

A DAY EXPLORING THE THREE MILE ARCHIVES

Committee member, Tracy Munn

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Tucked away on the fourth floor of the AMC headquarters at 5 Joy St., Boston, in an airy wood- and brick-walled space that is lined with shelves full of neat, well-labeled boxes and books, is the official AMC Library & Archives. The Three Mile archives have their official home here. During the past year or so, Becky Fullerton, AMC's staff archivist, has been ably and diligently cataloguing these archives as we have delivered her one after another big plastic tub of musty paper documents formerly stored ignobly in the island's "Dog House". The job's not yet done. Becky and her intern are working on two tubs recently handed over by committee chair, Neil Burns. A final ten tubs are slated for transfer from the island to Joy St. after the June work weekend.

Becky's work space features a computer with its monitor turned from landscape to portrait orientation, evidently to facilitate the searching and writing of records related to whatever materials she is working. On the wall behind her desk hangs a large oil painting of Allen Chamberlain, who was significantly involved with Three Mile in its earliest years, and now watches benignly over her shoulder as she works. She tells me what an uncanny experience it was for her to meet *Jason* Chamberlain in person; how much he looked just like his forebear from a century previous. (She's right: they have the very same eyes.)

Those of the Three Mile archives that are currently catalogued and available for study feature materials from 1900-1916, followed by a long period absent of records, until they pick up again in the mid-1950's. By the 1960's the records become thick and consistent, by and large. I don't know what's in those remaining ten tubs still on the island; perhaps they contain evidence of the missing decades. Becky tells me there is a separate mine of photographic records of the island already on hand.¹

My mission today is to find some interesting bits of Three Mile history to add spice to upcoming discussions related to the island's next long-range plan process. As I begin to leaf through the yellowed pages of an old scrapbook, I am quickly rewarded. I read about the founding of the camp in 1900, and choices made in those early years that now seem radical, truly bold, but which—in balance—set a model that we continue to follow today. An annual report of the club (as it was first called), published in *Appalachia* (1902), for instance, reveals the care and controversy of an early episode of stewardship:

“There was upon the island a large amount of poplar—an inferior, short-lived tree. The committee was satisfied that a considerable portion of this growth should be removed, in order to give the evergreens and hardwoods a better opportunity.” During the winter of 1901-2 about fifty cords of this wood were cut; some of it was used at camp and the remainder sold, “the receipts being utilized to pay for

¹ I don't have the time to get to those on this visit, but privately wish that someone would come search the collection for several that could be reprinted into a new series of postcards for the island store.

labor in cleaning up the brush left from the cutting. The committee realize the exceeding difficulty of carrying through such work without injury to the property, but, in spite of some criticism, they are perfectly confident that the island has been vastly improved in value and attractiveness, and that in the not distant future all members will commend the committee's foresight and judgment. In connection with this work a trail has been laid out around the island near the shore, and the paths from the camp to the various tent sites have been improved."

Generally speaking, the records that I found (mostly annual reports and committee minutes) cycled recurrently through more than a century of perpetual island camp matters: roof re-shingling, boat replacement, winter ice damage to the docks, tensions over reservation policies, kitchen sanitation, toilet problems, concerns about regulating the island census and ensuring financial reserves. But there were, as well, larger scale confrontations with the environment that led to larger scale interventions for the sake of preserving camper access to and enjoyment of the wild. In 1911, for instance, I learn: Water levels on the lake had dropped significantly due to "the greater drain on the lake by mills and the electric light company, not to mention a leaky dam and a succession of dry seasons." It was deemed "advisable to spend more money (\$119) in the work of blasting and floating into deep water rocks which troubled the mailboat, launches and canoes." Three months later: "The dam has been repaired and efforts are likely to be made through the courts and the Legislature to prevent the lake from being drawn so low."²

The island's 1955 annual report notes a more colorful instance of the camp's reckoning with its desire to live in comfort and pleasure so close to nature:

"Our main dock in front of the canoe house was in bad shape at the opening of the season. By bracing it up we managed to use it until Labor Day, when under the weight of an enthusiastic crowd, the main supports gave way. Fortunately no one was injured. It had been in use for about 25 years. A replacement, made of three separate wood cribs, is now being constructed at a cost of \$5,103."

As a third-generation Three Mile camper and a former crew member, I was tickled by other details I came upon in the archives. In 1967, committee minutes report "it was suggested that we try to get the crew members to wear shoes more often." Two years later—everyone perhaps older and wiser from the times—the 1969 minutes reveal: "Lou Palmer [then Manager] feels that it would be advisable to make Crew job assignments on a co-ed basis to relieve the monotony of some of the more routine tasks. (If that doesn't make you smile, read it again.)"³

² Blasting and floating rocks into deep water?!

³ It is no wonder this particular era spawned so many intra-Crew marriages.

Other items struck me as mysterious, practically inconceivable. A 1956 report reviewing progress toward a capital expense program included a section:

General Maintenance of Three Mile

Bridge to Rock Island

Permanent Telescope Mount

In a possible post-script, roughly a decade later, a cryptic item in the 1965 committee minutes reports:

“Hemenway Telescope—return has been suggested and the committee voted that this be done.”⁴

Yet other issues were hard to imagine occurring in the present day. Contending with natural predators, for instance, was a fact of Three Mile history at several points in time. A 1910 article, which happened to regard the future of neighboring Rattlesnake Island (not Three Mile), revealed that just “a generation previous, the mainland around the lake was more or less infested” by rattlesnakes. In 1910 there continued to be the occasional authenticated sighting of rattlers on Rattlesnake. I came across no mention of rattlers at Three Mile, but one can’t help but wonder, why not. In 1911 there began several years of concerted effort to eradicate a siege of brown-tail caterpillars and moths. \$100 was budgeted for this effort, quite a sum in those days. In the 1920’s a huge sum of money (\$825 in one year; and that after having had to borrow money from the AMC the year before for this very same purpose) was spent to “discourage” gypsy moths. Again in 1968 they invaded and the committee decided on aerial chemical spraying of the island off-season, which was evidently successful. In 1965, the bat population became a concern when bat-borne rabies infections spread in Three Mile’s direction. The committee agreed to attempt bat control with para-di-chloro-benzene. I suppose we’re not immune to the dangers: these days Three Milers report worries about island mosquitoes and the West Nile virus.

For more Three Mile trivia and lore, you too can explore the insides of the island’s archives. Becky has developed a Finding Aid, which is a guide to what she has to-date catalogued. To find this document: go to www.outdoors.org/library, click on “Visit our online Library Catalog” and search for Three Mile Island Records. Becky welcomes visitors, by appointment, to the AMC library (contact: amclibrary@outdoors.org or 617.391.6629). If you care to do some searching from home, she informed me that early (but not later) decades of the AMC’s journal, Appalachia, have been fully scanned and can be found on Google Books. (Go to Google and find “Books” in the drop-down menu; use “Appalachia” and “Three Mile Island” with your search terms and you’ll be on your way.) Three Mile’s annual report and its periodic advertisements to bring people to the island were all printed in Appalachia in those early years.

⁴ A bridge to Rock Island? And a permanent telescope mount?