

## *! BACK GROUND/INSIGHT*

### **POMPEI BY LAKE MICHIGAN**

#### **Rise and fall of Singapore**

It was supposed to be a town that could rival Chicago and Milwaukee on the other side: Singapore, located on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Had fate not decided otherwise Singapore would have become a mega-city. No one could ever have predicted that it was Chicago that indirectly brought about Singapore's downfall. A world-city in the making went under and would never rise again. What are the remnants of this ghost town?

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## *! BACK GROUND*

In 1830, when the Indian Removal Act under President Andrew Jackson was signed into law, the original inhabitants of Michigan, the Ottawa Indians, moved away. The land was now open to commercial development and the Singapore location was selected by the reigning authorities as a place with economic potential. It was situated just like Chicago and Milwaukee in a favourable spot on Lake Michigan. It is a bit vague where the name Singapore came from, but there is an explanation. If anything, it has nothing to do with the immigrants who came from the Asiatic Singapore. They came to America much later. Most likely it was the so-called scouts who scoured the area for good port-town locations whom invented the name. Thus, as well as Chicago and Milwaukee, Singapore was chosen and it was destined to expand just like the then already well-known Singapore in Asia.

#### **Boomtown**

Anyway, Singapore was literally put on the map by pioneer Oshea Wilder. This land jobber from Massachusetts saw something in the ambitious plans for a port city on Lake Michigan. He bought approximately 250 acres of land in 1836 on the shore near the mouth of the Kalamazoo River. Now Singapore was ready to be developed and a flourishing future was in store. Initially, the focus was on forestry and shipbuilding. The woody hinterland of Michigan was a rich source of timber. So sawmills were founded next to the shipbuilding industry and Singapore became a boomtown in both senses of the word. Inevitably, a lot of lumber was cut in the area, but fortunately this didn't result in deforestation. Not yet, anyhow. The settlement expanded steadily. It began to somewhat resemble a town when more industry was established, as well as stores, a hotel, a town hall and a cemetery. Moreover, Singapore is reputed to be the town where the first (state) school of Michigan was founded. Albeit in a wood drying shed with an old saw blade serving as the school bell, but still. And another institution, essential for economic growth, established itself in Singapore: a bank.

#### **Bank scandal**

Oshea Wilder's son Daniel was the first president of the Singapore Bank, operated from inside a boarding house. It was a so-called wildcat bank, in those days a rather unorthodox way of banking (*free banking*) without oversight from the federal

authority. Sometimes collectors still come across beautiful bank notes with the caption *The Bank of Singapore*. Stories about the Singapore Bank are still going around that would not be out of place in a B rated Western Movie. One of the famous stories is the one about the so-called Singapore bank scandal. Shortly after the American Civil War most banks were put on a tighter reign. One of the measures that were laid down was that state banks were to maintain enough hard currency on hand to cover at least one third of the banknotes that were circulating. For Singapore that amount was fifty thousand dollars (\$50,000.00). This was also a problem for the nearby Allegan State Bank as they were faced with the same measure. The people of Singapore decided to lend Allegan a hand by bringing their dollars to Allegan before the bank inspector came to check. But then the money would have to be back in Singapore by the time the inspector was there to carry out his investigation. This practical problem was solved in a typical Wild West manner: after the inspector had carried out his investigation in Allegan (everything in perfect order of course) the banker would get him drunk. The next day, while the inspector was sleeping it off, the Singapore dollars were quickly returned to the Singapore Bank. Ready for inspection!

### **Ellis Island**

The bank scandal is one of the few left-over stories about Singapore. Many written sources are just not there anymore. James Schmiechen, a former professor of Central Michigan University and chairman of the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society, has extensively researched the history of Singapore. He interviewed descendants of the inhabitants of the former town. These descendants were able to tell a little bit about how the old-timers of Singapore lived.

Based upon their stories we could reconstruct that Singapore had (timber) industry, paved roads and a large store which attracted people from the entire area. Apart from the Wildcat Bank Singapore had a hotel, the Astor House, named after the at that time most famous hotel of America in New York.

We also know that big ships were built, including the first steamers. However, what makes Singapore even more unique is the fact that it served as a sort of Ellis Island. From all over America, Canada and Europe people arrived in Singapore by boat. Dozens of families from all over first settled in Singapore before they moved further into Michigan as pioneers. The first Dutch immigrants who arrived in this part of America came on shore in Singapore and would later found the town of Holland, further North up the coast and Zeeland, a little North East and several other Dutch named small villages in Michigan.

All of this could have resulted in a prosperous big city on the east coast of Lake Michigan. But in 1871, on October 8 to be precise, all went wrong. Terribly wrong.

### **Pompeii**

On that day Chicago was hit by a fire that lasted three days thru the 10<sup>th</sup>, going down in history as the Great Chicago Fire. This huge fire (one of the largest disasters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in America) claimed hundreds of victims and destroyed four square miles of Chicago. A large part of Chicago had to be rebuilt which indeed happened rather quickly after the fire. This disaster that had hit Chicago would turn out to be ultimately a disaster for Singapore as well, even though at first it did not look that way. All of a sudden a lot of lumber was needed for the rebuilding of Chicago and Singapore was very willing to supply it. A long time before the disaster it was customary to transport loads of timber across Lake Michigan to Chicago. But now all

hell broke loose because of the huge demand from the ravaged city. Wood was cut down and sawn, as much as one could. The result was that the area around Singapore was completely deforested, with all its consequences. Without the protective tree cover the town was exposed to the always blowing wind, pretty much a constant factor around the lake anyhow. Resulting in massive erosions and within four years Singapore was completely covered by the sand dunes. Nothing was left and Pompeï by Lake Michigan was a fact. Some parts of Singapore were saved during the four years that it took to be 'snowed under'. Some buildings were moved entirely to nearby Saugatuck and the inhabitants of Fishtown, also near Singapore, used timber of deserted buildings to expand their village. Most inhabitants moved out to Saugatuck and by 1875 the once bustling town was completely deserted.

### **Saugatuck**

Singapore was never to rise again. Untouched it still lies buried beneath the sand dunes not too far from Saugatuck. Today it is one of the sights to be seen, even though there is nothing to see. Nevertheless, touristy Saugatuck is very much worth seeing and holds a place in the top 12 of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It has developed into perhaps the most attractive coastal town of Michigan. A number of beautiful beaches, such as Oval Beach, a charming city-center with boutiques and restaurants, and a marina where the Singapore Yacht Club is located. It's one of the few remaining spots to remind us of the Singapore of yesteryear. Next to the splendid Saugatuck Village Hall, in the center of town, is a remembrance plaque for Singapore. That's all that is left to us, because the sand dunes that have buried the ghost town are private property. There are no plans to excavate Singapore. So it is likely that Pompeï by Lake Michigan will forever only appeal to our imagination.

### **Photo Captions:**

Pg. 18 top right; Singapore in 1869 showing the bustling timber industry.

Pg. 19 top: Especially in the summer Saugatuck attracts a lot of tourists.

Pg. 19 bottom: At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Fishtown and Saugatuck 'took over' Singapore.

Pg.20 left bottom: Simple Lay-out drawing 1833

Page 20 & 21 top: View of Saugatuck on the Kalamazoo River showing Lake Michigan on top

Page 21 right top: Singapore Dollars

Page 22 left top: Oval Beach near Saugatuck.

Page 22 top right: Saugatuck Village Hall.

Page 22 middle right: A rare picture of a Singapore house almost covered by sand.

Page 22 bottom: Singapore on the Kalamazoo River.

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