

The Islands of Rest Lake

By Jim Bokern

All three islands on Rest Lake were part of the original shoreline before construction of the Rest Lake Dam in 1888. Today, only two islands remain, Fox Island and Judge Kersten's Island. The infamous one-acre floating island on Rest Lake was removed in 2008, after about a century of bouncing around the lake.

Fox Island

Fox Island was originally a peninsula that connected to the Camp Jorn property and was likely the summer residence of Ojibwe chief White Thunder. In 1846, geologist A. B. Gray documented, "upon this point are two large wigwams and several acres of ground cleared and cultivated, being the summer residence of 'White Thunder'..." Ojibwe continued to occupy Fox Island into the late 1800s.

In 1902, a new Rest Lake Dam holding back 12 or more feet of springtime water for log drives caused Fox Island to erode dramatically. A 1902 survey crew documented no modern buildings on the island and estimated the newly eroding Fox Island to be 20 acres. Today, Fox Island is just over nine acres.

In the early 1900s, H. E. Fox, a dentist from Ironwood, Michigan, purchased the island and other properties on Rest Lake. Fox visited Rest Lake often, owned an 18-foot gasoline launch, and constructed several structures along the western most point of the island.

In 1926, Fox sold his island property to Charles Nash, famous automobile manufacturing giant. Nash spent \$150,000 to purchase Fox Island, a lumber camp, and thousands of acres of land. Nash developed Fox Island further, building a barbecue and picnic area where storied family cookouts were filmed for family movies. Nash himself cooked for his family on large permanent grills. Nash also purchased what today is Camp Jorn, creating a fantastic Northwoods family retreat with a private island.

In 1947, longtime MW summer vacationers Jack and Dorothy Dengel purchased the Nash estate, including Fox Island, and created Camp Thunderbolt. The Dengel family proudly operated Camp Thunderbolt until 1952 when it was sold to the Lake County (Illinois) Family YMCA. Over 70 years later, Camp Jorn operates independently as a YMCA camp and continues to deliver on its mission: *Building character, confidence and community through enriching outdoor experiences*. Fox Island is prized by the Camp Jorn community and remains a big part of their unique camp experience on Rest Lake. Fortunately, Camp Jorn intends to keep Fox Island undeveloped.

Judge Kersten Island

Rest Lake's southernmost island was originally part of a long peninsula that separated the Manitowish River and Rest Lake. In 1862, original surveyor notes cited, "...a large amount of pine timber much of which is valuable and will very soon be taken to market by floating down the streams..." To facilitate booming logs by steamboat to the Rest Lake Dam and the railroad's Riley Hoist, loggers made a new eastern channel to shorten the log drive distance and avoid snags. Today, remnant river drive logs remain on the southern shore of the island.

Before 1917, Chicago Judge Kersten purchased the southernmost Rest Lake island and built an impressive summer residence, boat lagoon, and other buildings. Kersten also owned a narrow access point on the southern shore of Manitowish River.

Given the growing list of gangsters visiting Manitowish Waters and surrounding communities at the time, local historians continue to question the proximity of a long-time Chicago judge's summer residence to where Chicago mob leaders frequented. In the summer of 1925, Kersten was removed from the bench due to illness and declared insane by a judicial commission. Interestingly, current local excavator, Chuck Kramer, discovered an antique brass hydrometer for measuring alcohol content in beer or liquor while clearing some of the old buildings from the island. Also, a Manitowish River property owner directly across from the island shared the discovery of a mysterious large cement structure hidden beneath a crawl space of his historic home.

The Kersten family sold the island and the Manitowish River access property to John and Virginia Langum in 1955. The Langums also purchased Manitowish River property from the Bart family. They hoped to renovate the island buildings to enhance their experiences Up North. Unfortunately, the buildings on the property were in terrible disrepair; police reports and other documents reveal repeated vandalism, leading to formal complaints from the town of Manitowish Waters. On one occasion, vandals using high-powered rifles shot the corner blocks that served as the main building's foundation. The house shifted radically, knocking the chimney over and into the center of the house. The Langums worked with several local contractors over their years of ownership to repair the buildings, but reconstruction challenges became too much. Initial island sales attempts in the mid-1990s proved challenging, and the Langums offered the island to the town of Manitowish Waters, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and the Nature Conservancy. Property liability, as well as building demolition and property costs, deterred these groups from purchasing the island.

In 1997, Rich and Sue Clack purchased Judge Kersten's island from the Langums and had the old buildings removed. The Clack family collaborates with the Manitowish Waters Historical Society regarding the island property and continues to support on-going historic research. The Clacks intend to preserve the island in its natural state.

Rest Lake Floating Island and MW Bog Islands

The Rest Lake floating island was both beloved and a source of controversy among the Manitowish Waters community. Floating islands are usually bog or swampy areas with some tree growth that become dislodged when a dam floods an impoundment or flowage. Rest Lake's proximity to the dam created the most dramatic water rise on the Manitowish chain. By 1901, the dam lifted a one-acre mass of swampy shoreline with a thick and buoyant root mat to form an island. The original location of the floating island was likely the northern part of Rest Lake between Rest Lake Park and Papoose Creek. The Manitowish chain of lakes has notable bog or swamp islands on Stone, Fawn and Manitowish lakes that are still rooted in the lake bed.

In 1964, town chairman Palmer Hanson reported the floating island broke loose eight times since 1942. Residents then complained that the island was, "an objectionable insect haven and an eyesore." The rogue island spent extended time on the shore of Joe Ilg's resort, the Rest Lake Dam, and several other locations. Pioneer Joe Ilg loved the floating island and started securing it to his western shoreline in 1925 for a fish habitat and to draw tourists to his property. As it turned out, the wind would catch the island's trees and shrubs like a sail and pushed the island around. Big storms tended to dislodge the island from resting on a shoreline, sending the island to a new random location. In the 1960s, residents repeatedly used dozens of power boats to try and push the island, but every attempt was met with failure. Sometimes little pieces of the floating Island broke off and created smaller floating islands, similar to the middle of the Fawn Lake bog island that recently broke off.

By the 1970s, the floating island made its way into the eastern bay by Camp Jorn (Finn Bay), and was secured in place for decades. Once corralled, residents loved the floating island as a unique destination, excellent fishing spot, and great habitat for wildlife like loons. In 2007, the island broke lose again, moving slightly to the north in Finn Bay. The Serbin family, who had leased state property for more than 90 years, petitioned the DNR for a permit to extract the island during the winter freeze, because the island blocked their access to the lake. In spring of 2008, many Manitowish Waters property owners and visitors were shocked by the removal of the famous Rest Lake floating island.