

# Snowmobiles Buzz onto Mackinac Island



The impasse began to crumble in 1969 with the Great Snowmobile Parade. By the winter of 1968-69, about 40 Islanders had bought snowmobiles, and in a coordinated demonstration of nonviolent civil disobedience, Mayor Otto "Bud" Emmons led Island snowmobilers eastward along Main Street onto park property in front of Marquette Park. From Fort Mackinac, Park Superintendent Eugene T. Petersen took this photograph and marked the boundary in red ink. (Photograph courtesy of Mackinac State Historic Parks)

have fallen through the ice during Mackinac Island's history, and Islanders had waited a long time for a lighter vehicle that could carry them back and forth to the mainland.

In the 1960s, many Islanders began to carry necessary supplies from the mainland to their Island on sleds towed by the powered vehicles. The snowmobile had become essential to the Island's wintertime quality of life. However, the State Park commissioners stood fast in their ban on snowmobiles on State Park property. Most ice bridges from the mainland to Mackinac Island form over that portion of the lake that touches the Island at or near the park's British Landing. Snowmobilers crossing both ways were almost compelled to cross over park lines.

"We just want you to do something for us," Armand "Smi" Horn told commissioners, "who live here in the winter-time."

The impasse began to crumble in 1969 with the Great Snowmobile Parade. By the winter of 1968-69, about 40 Islanders had bought snowmobiles, and in a coordinated



## A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

### Snowmobiles

demonstration of nonviolent civil disobedience Mayor Otto "Bud" Emmons led Island snowmobilers eastward from Main Street onto that portion of M-185 that borders the front edge of Marquette Park - state property.

"You cannot stop progress," said Mr. Emmons, "and snowmobiles are progress."

The State Park Commission was not happy. Park Chairman W.F. Doyle, sometimes called the "uncrowned king of Mackinac Island," did not want to see the machines on "his" park. Vice Chairman Walter Murray shared these feelings. Both men were deeply concerned that if the State Park were to allow snowmobiles on State Park land, this move would create a legal precedent which could be used by other owners of motorized vehicles to demand access to Mackinac Island as well.

"Opening a Pandora's box," said Mr. Murray. "If we let them here, in two years Mackinac would be just another island."

Doyle and Murray were not impressed by the Great Snowmobile Parade. The State Park Commission can, by state law, meet anywhere in Michigan. Traditionally, the panel holds public meetings at the Straits of Mackinac during summer months and in southern Michigan during the winter. Chairman Doyle put off the Commission's 1969 discussion of the snowmobile issue until one of the 1969-70 winter meetings, held in Grand Rapids. At

the meeting, the commissioners asked if anyone wanted to speak up to repeal the ban. No one from the Island was there. The ban remained in place.

Adjacent mainland towns, such as St. Ignace, had taken to the winter machines with a vengeance. "Snowmobiling," the Mackinac Island Town Crier reported, "is the fastest-growing sport in history." Snowmobilers at the time had begun to form their own culture of the Northland, a way of life that included trail riding, off-road racing, and the consumption of legal beverages. Some Islanders became concerned that snowmobile behavior could jeopardize their chance of gaining acceptance and legalization.

These islanders, who had formed the Mackinac Island Snowmobile Club, struck back in 1969-70 with the Safari Offensive. As the act of parading openly on State Park land had proved obnoxious to several commissioners, club members started grouping together to publicize what they called "safaris." The winter of 1969-70 was a cold one, and the Round Island Channel and much of the Straits of Mackinac froze hard. Island snowmobilers openly invited their friends to gather out on the frozen channel, where the State Park's ordinances did not apply, and then buzz over as a group to properties on neighboring Bois Blanc. The club's members took pictures of themselves and distributed them; the Town Crier printed one June 28, 1970. It was clear that the Mackinac Island snowmobile club members were cheerful and law-abiding, and fears of disorderly snowmobiling began to fade.

News of the safaris spread, in early 1970, throughout Michigan. A bikers' organization, the Wolverine Motorcycle Club of Ecorse, heard a garbled version of the news and assumed that the Island was abandoning its no-motor-vehicle law. The bikers sent a letter to the State Park asking for the

\*Please turn to page 22

Winter is the time of the snowmobile on Mackinac. A couple of dozen shaggy-coated horses remain on the Island, pulling sleighs through the snow. Most of today's Islanders get around on the tracked vehicles.

The snowmobile is deeply embedded into the history of northern Michigan. The first patent for a snowmobile was issued to a Michigan man, R.H. Muscott, who invented the tracked vehicle in 1916 to get around in wintertime at his home near Gaylord. The northern peninsulas, with their heavy loads of "lake effect" snow, often create ideal conditions for snowmobiling.

The snowmobile's potential as an off-road vehicle made it difficult at first for many Islanders to accept the new invention. Many were concerned that the machines would tear up State Park woods and trails. Snowmobiles were officially banned on Mackinac Island park property until 1970.

Mackinac Island property lines are such that it is very tough to get from anywhere to anywhere without crossing over State Park land. Many Islanders began to buy snowmobiles in the late 1960s and felt themselves forced to ignore the ban. As the "year-arounders" saw it, their safety was at stake.

"People who live here don't think of Mackinac Island as a park," Islander Frank Blosswick Sr. said at the time, "but as a place to live and work." In the winters when an ice bridge forms from St. Ignace to Mackinac Island, the frozen surface is often relatively thin. Several horse-drawn vehicles



## Church Schedules

### Ste. Anne's Catholic Church

#### Mass Schedule

Saturday - 5:30 p.m.

Sunday - 9 and 11 a.m.

### Mackinac Island Bible Church

A church in the word for all people

Sunday Worship 9:30 a.m.

Wednesday Mid-week

Service 8 p.m.

all services at

Mission Point Resort Theatre

Watch for our Summer Concerts & Special Events

Coffee House Friday

9 p.m. to Midnight

### Little Stone Church Union Congregational

Summer Sunday Worship

10:30 a.m.

Thursday Bible Study 1 p.m.

Trinity Episcopal Church Parish Hall

All Are Welcome

### Trinity Episcopal Church

Sunday Holy Eucharist

10:30 a.m.

A Year-Round Presence on Mackinac Island

**Picking up the Town Crier at the newsstand?**

**You won't want to miss our April issue!**

To order, send \$2.50 and we'll mail it to you.

Enclose \$2.50 with the coupon below no later than March 31, 2007

Please mail the April Issue of the Town Crier to:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Send to: Mackinac Island Town Crier  
c/o St. Ignace News  
P. O. Box 277  
St. Ignace, MI 49781

**Belongga**  
PLUMBING & HEATING

**LICENSED**  
▪ Plumbing  
▪ Heating  
▪ Cooling Contractor

115 Elliot Street  
St. Ignace  
(906) 643-9595  
Monday - Friday 8 to 5

More than 60 years  
combined experience  
COMMERCIAL · RESIDENTIAL  
Master Plumber:  
License #6578