

# Keith Island, Big Lake

By Kay Krans

At one time, Big Lake was considered part of the Manitowish chain, and Keith Island was an important part of the lake. The earliest known owner of the island was Calvin Doriot, who homesteaded on Big Lake and whose family would play a greater role on the chain. After Doriot, James Martin from lower Michigan, who was a prominent cherry farmer, owned the island. A.S. Badger of Chicago owned the Keego Estate on Big Lake, and it is believed that he told Carl Keith about the island that Mr. Martin hoped to sell. Both Badger and Keith were from Kenilworth, Illinois.

In 1908, Carl and Cornelia Keith purchased the island for a summer home for their family. A wonderful furnished home was already in place and to this day is known as the "Big House." The family would ascend upon the island each summer very excited about their three months stay. The island had caretakers through the years like Jim and Louis Blaisdell. The island was about nine acres which seemed like a wonderful place for their nine children to play, find adventure, and learn about nature, swim, fish and boat around their island for the whole summer.

In 1910, Carl and Cornelia bought 53 acres on the mainland shore to build their farm property. There were several people who ran the farm through the years, but the earliest were Frank and Wilda Bovee, while later caretakers were John and Emma Collins. The Keith children were expected to work at the farm and went daily by boat to gather eggs and vegetables for island meals.

Sunday dinner was an important event on the island. On Saturday mornings, some of the children would go to the farm and get two or three chickens, eggs, milk and vegetables. Saturday was baking day, and bread was made for the next week and dinner rolls for their Sunday meal on a large wood stove. Cornelia Keith always made custard for the ice cream to be cranked on Sunday. They used fresh linen napkins with birchbark rings made by the children. The eldest male in attendance served the chicken. The meal consisted of all the fixings, and the children took turns cranking the ice cream maker to create their mother's wonderful custard. The piano was part of the celebration as their mother played old-fashioned hymns, and the children all sang along. Margaret Henning, the oldest grandchild of Carl and Cornelia, stated that "Sunday was simple, peaceful and elegant."

How that piano got to the island is another great story. Just think, the train arrived at Manitowish, the buggy carried the family and piano to Rest Lake Dam, and the piano went for a boat ride on the Manitowish chain to Clear Lake. Then, it had to be portaged to Big Lake and put on another boat and then up the path to the Big House.

The Keith family still enjoys their beautiful island today. With the nine Keith children, imagine how the family has grown over the years!