

# Basketball Has Been Played on Island for More Than 100 Years

Last month, the Mackinac Island high school team won the 2006-07 championship of the Northern Lights League, the athletic league that represents many of the minimal-enrollment schools of northern Michigan.

Mackinac Islanders have a long connection with roundball. Soon after the game was invented on the east coast in Massachusetts in the late 1800s, Islanders were looking for a place to play it.

The Fort Mackinac commissary building, built in 1879, was originally constructed as a storage warehouse for foodstuffs to be consumed by the Fort's soldiers during the winter months. Before this time, foods were stored haphazardly in Fort cellars and buildings originally designed for other purposes, which could lead to problems.

For example, the Fort reported to the U.S. Army in fall 1855 that their men had stacked bags of potatoes six feet high in the cellar of the Fort's old barracks, but then the spuds were roasted all at once when the barracks burned down. Both the current barracks and the current commissary now standing inside the walls of the Fort are replacement structures that the Army built atop the foundations of previous buildings. The purpose-built food commissary structure was roomier and had better ventilation than the cellars used previously.

When Fort Mackinac was abandoned by the Army in 1895, the Fort commissary, like the other buildings of the Fort, was available for new use. Soon afterward, someone hung a pair of nets over the commissary's wooden floor. At this time the players of the new game were calling it "basketball," even though the peach baskets into which young men had thrown the ball had been taken down and replaced by the familiar cone-shaped nets with an opening in the bottom.

The Fort commissary, as built by the Army, was not lighted, and had minimal heat, if any. It was not an ideal place to play. In late 1915 or early 1916, the little Island electric company, which generated a weak current from the old brick plant on East Shore Road north of Arch Rock, began to feed some "juice" to the commissary, and the St. Ignace newspaper, ancestor of today's *The St. Ignace News*, reported in February 1916 that Island boys were playing ball under the lights. Some of them must have



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had cold hands.

During the summer months, the Fort's commissary was used for other purposes. In 1929, it was fitted out with camp beds and served as home to Fort Mackinac's first group of summer guides. This building was where the late Gerald Ford, then an Eagle Scout, slept that summer. Although Ford liked skiing and football, he was good at basketball, too, and may have played some games of pickup hoops here.

Even in the 1910s and 1920s, the Fort commissary building was not the only large interior space on Mackinac Island. A century earlier, fur traders had built a large warehouse on Market Street, where pelts were stored for shipment to the East. This building, the Astor Fur Warehouse, became redundant when the fur company shut down Mackinac Island operations in the late 1830s. In the early 1900s, the warehouse space served as a meeting room, indoor gathering area, and dance hall for guests of the Astor House, one of Mackinac Island's hotels. The hostelry closed its doors in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, and never reopened.

After acquiring the empty

hotel buildings, the city of Mackinac Island turned operating control of the warehouse over to a local fraternal organization, the Lions Club, which remodeled the old space in 1951-52 into a community hall. In July 1952, the "Island News" was reporting that the fur warehouse/community hall was available for boys' basketball and girls' volleyball games. The warehouse ceilings were high enough to allow the game to be played inside, and there was electric light and some heat in winter. It was in this building, almost 150 years old, that young Islanders played basketball in the 1950s. It may have been one of the oldest buildings in the United States used for this purpose.

As the state pressured the Island to end its use of the old wooden Ferry School (the Indian Dormitory), the Mackinac Island school district built a new brick school, which opened in 1960. This schoolhouse is the same building that is in use today. It was designed with central heating, and it contained a lunchroom that could be used for basketball games. Many Islanders will remember that the lunchroom was not quite big enough for varsity games.



## A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

### Basketball

The playing floor took up almost the entire space, and there were no seats for spectators, who had to huddle around the lunchroom doorways. The state schedule allowed Island girls to play basketball in those days, and in 1974, coached by Jack Dehring, the "Lady Lakers" won Mackinac Island's first Northern Lights League championship.

In 2000-01, the school was enlarged. The new \$2.5 million wing contained the first regulation-sized gymnasium building in Island's history. With bleacher space for fans, the new building could welcome visiting teams and fans to Mackinac

Island. It was in this space that the "Lakers" played games and trained for their Northern Lights championship of 2007.

This fourth Island basketball court rests, at least in spirit, upon the basketball courts that were used before it. Three of them have been mentioned in this article. It is possible that some of the people reading this article can remember playing basketball in the Fort's commissary, the Community Hall, or the school lunchroom. Maybe one or two of you would like to share with the *Town Crier* your memories of basketball on Mackinac Island.

## Coffee Talk Planned With School Superintendent Schrock April 20

Parents are invited to meet with Superintendent Roger Schrock at 9 a.m. Friday, April 20. The "Coffee with the Superintendent" program was

introduced this year by Dr. Schrock to allow parents to speak with him about concerns or issues involving their students and the school.

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