

Summer eviction planned

Toronto Island residents fight for their homes

By BONNIE SANDISON

Residents of the Toronto Islands received their eviction notices effective Aug. 31, 1974, on Valentines Day with no hearts or flowers attached.

The Island residents celebrated, with their annual winter carnival Feb. 16, and 17, one hundred and fifty years on the islands and possibly their last year of inhabitation. A large sign greeting the many visitors that weekend said, "Save the Island Community".

Politics was mixed with pleasure as the residents tried to show how important they were in encouraging the use of the island facilities. The winter carnival is sponsored by Island residents, without the help of the Metropolitan Parks department.

Only two groups of houses remain on the islands. One group of 105 on Algonquin Island, and a second of 149 on Ward's Island. These cottages have received annual stays of execution since 1968. On May 1, 1973, Metro renewed the leases until Aug. 31, 1974.

In an interview in his cozy cottage, Eldon Bennett, a part-time lecturer in political science at Atkinson, discussed the various aspects of the "needless destruction of the island homes."

"The media have been unfair to us," said Bennett. "Radio and television have both been sympathetic to our problems, but the Star and Globe & Mail both hold editorial policies which are anti-islanders. The few pro-island letters to the editor that they run have little effect beside the numerous unsigned editorials."

The Star has often referred to island residents as squatters. Bennett and other residents have tried to find out without success the reason why.

The land is legally leased by Metro and 87 per cent of the homes are occupied year-round (the others are not winterized). The fact that 82 per cent of the residents own their island homes compared to the city average of 70 per cent should, said Bennett, show that the residents are not squatters.

Metropolitan Toronto assumed control of the city-owned portion of the Islands for park purposes Jan. 1, 1956. In 1973, the city officially asked Metro to return the land where the houses now stand.

The people who live on the islands, and the government of the City of Toronto, are trying to save the community. But Metro council, Dec. 11, by a margin of 20 to 12, reversed what the Toronto City Council had supported, 17 to 2, in November.

COMMUNITY ORIGIN

The Island Community developed from a few fishing families in the early 19th century; it expanded rapidly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, (when the three major residential areas of Hanlan's Centre Island, and Ward's were developed), to the era of demolition in the late 1950's and '60's.

Today, the gross residential area occupies 29 acres or 4.7 per cent of the total island park complex (612 acres). There are approximately 254 non-compensatable residential leases on the Islands. The leases between Metro and the residents are for land use only; the buildings are owned by the private individuals, according to the Toronto Island Park Neighbourhood report.

The report, released in Sept. 1973, according to Ron Haggart, was thrown into a delicately balanced political situation. Haggart, in the March issue of Toronto Life, summed up the two-and-a-half pound report as a "product of an inter-departmental committee of city officials, along with executive alderman Karl Jaffary and the two ward aldermen; Dan Heap and William Archer.

The mix of socio-economic and income groups makes the Island community a unique one. The average income level on the islands is slightly lower than the Metro average of \$13,000, per household. About half of the wives work full or part-time. About a third of the residents are in the lower

income group (some receiving welfare), according to the Island report.

Bennett said, "it is ridiculous on the part of the government to push these people out of their homes and force them into the housing market in the city. The Provincial government report declares a housing crisis, so why destroy 254 homes? A number of residents would need assistance from the Ontario Housing Corporation to find a home, there are already 1,800 on a waiting list to receive assistance."

Metro is using the argument that Toronto needs the residential area for more parkland. The "Island already contains 612 acres of parkland," Bennett said.

The Toronto Island Park falls into the central waterfront sector that stretches from Coxwell to Dufferin.

SERIES OF PROPOSALS

The Island report stated there are 1,141 acres of parkland in the central waterfront area now. A series of proposals are now being analyzed which would add to the quantity and quality of present parkland.

According to the report, among these would be: the redevelopment of Exhibition Park; Intergovernmental Waterfront Park (86 acres); Harbour Square (5.6 acres), and East Headland (proposed 90 acres aquatic park).

