

HST 302

12/4/2012

*The influence of Humans on Island Park*

By Kyle

Island Park is a thirty five acre city owned park located in Mount Pleasant, Michigan. The park lies almost directly in the center of Union Township of Isabella County and is completely surrounded by the Chippewa River. After looking at some maps of Mount Pleasant from as early as 1879, I have come to the realization that present day Island Park, which I have thoroughly observed first hand, looks drastically different than the property portrayed on the maps. Through the analysis of several secondary sources of the park's history, multiple plat maps, some old news paper articles, a few old pictures, and information provided by Mt. Pleasant Parks and Recreation, I have come to the conclusion that humans have had a profound influence on the land. The relationship between man and nature is very interesting in the area of Island Park. The land has attracted many visitors for over a century and it is very evident that humans have altered and shaped the land into what it is today.

Before Island Park was owned by the City of Mount Pleasant, the land was owned by a man named Isaac A. Fancher and the area was referred to as Fancher Flats.<sup>1</sup> Fancher's property was a very flat and open piece of land, hence the name "Fancher Flats".<sup>2</sup> Even while Isaac Fancher owned the land it was widely used by the people of Mount Pleasant. The land was used as a pasture for the townspeople's cows to graze. John Cumming, an author of multiple books on the history of the Mount Pleasant area, described this process by saying, "Each morning a boy would pass through the neighborhood to gather the cows together to drive them to Fancher's

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<sup>1</sup> Fancher, Isaac A. Past and Present of Isabella County Michigan. Indianapolis: B.F. Bowen & Company, 1911. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Cumming, John. The First Hundred Years: A Portrait of Central Michigan University, 1892-1992. Mt. Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1993. Print. p. 34

Flats.”<sup>3</sup> As time progressed Fancher’s property was also used by the people of Mount Pleasant as a park where picnics were held and in 1903 Fancher’s Athletic Field was constructed.<sup>4</sup> The field drew many more visitors to Fancher Flats and local schools such as The Normal School and Mount Pleasant’s high school rented the field for forty dollars a year.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the most drastic human induced effects upon Fancher Flats occurred in 1909, when the city of Mount Pleasant bought the land from Isaac A. Fancher. Right after purchasing the land, a crew of men set out to dig a canal across the west side of the property.<sup>6</sup> After digging out this large chunk of soil, a dam was also built at the “downriver end of the park so that the canal would contain slack water suitable for canoeing.”<sup>7</sup> The construction of the canal drastically changed the pattern of the Chippewa River and in doing so the land once known as Fancher Flats became completely surrounded by water and was given the name Island Park. In order to access the newly owned city park, the Lincoln Street Bridge was constructed. Through the observation of an old picture taken of the bridge, it appears that the bridge was flat, low to the ground, and was made of large pieces of wood.<sup>8</sup> This is a very contrasting description of the Lincoln Street Bridge that passes over the Chippewa River into Island Park today. The reason for this is because

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<sup>3</sup> Cumming, John. *The First Hundred Years: A Portrait of Central Michigan University, 1892–1992*. Mt. Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1993. Print. p. vii

<sup>4</sup> Cumming, John. *The First Hundred Years: A Portrait of Central Michigan University, 1892–1992*. Mt. Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1993. Print. p.34

<sup>5</sup> Cumming, John. *This Place Mount Pleasant*. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

<sup>6</sup> Cumming, John. *This Place Mount Pleasant*. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

<sup>7</sup> Cumming, John. *This Place Mount Pleasant*. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

<sup>8</sup> Westbrook, Jack R. *The Big Picture Book of Mt. Pleasant Michigan: Yesteryears to 2010*. Mt. Pleasant: ORSB Publishing, 2010. Print. p.325

the newly owned city park grew drastically in “popularity as additional facilities were added, fields were improved, picnic grounds were upgraded, paths were laid out, and much landscaping was done.”<sup>9</sup> Increased popularity meant that a large amount of traffic was crossing the bridge into and out of Island Park, so the bridge was “replaced in 1915 by a cement arch bridge.”<sup>10</sup>

