

“Island Prominent in ‘Old Mary’s’ History“

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“The Marais des Cygnes River in Franklin County has an island in it.”

So What? An island is certainly not an unusual geographic feature.

“It is a very large island.”

This might puzzle many latter-day Franklin Countians.

“In fact, it contains 1,200 acres.”

But, as many old-time residents well know, “The Island” really does exist.

It is located about a mile and a half straight west of Ottawa, nestled in the river basin just north of the Chippewa Hills. Nearly two square miles in area, it is shaped like a jigsaw puzzle piece, or perhaps a jagged tooth. Highway K-68 cuts across its two roots.

Apparently it was formed ages ago. The Indians referred to it as an island long before white men came to this area.

An 1864 map shows the Marais des Cygnes River taking a much longer and twisting route to get to the then infant town of Ottawa. That old river bed is now the west, south and east borders of “The Island.”

Appanoose Creek was longer then, two miles or so, as it flowed along the present river bed and entered the Marais des Cygnes just three quarters of a mile from Hope Cemetery.

Sometime in the late 1800’s, the narrow neck of land between the two streams, near the center of Section 32, eroded through.

For a time, “Old Mary” flowed on both sides of the Island, officially making it an island. But later she took the straighter, more northern course, which she still travels today. The old river bed then became known, aptly enough, as Island Creek.

Some of the earliest written references to “The Island” come from the daily journal of the Rev. Jotham Meeker, missionary to the Ottawa Indians. One colony of the immigrant Ottawas settled on the island in the 1830’s, and Meeker occasionally went on horseback to minister among them.

On January 29, 1843, he wrote, “Rode to the island to preach, but their (the Indians) drinking in our meeting house prevented.”

Meeker also wrote of the devastation that settlement received when the 1844 flood covered the island. The Indians lost nearly everything and had to flee to the hills.

The history of “The Island” also includes whispered tales of horse thieves being hung there by vigilantes.

On a more light-hearted note, its banks have also been the location of several favorite fishing and picnic spots. In the 1880’s a little paddle-wheeled steamer, christened the “Gertie,” used to take joyous parties of picnickers from Forest Park up to “The Island.”

Today, it’s still a favorite spot for some locals. As one recently quipped, “I took a sunny island vacation this summer,” jerking his thumb at a fishing pole, “and never left the county.”