

Claudia Polley

Fox Lake A Resort Like Many Others

In the extreme northeastern corner of Indiana near the Steuben county seat of Angola, five miles from the Michigan state line and just three miles from Ohio's, is the historic African-American resort community of Fox Lake. Nestled in country dotted with clear lakes and healthy pines, for some 70 years blacks from Indianapolis, Detroit, Toledo, Columbus, and Chicago have been coming to "The Lake." Its history and importance to those families who call it their "home-away-from-home" cannot be measured in mere dollars and cents. So with a thank you to those who came before, the current families of Fox Lake are now eagerly looking forward to its listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Fox Lake came about, as did many other black resort communities of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, because segregation prevented people-of-color from enjoying as owners or guests any resort areas frequented by whites. Many resort communities were further segregated by class and/or economic status, but all were closed to African Americans, except if they were servants. Following the end of the Civil War, when blacks were able to go to college, own businesses, farm their own land, teach, pray, and die in their own institutions, there was a considerable rise in the number of black families who had enough disposable income to afford a "house in the country." Unwelcome in existing white summer communities, African Americans planned and built their own. Between 1850 and 1890, these communities grew all along the Atlantic seaboard, Oak Bluffs on Martha's Vineyard, Highland Beach near Annapolis. They also could be found in the West, just outside Denver at the height of the Colorado

Gold Rush which spawned many a black millionaire, and in California, Washington state, and British Columbia.

In the midsection of America and in the south, black resorts began to spring to life in greater numbers just after World War I. In Indiana, with a booming black community in Indianapolis, businessmen, teachers, doctors, lawyers, dentists, railroad porters, hotel workers, barbers began to look around for a place in the country where they could take their families. Though Indiana was largely-controlled by the Ku Klux Klan, African Americans were not the KKK's first target. Catholics and Jews were their prime focus. And as much as the Klan made its presence known, there were thousands of Quakers in the state who were working just as hard to have Indiana be a welcome place for its black citizens. The first family to settle at Fox Lake, the family of Viola Reynolds, secretary to Madam C. J. Walker who had her manufacturing base in Indianapolis, were invited to visit the site at the request of the Boyd family, the white landowners of much of the area surrounding the 1-mile lake. The cabin they first rented in 1927, then bought, is the oldest extant structure on the southwest shore of the lake. Densely wooded with gentle hills sloping to the water's edge, the shoreline was indeed an inviting place. Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds began to go up on weekends to Fox Lake, and soon other black families from Indianapolis followed suit.

In the ensuing years, an aggressive marketing campaign was set up by the African Americans who called Fox Lake their home away from home and people from Detroit, Columbus, Toledo, and Chicago began to build new structures alongside the cottages moved to Fox Lake from a nearby conservation camp. The Fox Lake Property Owners Association was formed as people began to own more land, buying principally from the Boyd family. By 1945, there was quite a community of people and houses, including a community center near the beach. The area under consideration for National Register nomination contains the rustic cabins, camp cottages, and vernacular summer houses that typify older resort communities. Some of the structures date from well before the turn of the century while others were built between the wars. If successful in its quest for official historic status, Fox Lake will be the first African-American resort community listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Claudia Polley is President of the National Association for African-American Heritage Preservation, Inc. She writes frequently on subjects pertaining to African-American history and culture.

Fox Lake summer house. Photo by Paul Madar courtesy Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana.

