

# Michigan Time Traveler

An educational supplement produced by Lansing Newspapers In Education, Inc. and the Michigan Historical Center.

## KIDS' History

### Idlewild Memories

In celebration of Black History Month, today's Time Traveler visits Idlewild, a Michigan vacationland for thousands of African Americans.

### Idlewild or Black Eden

Idlewild, known as "Black Eden," in Lake County, Michigan, was once the largest and most famous African-American resort in the United States.

In 1912, four businessmen bought 2,700 acres of land in Idlewild. Racial segregation meant that black people were not allowed in most hotels, restaurants or campgrounds. The businessmen thought that helping black people create a vacation resort of their own was a good business opportunity. They organized Idlewild Resort Company (IRC) and sold plots of land to people from all over the United States.

Black writers, business people, musicians and physicians bought land at Idlewild. Families fished, hunted, rode horses, roller-skated and swam in the spring-fed lakes. Nightclubs featured local, regional, national and international entertainers—Sammy Davis Jr., The Four Tops, Della Reese, Aretha Franklin and Louis Armstrong played at Idlewild. Boxer Joe Louis trained there.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made segregation illegal. African Americans could legally vacation where they wanted. Black entertainers could perform anywhere. The number of vacationers and year-round residents declined. Recently, retired citizens who once vacationed there, have begun to revitalize Idlewild and preserve its historic character.



The photo is of the Paradise Club c.1930. (State of Michigan Archives)

### Idlewild Timeline

- 1884: Twenty-five sawmills exist in Lake County employing 1,200 people.
- 1912: The Idlewild Resort Company is founded.
- 1915: Mrs. Helen Buckles and her husband purchase the first plot of land on sale in Idlewild.
- 1919-1945: Most buildings are constructed.
- 1964: Civil Rights Act passes.
- 1959: 25,000 people attend 4th of July events.
- 1979: Idlewild is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- 1990s: Citizens and business developers begin revitalizing Idlewild.



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### A Vacationer's Memories

Harry Solomon, Yates Township Supervisor from 1974 to 1978, wrote about Idlewild (located in Yates Township.)

In August of 1928 at the age of 12, [I], my father, mother, sisters and brother made the trip to Idlewild. I remember it took 24 hours to get there from Detroit in a Model-T Ford after many flat tires. I remember my sister becoming car sick from the trip. I remember that Idlewild was rugged, natural and beautiful with dirt roads, trails and very few modern conveniences. [There were] no electric lights, no electric water pumps; there were kerosene lamps, no inside toilet facilities. I saw for the first time in my life snakes, porcupine, deer, bear, rabbit and many [kinds] of birds in their natural habitat. I saw my father shave by the

Families swim at Idlewild. (State Archives)



light of the sun. We spent two very beautiful weeks in a cottage. . . . We had many camp-type meals. This was my first real experience of what a vacation was like.

### An Entertainer's Memories

Carlean Gill was a "Fiesta Doll," dancer at the Paradise Club in Idlewild from 1960 to 1964. This is part of her story based on oral history interviews. (Ms. Gill's story is featured in the Saginaw Oral history Project directed by Dr. Michelle S. Johnson, Michigan Freedom Trail Coordinator.)

My Daddy always said as long as I worked and I went to school, I wouldn't have to pay rent. After high school, I went to modeling school, won some beauty contests and attended business college.

One day, a friend, a dancer at the Paradise Club in Idlewild, told me about a job opportunity. I had never been to Idlewild to see the shows, but had seen the Idlewild Revue traveling show in Detroit.

I told Mama they had asked me to interview for show business. She said, "If this is something you really want to do, you can go try out." I went and tried out. Arthur E. Braggs, the owner of the Paradise Club, accepted me.

I went home and talked it over with my Mom. "I trust you, and I know you; and whatever you do you have to do the best you can," she said. I couldn't disappoint her.

We went to Idlewild to rehearse in the early summer. People from New York came to fit us for costumes—\$5,000 and up for one girl for three events—the beginning act, middle act and finale.

A month before Idlewild opened, the cooks, waitresses, band, showgirls, doormen came. Everything was first-class—white tablecloths, best of steaks. At the time it gave you a sense of belonging. Mr. Braggs got cabins for us and paid a decent salary.

Idlewild was fabulous—like New York or



Paradise Club. (Carlean Gill)

Paris. It was where the 'top of the line' Black entertainers went. The shows were directed and produced by Black people and the upper class because they couldn't go to resorts like those in Florida.

Black people went there because they couldn't go to resorts like those in Florida.

I was one of four showgirls or "prancers"—then there were "six ponies"—dancing doing high steps. Then, maybe you'd have a comedian and tap dancers.

I couldn't sing. I couldn't even walk that well. They called me "Nervous Nauseous." My feathers would be shaking as I walked. I walked off time, but ended up on time.

There were matinees for kids Sunday afternoons from three to six o'clock for \$1.50. Kids were dressed up. They used knockers—wooden sticks—instead of clapping.

After Labor Day, the show closed and they "buried the show." The stars exchanged costumes and played different roles.

Then we went on the road in the blue bus—Kansas City, New York, Chicago, New Jersey, Boston, Oklahoma, Canada. I remember traveling to nightclubs. We couldn't go in the front door, and we couldn't go into the audience.

Integration came. I stopped going up there. Idlewild began to die down. Florida opened up. People gave up on the dream. They said, "Let me go somewhere else."

I've been back to visit, but it's not like it used to be. When I go up there I almost just want to sit and cry—cause it was fabulous.



Dancer Carlean Gill. (Carlean Gill)



Idlewild Review Dancers (Carlean Gill)

### Things To Do:



This poster announces the Idlewild Carnival in 1927. (State of Michigan Archives)

Find articles about vacation spots and entertainment. Compared to Idlewild, what is different? What is similar?

Read more about Idlewild:

- Walker, Lewis and Ben C. Wilson, *The Idlewild Community, Black Eden*, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI: 2002.
- Stephens, Ronald J. *Images of America Idlewild, The Black Eden of Michigan*, Arcadia, Chicago, IL: 2001.
- Stepto, Robert B. *Blue as the Lake, A Personal Geography*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999.

### At the Michigan Historical Museum

- Find out about the Civil Rights Movement and Black entertainers in the 1960s gallery.
- Listen to the Joe Louis boxing match on the radio in the Great Depression gallery.

The Michigan Historical Museum is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free.

Hours: Monday-Friday: 9 a.m. - 4:30 a.m.; Saturday: 10 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.; Sunday: 1-5 p.m. Telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. Visit the Michigan Historical Museum's Web site: [www.michiganhistory.org](http://www.michiganhistory.org).



Children from Highland Montessori School study the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s gallery at the Michigan Historical Museum.