A number of areas around the islands have not yet been developed as usable parkland.

Bennett said: "A lot of places on the Island are not used by the public. The weeds are cut only to meet the weed control laws."

Even on the busiest summer days, the Islands have a lot of open space because of the limited number of people the ferries can carry, Bennett said.

A spokesman for Metro Parks said: "In 1944 there were about 1.3 million people who used the ferries and in 1973 there were again 1.3 million people who used the ferries. Breaking that down to summer and winter use," he said, "there were 1.25 million passengers in the summer and 59,475 passengers in the winter. Of course, these figures include the people who work at the filtration plant on the Island, and our own Metro Parks workers go over to do repairs and maintenance."

This spokesman said he thought it would make little financial difference to the Parks department whether the island residents moved off or not since the ferries would still be needed. The Island report estimated the loss in revenue on the ferries would be about \$40,000 or eight per cent of the present yearly revenue.

PRIVATE YACHT CLUBS

Private use of public property is far from unique. Three private yacht clubs also lease parkland on the islands. Each club has specific boundaries fenced off with signs stating "no trespassing" and "members only." There are no such restrictions in the residential areas.

Roy Bristow, a spokesman from the Metro Parks leasing office, said the leases for "the Royal Canadian Yacht Club, Queen City Yacht Club and Island Yacht Club all must be renegotiated in 1980. The cost of the rent varies with each club. Rentals are paid yearly, plus additional costs for taxes. The buildings are compensatable, but in a de-escalating program."

Bristow said he assumed the leases would all be renegotiated in 1980 until the year 2001, with increased costs the reason for the new leases.

Spokesmen for the yacht clubs all said the clubs had taken no public stand for or against the island residents.

In a recent poll conducted by Elliott Research, approximately three to one city dwellers opposed the Metro Council decision to destroy the island homes.

In Toronto Life, Ron Haggart wrote: "The eviction of the Islanders became a city vs suburbs issue for several complicated reasons, only one of which is the legal fact that the



Residents of cottages like this one on Ward's Island have received notification the homes are to be destroyed Aug. 31. Islanders have been called squatters by the press.

Islands lie within the city. Many of the suburban representatives harbored a resentment that the city had scratched and clawed to get the new subway to go down Bathurst Street, instead of through the ravines, and the city lost because Paul Godfrey clearly outmanoeuvred the idealists and tree-savers from the city.

"Now," continued Haggart, "the situation was reversed. The tree-savers from the city were trying to keep a community of 254 houses on the Toronto Islands, islands which are otherwise entirely devoted to open space and recreation."

Parks commissioner, Tommy Thompson prepared a report favouring the removal of the residents from the Island, which swayed the votes of a number of politicians.

In an interview last month, Thompson said he simply "is a servant of the municipality."

All he does is work under the "direction of the people," he said. But Haggart reports Thompson's role in shaping the policy to remove Island residents as not merely his duty but the most profoundly effective of all the department heads.

Thompson wrote in a report to Metro: "The Metropolitan Council in its early years set out an acquisition program (for the Islands) which indicated that all residences would be cleared by the end of 1968, but annual or bi-annual attritions have occurred, usually prompted by deputations of Island residents, to the point where today no clear policy is readily visible."

Thompson wants the politicians to remove the Islanders as quickly as possible, since they had decided to remove them prior to 1968 anyway.

Carol Gault, an interviewer on the City Show (Channel 29) working on the Island issue, said, "The removal of the Island residents has been a personal mission of Tommy Thompson's since I can remember."

Gault said Thompson for some "personal reason" believes the city needs the parkland and that enough people use it to validate the removal of the 254 homes. Gault herself is "for the continued residence of the Islanders," and believes the issue has become personal to too many politicians.

