13,000 visitors to sites to the area.

Doors Open is a cultural event celebrated annually by communities around the world. The event provides residents and visitors with a unique opportunity to explore hidden heritage

treasures free of charge.

To this end, organizers are looking for heritage sites that are rarely seen by the public. These include private residences, businesses, public buildings, and natural spaces.

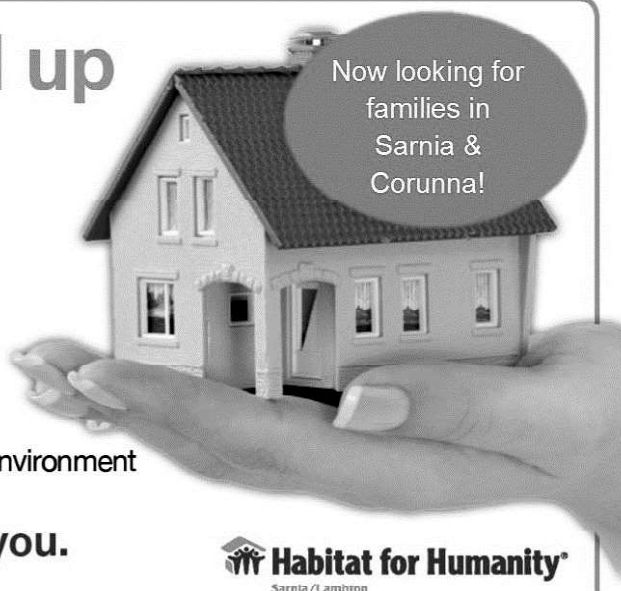
Sponsorship opportunities are available.

For more information or to participate, please contact doorsopen@county-lambton.on.ca or go online to: www.doorsopenlambtoncounty.ca

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