

A small, single-story building with white horizontal siding and a green door. The building has a gabled roof and a concrete foundation. A sign on the side of the building reads "Historical IDLEWILD". The door is green and has a small square window and the text "ROOMS 1 THRU 7" on it. There are concrete steps leading up to the door. The building is surrounded by trees and a lawn.

Historical  
IDLEWILD

ROOMS  
1 THRU 7

Dec. 10, 2006-----

IDLEWILD, Mich. -- In a distant world before the films "Idlewild" and "Dreamgirls," the resort community of Idlewild in northwest Michigan was a mecca for black entertainment. Today you can hear a needle drop on vinyl in the forgotten town.

The whispers are louder in winter.

During peak summer months of the 1950s, more than 20,000 people would twist and shout in Idlewild.

Jackie Wilson sang "Whispers." The Four Tops met their wives in Idlewild. Louis Armstrong's wife, Lil Hardin Armstrong, bought a house. Idlewild was one of the few resorts in America where blacks could vacation and purchase property.

When the hip-hop duo OutKast recently launched the film "Idlewild," the gangsta' story was set in Georgia. No one bothered to contact the original Idlewild.

Idlewild, located 5 1/2 hours from Chicago, survives on dreams.

The Paradise Nightclub -- where Sarah Vaughan and Little Willie John headlined -- burned down in 1970. Wilson Groceries, built in 1948, still stands next door, but it has been boarded up since the 1980s. The 700-seat Flamingo Bar overlooks Idlewild Lake. But it is empty.

The El Morocco? Gone. The Red Rooster lounge and restaurant is open after 4 p.m. -- sometimes. It was closed during my late October visit. Idlewild (population 1,500) has a tiny post office and there is one hotel in town. At one time there were 25 motels in Idlewild.

The 17-room Morton's Motel is owned by John Meeks. His motel is two blocks from Lake Drive, which ties a ribbon around Idlewild Lake. A few years ago he formed the Idlewild African American Chamber of Commerce to help attract new businesses to the area. Meeks hopes to reopen the Flamingo as a recreation center.

The resort's name came from idle men and wild women.

At least that's the legacy that has drifted down, like snow on a lake.

Filled with white pine trees, wild flowers and four lakes, Idlewild was founded in 1912 and thrived until 1971. The island was connected to the mainland by regal footbridges that no longer exist.

Middle-class blacks from Chicago, Detroit and Indiana were drawn to rural



Wilson

WILSON

Michigan by the Idlewild Resort Co. that acquired 2,700 acres of land from lumber barons. The resort is surrounded by the Pere Marquette State Forest and the Manistee State Forest. The eight original investors were whites, including A.E. and Modolin Wright of Chicago.

The IRC advertised in black newspapers such as the Chicago Defender. A vacant lot was \$35, paid for at \$1 a week. IRC sold parcels to illuminaries such as National Association for the Advancement of Colored People co-founder Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois. Canadian Helen Buckles and her husband were the first blacks to purchase a lot in Idlewild. They had visited the 1915 Chicago World's Fair when they heard about the new resort. According to Ronald J. Stephens book, *Idlewild: The Black Eden of Michigan*, (Arcadia, \$19.99), in 1916 they lived in a tool shed for six months while they waited for their resort home to be finished.

In its formative years the resort's most famous African-American resident was Chicagoan Dr. Daniel Hale Williams. In 1893 he had performed the world's first successful open heart surgery in Provident Hospital, which he founded. Williams retired to Idlewild and his remodeled house still stands on Paradise Lake.

Clara Jane "C.J." Thompson was born and reared on the South Side of Chicago. She heard about Idlewild from her Chicago friends. She first came to Idlewild in 1950 after she had moved to Detroit when her husband got a job with the Ford Motor Co. Thompson, 78, retired to Idlewild full time in 1994.

"At night the women would dress up in mink coats," Thompson recalled during a conversation in the motel kitchen. "Clubs had door men and valets. We had knockers and instead of applause, you would hit the glass with the knockers." It was a nod toward style the clubs picked up from the Club De Lisa and Rhum Boogie on the South Side of Chicago. Meeks added, "Entertainment is what really made Idlewild."

The Four Tops lived in Idlewild between the summers of 1955 and 1961. Original Tops Levi Stubbs, Duke Fakir and Obie Benson met their first wives in Idlewild. The women were members of the Ziggy Johnson Dancers at Idlewild. "We would work from July 4 to Labor Day," Fakir said from his home in Detroit. "We appeared at the Paradise. We worked with Jackie Wilson and Brook Benton. We saw how to put together production shows. The Idlewild shows were like Las Vegas, with dancing girls and show girls. We learned about theatrics."

