Idledow or Black Eden
Idledow, known as “Black Eden,” in Lake County, Michigan, was once the largest and most famous African-American resort in the United States. In 1912, fourteen businessmen bought 2,700 acres of land in Idledow. Racial segregation meant that black people were not allowed to stay in 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 Idledow Resort Company (IRC) and sold lots of land to people from all over the United States. Black writers, business people, musicians and physicians bought land at Idledow. Families fished, hunted, rode horses, roller-skated and swam in the spring-fed lakes. Nightclubs were featured local, regional, national and international entertainers—Sammy Davis Jr., Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Louis Armstrong played at Idledow. The Four Tops, Della Reese, Aretha Franklin and international entertainers—Sammy Davis Jr., Della Reese, and Louis Armstrong played at Idledow.

In August of 1928 at the age of 12, [my] father, mother, sisters and brother made the trip to Idledow. 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 Idledow was rugged, natural and beautiful with dirt roads, trails and very low 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 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.

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

Harry Solomon, Yates Township Supervisor from 1974 to 1979, wrote about Idledow (located in Yates Township.)

In August of 1928 at the age of 12, [my] father, mother, sisters and brother made the trip to Idledow. 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 Idledow was rugged, natural and beautiful with dirt roads, trails and very low 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 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.

| Ad#:857512 Date:02/12/03 Day:WED Size:6X22 Cust:LSJ NIE Salesperson:OHEARN Last Edited By:KJOHNSON Pub:DAILY Tag Line:TIME TRAVELER Color Info:CMYK
| Read more about Idlewild: An Entertainer’s Memories

Carolyn Gill into a “Time-Earl.” The Barber Club at Idledow 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 J. Johnson, Michigan Freedom Trail Commission.)

My Daddy always said as long as I worked and 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 Barber Club in Idledow, told me about a job opportunity. I never knew that I was going to see the shows, but I’ve never missed a show. 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 try it.” I went and I got out!

Arthur E. Bragg, the owner of the Barber Club, accepted me. I went home and talked it over with my Mom. “I trust you, and I have your blessing,” she said. I couldn’t disappoint her.

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

The shows were the first of their kinds. In August of 1945, thousands of people created a vacation resort of their own in the United States. When I go up there I almost just want to sit and cry—cause it was fabulous.

When I go up there I almost just want to sit and cry—cause it was fabulous.

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.

I’ve been back to visit, but it’s not like it used to be.

The Barber Club was a Michigan vacationland for thousands of African Americans. It was a place where the ‘top of the line’ Black entertainers went. The shows were directed and produced by Black people and the upper class Black people went there because they couldn’t go to resorts like those in Florida.

I was one of four shoggles or “prance”-ers—then there were “six puns”—dancing high steps. Then, maybe you’d have a tap and clog dancers.

I couldn’t sing, I couldn’t even walk that well. Then, I called me “Nervous Nanae.” My father would be shaking as I walked off around eight. He said, “If this is something you really want to do, you can try it.” I walked off time, but ended up on time.

There were waitresses for kids Sunday afternoons from three to six o’clock for 55-cents. Kids were dressed up. They used knockers—wooden sticks—instead of cookies.

After Labor Day, the show closed, and we ‘bunched the show’—the stars exchanged costumes and performed different roles.

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

Integration came. I stopped going up there. Idledow began to die down. Florida opened up. People grew up on the dream. They said, “Let’s go somewhere else.”

I cried—cause it was fabulous.

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.

I’ve been back to visit, but it’s not like it used to be.