

## **BOBLO MEMORIES THE PARK IS QUIET. THE FERRIES ARE STILL. MOST OF THE RIDES HAVE BEEN SOLD. THE ISLAND'S FUTURE IS UNCERTAIN, BUT ITS PAST IS GOLDEN**

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For people who have been there over and over or even just once, **Boblo** Island holds vivid **memories** -- a first kiss on the boat on the way to the island, the romance of the ride home late at night, midget Captain **Boblo** in his official hat waving good-bye to boats departing from the dock.

On Tuesday, many Detroiters were shocked to hear that the island will be sold off piece by piece. For some, it's been a part of family history, from their first trips as wide-eyed children to visits with their grandchildren.

\* Joanna Gunn, 80, who now lives in Charlevoix, says her earliest **memories** were of church picnics at the island in the early 1920s.

The picnics were always in June, and the picnickers would gather at the foot of Woodward, their baskets filled with potato salad and baked beans, to take on the boats. Girls wore dresses and bloomers.

The island was a big park, "kind of like a city park," Gunn says. There were only a handful of rides then, including bumper cars that "ran around and bumped into each other."

After a day in the park, the group would have a late supper at the end of the day, made up of picnic leftovers, and take the late boat home. At the end of the day, they'd wind up at Vernor's for a glass of ginger ale.

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Florence Karrer of St. Clair Shores remembers **Boblo** as a hot spot for young men and women in the early 1930s. She still has a scrapbook that shows a picture of her junior class at Annunciation High School in a 1931 excursion to **Boblo**. The 11 people in the photograph are all well-dressed, the girls wearing hats and the men in dressy white flannel pants and dark coats. "To us, it was a very special occasion, and we dressed that way -- **Boblo** was really the place to go."

Karrer took her own children to **Boblo** in the 1950s and a few years ago, her grandchildren.

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Former Mayor Coleman Young was denied entrance to **Boblo** in 1931 when he was a student at St. Mary's Catholic School in Detroit. In his new autobiography, he wrote about how that event marked his life.

"Our class scheduled an eighth grade graduation party at **Boblo** . As we were loading the boat to take us to **Boblo** , one of the guides jerked the cap off my head to check out my hair and officiously informed me that black children were not permitted at the park. Despite my Boy Scout experience and all the things that I'd heard from my father and other black adults, I honestly wasn't prepared for that. And I was never quite the same person again."

\* For Ann Hunt, 79, her fondest **memories** of **Boblo** are dancing. "The park had the most wonderful dance floor on the earth. It was divine, polished. It was just beautiful, big and airy." There were live orchestras and moonlight cruises. "If you got lucky and some fellow asked you to go, you'd have dinner on the boat or at the island, and come back in the dark."

Her family made trips every year to **Boblo** when she was a child. Whenever visitors came to visit her family from Ohio, out of town, one of the tourist highlights was always **Boblo** .

\* "Don't get me started. I'll cry."

But Geraldine Neill-McLaughlin manages to avoid tears when she talks about **Boblo** , despite her being a true child of the park.

Neill-McLaughlin, 32, of Amherstburg, Ontario, is the daughter of Eric Neill, a former owner of **Boblo** . She visited **Boblo** regularly as a child, and started working there at age 17.

"I went on all the moonlight cruises, and I heard people like Tommy Dorsey play. That was one of the perks of being the owner's daughter."

Neill-McLaughlin started working as a film projectionist, and worked her way up to director of entertainment.

"Anybody who made faces or made noise, I was in charge of them."

The greatest change to **Boblo** came when AAA Michigan acquired the island, she says.

"The landscaping was beautifully done. Until then, it had been a carnival in the middle of a wilderness. They made it into a park," she says. AAA owned the park from 1983-88.

\* Ted Diesbourg held nearly every job there was at **Boblo** . He started there 20 years ago when he needed money to pay for a set of tires for his van.

At the end, he was in charge of guest services. Over the years he hired hundreds of seasonal employees, ages 15 to the early 20s.

"Every year, you'd see kids come in as immature 15-year- olds and leave as young men and women," says Diesbourg, 39, of Amherstburg.

Diesbourg recalls that **Boblo** 's various owners in the past two decades sometimes tended to make decisions on impulse. About 10 years ago, for example, management decided to create a new roller coaster ride, the Corkscrew, from parts of other rides.

"It came up four feet short, and we had a press grand opening coming up. We had to order the four feet of track from Europe, but it was ready in time." Diesbourg hopes to land a new job in the Windsor area, as a spinoff from the new casino. Summer jobs for the area's young people won't be as easily replaced, he says.

"The loss of jobs for students is going to be the killer," he says.

\* Tom Keiswetter, 48, who now lives in Petoskey, says he only went to **Boblo** Island once, but it still sticks in his mind. "It was a big event."

He was small, a Cub Scout on a trip with his pack in the late 1950s. "I remember the excitement and anticipation of getting to this place. It was our Disney World." Up until then, he'd never been to any amusement park, so he had nothing to compare it with. He filled up on hot dogs and cotton candy, and rode the ferris wheel. "It was like an adventure. For us at that time, it was big time."

Caption: Photo

S: **Boblo** Island meant a day of rides, dancing and a river trip. Tom Keiswetter, 48, says: "I remember the excitement and anticipation of getting to this place. It was our Disney World."

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