The altering of the Chippewa River to completely surround Island Park not only had tremendous immediate effects on the environment. The decision also greatly impacted the environment in the years to come. In May of 1912, one of the worst recorded floods in Mount Pleasant history up to that date occurred and the Chippewa River overflowed into Island Park, turning the park into a large lake.<sup>11</sup> The water destroyed much of the work that had been done on the park and reconstructions were needed to be made. Although this was the worst flood that occurred in Island Park, it was not the only time the park was under water. Another bad flood occurred in 1986 after multiple tennis courts were built.<sup>12</sup> The flood waters ruined the tennis courts, so the city reconstructed them in 1987.<sup>13</sup> Since the park is completely surrounded by the Chippewa River, whenever a bad enough storm rolled in the park was flooded and the environment was altered. It is also interesting to note that Mother Nature was not the only one to

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<sup>9</sup> Cumming, John. This Place Mount Pleasant. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

<sup>10</sup> Westbrook, Jack R. The Big Picture Book of Mt. Pleasant Michigan: Yesteryears to 2010. Mt. Pleasant: ORSB Publishing, 2010. Print. p.325. Figure 1

<sup>11</sup> Cumming, John. This Place Mount Pleasant. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

<sup>12</sup> "Island Park." Parks and Recreation. Mount Pleasant Parks and Recreation, 2012. Web. 1 Dec. 2012. <[https://cmail.cmich.edu/service/home/~islandpark.pdf?auth=co&loc=en\\_US&id=13542&part=2](https://cmail.cmich.edu/service/home/~islandpark.pdf?auth=co&loc=en_US&id=13542&part=2)>.

<sup>13</sup> "Island Park." Parks and Recreation. Mount Pleasant Parks and Recreation, 2012. Web. 1 Dec. 2012. <[https://cmail.cmich.edu/service/home/~islandpark.pdf?auth=co&loc=en\\_US&id=13542&part=2](https://cmail.cmich.edu/service/home/~islandpark.pdf?auth=co&loc=en_US&id=13542&part=2)>. Figure 3

initiate flooding of Island Park. Each winter workers for the city would flood the baseball diamond in order to create a large ice rink, which attracted many people to the park during the cold winter months.<sup>14</sup>

Mayor Deuel held office in Mount Pleasant during the purchase of Island Park and he had a profound influence over the drastic changes that were implemented in the environment of the park. In 1912 Mayor Deuel made plans to build a grandstand, several barns, stock pens, sheds, and a race track in Island Park.<sup>15</sup> He finished construction in September of that year and established Island Park as the new grounds for the Isabella County Fair to be held annually.<sup>16</sup> The fair attracted more people to Island Park than ever before. The local newspaper, named the “Enterprise,” reported that the most popular event was the horse racing, which attracted many people to the park and filled the grandstand.<sup>17</sup>

The Isabella County Fair was not the only environmental changing event that Mayor Deuel brought to Island Park. He also hosted the annual gathering of the Northeastern Michigan Grand Army of the Republic in Island Park.<sup>18</sup> This event attracted many people to Island Park and also had an impact on the environment of the park. Island Park was transformed “into a city

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<sup>14</sup> Westbrook, Jack R. *The Big Picture Book of Mt. Pleasant Michigan: Yesteryears to 2010*. Mt. Pleasant: ORSB Publishing, 2010. Print. p.326

<sup>15</sup> Cumming, John. *This Place Mount Pleasant*. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

<sup>16</sup> Cumming, John. *This Place Mount Pleasant*. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

<sup>17</sup> Cumming, John. *This Place Mount Pleasant*. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

<sup>18</sup> Cumming, John. *This Place Mount Pleasant*. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

of 200 tents with streets and squares.”<sup>19</sup> The event lasted for a whole week and was held once a year.

Humans drastically altered the environment of Island Park in many ways throughout the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. In 1938 a public swimming pool was built in the southeast corner of Island Park along with locker rooms and showers.<sup>20</sup> Today this corner of the park looks drastically different because the pool was demolished in 1990 and in its place lays a large cement skate park with many metal ramps and rails, which was constructed in 2002.<sup>21</sup> Many human induced transformations of the environment occurred right around where the stock pens built for the Isabella County Fair used to stand on the northern area of the park. The Timber Town playground was built just below the area of the old stock pens in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> It is a large playground made almost entirely of wood and the ground surrounding the playground consists of woodchips. In 1994, a Vietnam Memorial was built a little bit north of the old stock pens, which includes a large statue and plaques with names listed of local men who lost their lives in the conflict.<sup>23</sup> Another memorial was built in 2005 next to the Vietnam Memorial named “The Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom Memorial.”<sup>24</sup> The year

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<sup>19</sup> Cumming, John. This Place Mount Pleasant. Mount Pleasant: Central Michigan University, 1989. Print