Meeks came to Idlewild in 1954 from Detroit, where he had been a teacher, and operated Meek's Dry Cleaners for 50 years. Since 1954 he has spent every summer in Idlewild. He also permanently moved to the resort in 1994. That's when he took over the motel that was opened in 1950 by Chicagoans Bill and Belle Morton. Meeks looked around the desolate dining room and said, "This used to be the place where you'd get good home-cooked food." Thompson added, "You'd knock on the door at any time of night and Belle would get up and cook for you. Or

when the nightclubs closed she'd get up and make hamburgers."

Meeks recalled picking up Chicago tourists who were arriving at the train station. Thompson listened while knitting a winter sweater. She looked up and said, "The train tracks are gone now. The train would stop if you told the conductor you were getting off in Idlewild."

Idlewild is down, but not out. The state of Michigan is looking at restoration of the 35-room Casa Blanca Hotel at the corner of Hall and Arbutis streets. The hotel opened in 1950 and closed in the 1980s. Meeks purchased the hotel in 2002. The three-story hotel is enveloped by lush pine trees. The Casa Blanca had a bar, restaurant and a baby grand piano in the lobby. Writers, entertainers and politicians stayed there.

"The Casa Blanca is high on our list," said William Anderson, director of the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries in Lansing, Mich. Anderson is a member of the cabinet of Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm. "The hotel is not very big, but it's a beginning. It has a tremendous legacy."

Carlean Gill is a former showgirl who was close friends with late promoter Arthur "Daddy" Braggs. He was the Simon Cowell of Idlewild. Braggs was a Saginaw businessman who leased and managed the Paradise between 1952-64. Gill is also from Saginaw where she operates a beauty salon.

"He brought Della Reese here," she said during a conversation in the motel. "The Temptations. Jackie Wilson. Jackie's mama used to come and watch over him as he sang. He was so polished." Organ player Bill Doggett performed for four straight years at the Paradise during the mid-1950s when his hit "Honky Tonk" was scaling the charts.

"I was on the road with Braggs," Gill said. "And Idlewild was our training ground. He'd bring in his band and the costume designer. We'd be here for two months before Idlewild opened up for the season. After that we'd go to the Apollo Theater, Chicago, Mexico."

Braggs even recruited illustrious dance teachers such as Aida Casablanc of the legendary Leon Escobar Dancers of Mexico.

Gill is originally from Ferndale, Mich. She first came to Idlewild in 1960 when she appeared in Braggs' revue of "April in Paris." "We were only paid to be beautiful," she said looking at a 1963 show poster with Lloyd Price and Erma Franklin (Aretha's sister) from Robert's Show Lounge, 6626 S. Park in Chicago.

After things wound down at the Paradise, the Flamingo and other clubs, people would adjourn to the after-hours El Morocco club.

Thompson smiled and said, "Of course you'd bring your bottle in your pocket. They had a little after-hours spot in the attic. If the sherriff knew he had to make a raid he would call Braggs and say, 'Tell your people at the Paradise to be cool tonight because I have to come out there.'"

Braggs left show business in 1966 and died on his 70th birthday, Oct. 30, 1982. "He brought a new level of entertainment to Idlewild," Gill said.

Although the seasonal population has bottomed out, the year-round residents of Idlewild live comfortably. Meeks said, "I don't know a single resident who is looking for a job. No one I know is on welfare. That's the core of Idlewild today. It was started by the black upper class. Quite a few places are occupied by fourth-generation Idlewilders."

Residents offer a few reasons for the decline of the destination, but most point to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as the beginning of the end. Just like baseball's Negro Leagues, the only good thing about segregation was that blacks owned and operated their own businesses. And the businesses thrived. After integration, vacationers spent their money everywhere.

"The leading story is that integration caused the downfall, but that was only one component," Meeks said.

Thompson added, "It also got too expensive to bring shows here." Tourists also began demanding better services and accommodations. "No one would dare come and stay at Morton's Motel today in a section that had 11 rooms and two bathrooms like they did before," Meeks said. "Idlewild didn't modernize and become competitive. The people who are returning to Idlewild are not returning under the old outhouse living standards. You can still stay at Morton's \$42 for singles, \$52 for doubles, the seasonal hotel reopens in April. But we're still short of accommodations. We had a jazz concert here two years ago that drew 2,500. And people had to stay in Big Rapids 28 miles south of Idlewild."

The Four Tops' Fakir last visited Idlewild in 1996. The community was a shell of what it once was. "I took my family up there to bring back some memories," he said. "It would be great if it came back. I'd do anything I could do. We were part of the grain in Idlewild."



