

Remembering When ...

Our History

Mt. BALDHEAD

Baldhead – the spot to see it all! Lucky we are, to be able to climb the 282 steps to the top to gaze down on the Michigan Lake shoreline, Oval Beach and almost to Milwaukee on a clear day. To the east a panorama that includes the majestic river Kalamazoo, Saugatuck and its photogenic waterfront treat our eye. Look to south to see Douglas and the Keewatin.

A couple thousand years ago when the level of Lake Michigan dropped hundreds of feet, a Sahara-like strip of lake bottom lay exposed. Northwest winds, still blowing today, pushed the sand – grain by grain – toward the ever-flowing waters of the Kalamazoo River. When finally the shifting dunes reached the river, nature called a truce!

The big dune has always been a landmark, but at first it was not appreciated for its tourist attraction value. With the big pines logged off, the village lost its mills. It was then that the residents began to value the natural wonders that would be the basis of the economic future in the 20th century. Evidence appeared in the August 15, 1884 issue of the Lakeshore Commercial. A front page article announced completion of the first stairs up Mount Baldhead:

“The stairway up Baldhead will be finished ere the close of the week. This is made in sections of about fifty feet interspersed with cool and shady resting places, when the climber can start aloft with renewed vigor. It is four feet wide, with eight inch risers, each step being of 2 in. plank, 12 inches in width, the whole structure strong and well put together. The more we look into the matter, the more firmly we become convinced that this is Saugatuck’s golden opportunity, and we are glad to note that the park project meets the popular favor that it does.”

A month later the paper noted that a tower had been built which enhanced the view so much as to cause “ecstasies of delight”:

“The observatory on the crest of Baldhead is forty feet higher than the top of the hill, giving an unobstructed view of the country in every direction. A flag staff forty feet in height will be placed upon this, and a Chicagoan who went into ecstasies of delight when he reached the top has agreed to send over a flag worthy of the park enterprise.”

Today, we are especially fortunate from a historical record standpoint (note the 1874 panorama at the top of this page, for instance) as the view has attracted many to record the scene on glass plate, film and now digitally!

By Jack Sheridan



Above - The Wheeler family ca 1885

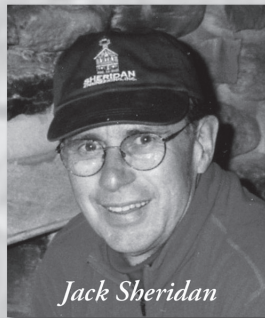


The Remembering When feature is the creation of Jack Sheridan and Jim Schmiechen of the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society. We remind our readers that this year’s SDHS Pumphouse Museum exhibit titled “Lincoln’s Ready-Made Soldiers: Saugatuck Area Men in the Civil War” is now open. The historic museum is located on the west side of the Kalamazoo River at the foot of Mt. Baldhead. It is open daily, noon to 4 p.m. until Labor Day, and then on fall weekends. There is no admission charge.

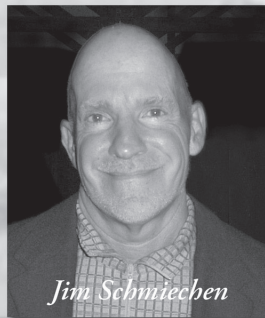
In addition, special presentations featuring various historical topics will be presented at the museum on Tuesdays and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to noon, beginning June 21.

We welcome your comments on Remembering When. Call 269 857-7901, email us at sdhistory@accn.org or write to Box 617 Douglas, MI 49406. SDHS historical images can be seen on the SDHS web site at www.sdhistory.com and all historical photos are available for purchase in print sizes up to 12x17.

Our historical image database is growing through your contributions. We scan your old photos—you keep the originals—and we then provide you with a CD of your digitized images.



Jack Sheridan



Jim Schmiechen