

## The Sweetness and Tragedy of Old Memories

City leaders were confronted with a serious problem. The unending stream of coal ships up and down the Milwaukee River meant that the drawbridges on major thoroughfares like Wisconsin Avenue were constantly being raised, disrupting street traffic. "It was a disaster," says Reinelt.

City planners at that time sought a way to move all of that coal and transit out of the downtown inner harbor and away from street traffic, and they turned to Jones Island for the solution. At the time, Jones Island was a makeshift fishing village inhabited by the Kaszubes (pronounced kahshoobs), a western Slavic people who had emigrated from a Baltic island off the coast of Poland.

Local historian and writer John Gurda wrote that "Jones Island's street „system" was a chaotic maze that disoriented even frequent visitors, and its houses ranged from scrap-lumber shacks to sizable Victorian homes. Along the margins of the settlement were backyard boat docks, weather beaten fish

sheds and scores of over-sized net reels. The fishing village in the shadow of the big city was so picturesque that a young, multitalented Carl Sandburg set up his easel to paint there."

Since Jones Island residents never obtained deeds for the land, they were considered squatters by the City of Milwaukee and by the Illinois Steel Company, which owned a part of the island. By 1940, all residents had been evicted to make way for the shipping port in the outer harbor. The last trace of the fishing village is in the name of the pocket park on the western side of Jones Island—Kaszube's Park. About 350 people related to the Kaszubes have a picnic there once a year to honor their ancestors and celebrate their heritage. They were celebrating people like Mr. and Mrs. Plampeck. The front page of the Sunday *Milwaukee Journal*, dated April 12, 1923, tells a sorrowful tale of an evicted saloon owner named Charles Plampeck, the

“Disposed King of Jones Island.” His owned one of eleven multifunctional restaurants that also served as saloons, groceries and dance halls on the island. Plampeck was seventy at the time and had lived and worked on the island for thirty years. A newspaper photo shows him and his wife, affectionately called “Mamma” with the bar clientele. Both had round-rimmed metal glasses. She wore an apron reaching her toes, and he was wearing a very permanent buccaneer-style, nine-inch-long, droopy white mustache. Their eviction story sadly drooped as well. Mamma shared her feelings after the eviction:

*It is nice here and the river isn't so far away. My man has still his boat, and you might say that we are happy. Yet, I often think of the island when everyone came across to see us, and that made it kind of lively, with something going on all the time. Here we are quiet. We have our pets (a parrot that speaks German and says “steh auf”; Tootie, the dachshund; Prince, the black and wire-haired mutt; and a basket of fish-loving kittens). And the children come in. Just yesterday I asked a group of little girls whether they liked the city side better than the island. “Ach,” they said. “It was fine on the island. If we could only move back tomorrow!”*

The eighty-seven-year old article published in the tissue-thin, yellowed newspaper continued describing the interview with the saloon owner. The former king of Jones Island sat down, dogs at his feet and pipe lit, and shared his memories living on the Island:

*If a nice day came in the spring, then everybody on the mainland got an appetite for fish and started for the island. I would welcome them and mama had the fish dinner ready maybe for 50 people. “How is the admiral?” Or “How is the king?” they would call out. King—Admiral—It was all one to me. Governors, mayors, artists, lawyers every kind of nice people came. “My friend,” I would say, “you are yust like birds. The sun comes high once more; here you are after the fish and wanting to see your old friends on the island.” Then we would go into the hall, and have a good time. “And the nicest part was that everybody always went away so satisfied,” added Mamma, smiling.*