

MY TAKE - Dunelands tell many stories

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Reader contributor

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Saugatuck, MI — Sometimes we need to look in the rear-view mirror in order to make clear sense of how to move forward.

I say this as introduction to a seldom-considered perspective on the Denison (now McClendon) land-use controversy. While most of the commentary about the merits of not disturbing this property has centered on the ecological and biological nature of the site, I propose that we also consider the merit of preserving the site because it is a key part in a series of interconnected stories in human history played out over a century and a half. As we would a Civil War battlefield, I suggest that we consider preserving our dunes because they tell grand stories about heroes and ordinary people, as well as about flawed thinking.

To see the big picture, let us hike south from the Felt Estate, through Saugatuck Dunes State Park and the Dune Schooner property, then proceed along the shore through the Denison-McClendon property to the old lighthouse site, Oval Beach and Presbyterian Camps. Then let us trek east from Lake Michigan to the spaces called Ox-Bow and Mt. Baldhead and onto our beloved Chain Ferry and the Kalamazoo River. Within this space of approximately 2,000 acres, I can identify no less than 15 historic “story sites” that tell something about how we humans interacted, for better or worse, with the physical environment.

The lands within this coastal district tell stories about Indian life that predated white settlers: about trails and burial grounds, about hundreds of birch-bark canoes drawn up along the banks of the Kalamazoo, and about using Mt. Baldhead for the annual “White Dog” sacrifice. We know that enough Indian activity existed here to keep the great writer James Fennimore Cooper living here for some time, gathering notes for his book “Oak Openings.”

Several settlements existed inside our dune lands — warehouses (with a tavern) around the lighthouse and two little fishing settlements on the old harbor. The principal settlement was Singapore, a lumber village buried by the blowing sands of Lake Michigan because clear-cutting of nearby pine forests left the village unprotected. Its exact location is at the riverside, smack in the middle of the Denison-McClendon property, still to be seen as one approaches Lake Michigan by boat. Over time the settlement had three or four mills, a platted “village” with boardwalks connecting a general store, schoolroom, a cemetery, a large boarding house, a number of houses and its famous “wildcat bank.” Singapore was a sort of Michigan Ellis Island, a port of entry for immigrants from all over America, Canada, and Europe. Materially, what lies beneath the shifting sands at

Singapore is unclear, but the hundreds of families who can trace their ancestors to this place know that it is near sacred.

The good news is that at about the time that sand covered the last roof in Singapore, another story was unfolding on the opposite shore of the old harbor — one that proved to be a more sustainable example of human industry, the Ox-Bow Summer School of Art. Here, we see one of the most important innovations in American art history: a place where a new and youthful passion for painting nature outdoors was played out, and still exists as the oldest summer art school in America. With cottages and studios discreetly nestled into the landscape, the artists of Ox-Bow work and breathe in the beauty of their surroundings.

As we move southward into the 300 acres of woods and open dunes to the Oval Beach, Mt. Baldhead and Presbyterian Camp areas, the same veneration of landscape and nature that inspired Ox-Bow drives a number of additional stories — one about how a Chicago social reformer, inspired by Jane Addams and Christian stewardship, founded the “Forward Movement” camp for poor children from the city. Add to this anthology the story of how in 1884 the Saugatuck village fathers purchased the great dune, Mt. Baldhead and then (1936) Oval Beach for the promotion of good health and public enjoyment.

The Felt Mansion, now in the public trust, is the story of a millionaire “preservationist” who reforested the land and created a working farm, not unlike another Chicago millionaire who created a working farm that is now the Belvedere Hotel. The old Pump House along the riverside is the story of a public works project to provide access to clean water and fire protection. Saugatuck Dunes State Park and the Dune Schooner Rides are additional stories of public access that have allowed us to live with, learn from and enjoy our natural environment.

Smart thinking is about regarding our coastal district as many narratives with one big theme: the battle between humankind and nature, showing how sustainable relationships are those that respect nature. Bulldoze one part of the story and the rest begins to fall away. Let us look to the nearby nature-friendly land-use sites, such as the Felt Estate, Ox-Bow, Oval Beach, Mt. Baldhead, the Presbyterian Camps and Saugatuck Dunes State Park as lessons in sustainable relationships between us and nature.

If you have never done so, take a Saugatuck Dune Schooner ride and check out one the most amazing landscape views in America. Then think backward and forward. Just as we protect and preserve battlefields in this country, why would we want to bulldoze our most important historical spaces?

James Schmiechen is a Saugatuck resident.