<sup>20</sup> Westbrook, Jack R. The Big Picture Book of Mt. Pleasant Michigan: Yesteryears to 2010. Mt. Pleasant: ORSB Publishing, 2010. Print. p.325

<sup>21</sup> "Island Park." Parks and Recreation. Mount Pleasant Parks and Recreation, 2012. Web. 1 Dec. 2012. <[https://cmail.cmich.edu/service/home/~islandpark.pdf?auth=co&loc=en\\_US&id=13542&part=2](https://cmail.cmich.edu/service/home/~islandpark.pdf?auth=co&loc=en_US&id=13542&part=2)>. Figure 2.

<sup>22</sup> Westbrook, Jack R. The Big Picture Book of Mt. Pleasant Michigan: Yesteryears to 2010. Mt. Pleasant: ORSB Publishing, 2010. Print.

<sup>23</sup> Stevens, Kyle M. Figure 1 –12. 2012. Photograph. Island Park. Figure 11

<sup>24</sup> Stevens, Kyle M. Figure 1 –12. 2012. Photograph. Island Park. Figure 10

2000 also saw some dramatic changes to the environment around the area of the old stock pens. A large amount of sand was brought into the park in order to create four sand volleyball courts.<sup>25</sup> In the same year a large gazebo was built along with a walk down canoe launch, fishing deck, and two foot walk bridges.<sup>26</sup>

The list of human induced environmental changes to Island Park doesn't end here. The park now also contains two large open air pavilions, two modern restrooms, multiple gazebos, a paved river walk trail that stretches all the way around the park, two cement basketball courts, ten shuffle board courts, nine horseshoe pits, three softball fields, four tennis courts, and a Splash Park for children.<sup>27</sup>

It is very evident that humans have had a profound effect on the environment of Island Park. Although humans have made great changes to the environment of Island Park, It is also evident that humans have affected the park by making efforts to conserve and sustain the environment. While observing Island Park I came across a sign that promoted the conservation of the park.<sup>28</sup> The sign lists rules advocating against water and land pollution. It also speaks about protecting the wildlife and vegetation residing in the park. The last thing that the sign advocates for is the use of stairs and trails in order to prevent erosion.

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<sup>25</sup> Westbrook, Jack R. The Big Picture Book of Mt. Pleasant Michigan: Yesteryears to 2010. Mt. Pleasant: ORSB Publishing, 2010. Print. Also Figure 8.

<sup>26</sup> "Island Park." Parks and Recreation. Mount Pleasant Parks and Recreation, 2012. Web. 1 Dec. 2012. <[https://cmail.cmich.edu/service/home/~//islandpark.pdf?auth=co&loc=en\\_US&id=13542&part=2](https://cmail.cmich.edu/service/home/~//islandpark.pdf?auth=co&loc=en_US&id=13542&part=2)>.

<sup>27</sup> Stevens, Kyle M. Figure 1 -12. 2012. Photograph. Island Park. Figure 3, 4, 5, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Stevens, Kyle M. Figure 1 -12. 2012. Photograph. Island Park. Figure 9

After observing the river I noticed that there were some aspects of the river that were obviously man made. For example, there appeared to be many human efforts to control the shape and size of the river. Along most of the river, large rocks were placed where the water met the land to prevent erosion of the land into the river. There is also a high cement sea wall that was built to prevent the water from expanding out into the park.<sup>29</sup>

After analyzing the environment of the park I believe that the decision to dig a canal and alter the Chippewa River could have some profound effects in the future. I believe that as a result of the canal being dug, the Chippewa River running along the east side of Island Park may run the risk of being cut off from the mainstream of the river, transforming it into an Oxbow lake. If this were to happen, Island Park would no longer be completely surrounded by water or considered to be an island.

In conclusion, it is very evident that humans had a profound effect on the environment of Island Park. The wide open grasslands of Fancher Flats once used for grazing have changed dramatically into the city park that resides there today. Humans didn't only leave their footprint on Island Park figuratively, they literally left their handprints. A small path made of cement was laid out and children were able to put their handprints into the path and also sign their names, leaving their own personal marks on the park for the future generations to observe.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Stevens, Kyle M. Figure 1 -12. 2012. Photograph. Island Park. Figure 7

<sup>30</sup> Stevens, Kyle M. Figure 1 -12. 2012. Photograph. Island Park. Figure12