ALDERMAN ARCHER

William Archer, Ward Six alderman, said in an interview Feb 21 he wants "the Islanders apart from the Island". He said he has been going to the Island since 1936 and he can appreciate its attraction for both residents and visitors, but, because of increased use by senior citizens and school children, the land is needed for a park.

"People in the central area of the

city need the land," he said. "Metro is ready to go ahead with the financing of the island area. There is project money in the budget now ready to go."

Archer also wants the residents off the island because, he says, to maintain the houses that are there now would entail considerable expense to the residents as well as tax-payers in general.

Archer said: "The people on the island took their leases under the knowledge that if the land was needed for parkland, they would leave. Well now the land is needed, so it is up to the residents to leave the property by Aug. 31, 1974."

Paul V. Godfrey, Metro Toronto chairman, has clearly stated his view of the Island issue. Godfrey feels people who came to the Islands came "as visitors, with no real rights and always with the feeling that they were somehow intruding on the other person's home."

On the question of compensation, Godfrey said the houses "under the terms of the leases didn't require compensation. Many of them are on old tent sites, only 40 feet by 45 feet... Some floated over on the water when the airport was built. Land was leased on the basis that structures of any value would not be built there. And in fact they haven't been structures of any great value. But year by year their leases have been extended."

GODFREY VS ISLANDERS

According to Godfrey, "every house on Ward's Island has septic tanks that would not meet health standards."

He added that "65 per cent are on wooden foundations, 84 per cent are made of combustible material — in other words they are serious fire risks. 17 per cent have decaying floors and 43 per cent have decaying or broken siding. About 50 per cent of the total 254 buildings need repairs costing up to \$5,000. Another 12 per cent or so need repairs costing from \$5,000 to \$10,000. And a few others are beyond economic repairs, since the cost of renovations would be more than \$10,000 — and that is more than the buildings are worth."

The Island report states that "despite years of uncertainty, a substantial number of Island houses have been well maintained and very few are not worth trying to save. According to estimates from the housing standards director, 28 per cent of Ward's and 42 per cent of Algonquin houses are in good condition; another 55 per cent of Wards and 47 per cent of Algonquin houses could be brought up to standard for less than \$5,000; and only three per cent of Ward's and one per cent of Algonquin homes are deemed

'economically unfeasible' to bring up to standard."

Godfrey said there are "plans for day camps for children, overnight camping on the Islands for kids, space for senior citizens, winter recreation facilities, including a speedskating rink."

Representatives from different children's agencies have said the Island is not the place for children's camps. Supervision is difficult in the island setting when the public is present, and the supervision of children on the ferries would be difficult.

But Godfrey insists that "parks are for all the people, not for a select few. Simple equity — the greatest good for the greatest number of people — requires that this principle be upheld. And I intend to provide the leadership to determine that it is in fact upheld — so that all our citizens will be able to enjoy the parks for generations to come."

The present residential communities are not without problems. Some of the gardens are overgrown and some of the houses are not well maintained. More important, however, is the element of "private domain" which probably discourages some visitors from using public areas around the houses. Residents welcome visitors and have placed no signs nor given any cause for this feeling to develop.

The residents may also provide a measure of public safety, because of the continual surveillance ensured by their year-round presence.

The Island community is both a healthy community (evidenced by the number of local organizations, variety of activities and length of residence), and a unique corner of Toronto with its carless streets, natural surroundings and cottage architecture.

CLOSE-KNIT COMMUNITY

As a result of both the pleasurable aspects and the discomforts of island life (the lack of shopping facilities, the difficulty of luring repairmen across the bay to make essential repairs, the winter ferry crossing), and, no doubt, also because of the uncertain political situation of recent years, the remaining residents form a particularly close-knit community.

The residents do not want to purchase the land; they are seeking only longer-term leases. A spokesman for the Island association said if the residents receive the leases it will be under a condition that if at "anytime the residential land is justifiably needed for parkland and the money is available to develop it as such, the residents will vacate."