

# Pamdenec

By Gary Davis

**[This is the first in a series of articles about “Historic Places” in Grand Bay-Westfield, written by members of the Heritage Subcommittee of the Grand Bay-Westfield Tourism Committee. You can learn more about Historic Places listed on the new Brunswick Government’s official website by visiting <http://www.gnb.ca/0131/historicplaces/index-e.asp> ]**

The Westfield Fire changed everything. My Davis grandparents had a summer place in Public Landing for their 5 children in 1921. In those days Saint John was a smoky, sooty city where health conditions were dubious and families did their best to get away for the summer. In Public Landing the air was fresh, the river was clean, and their biggest fears were the dangers of crossing the road to swim in the river or fish from the pier.

That August, the Westfield Fire broke out near Musquash and spread quickly towards the St. John River. It caused widespread destruction, and no small amount of panic. As my uncle, now 90, tells it, the Davis family were evacuated by water and headed down river towards Saint John, where they lived. He was 5 months old at the time.

Undaunted, my grandparents bought a lot in a settlement called Pamdenec. Pamdenec is between what were once Epworth Park and Grand Bay. About a hundred families had places there. It was a mixture of permanent and summer residents. There were a few Jewish families.

There was also the Pamdenec Outing Association clubhouse (private; no Jewish members allowed). They owned a tennis court. There was a stony beach, which was visited annually by First Nations people from up the river. They made baskets and other artefacts from the ash trees. It became known as “Indian Beach”.

The story goes that after the fire my grandfather, a house builder, brought his workers out and they build a two-storey summer house in one day. The family insisted that it was true, and I repeat the story even though I don’t entirely believe it. I remember the house well. I was told that my father and his three brothers each panted a tree near the house, and that the trees are still there. The house has been replaced by a modern bungalow on George Street.

In subsequent years dozens of Jewish families bought or built summer homes in Pamdenec. My cousin in Calgary recently sent me a photo taken at the 1924 Hebrew School Picnic in a field not far from the Davis house. By the time I was a teenager there may have been 100 Jewish summer cottages. It was a wonderful place for kids. Safe, sunny, quiet, and a real community.

In many ways it was an example of the relationship of Jewish and Christian people in Canada. I was told that my grandfather Davis took the train home after work every day in the summer. On the train he and the non-Jewish residents of Pamdenec chatted and were very friendly. When they got off the train, they became strangers and went their separate ways.

The Davis house was close to the Clubhouse. In the 1930s Jewish kids could hear the music from dances but they were not allowed in, so they danced on my grandparents' porch.

I was told a story by a member of the Tillsley family. (There is a street named after them in Pamdenec.) Some of the Jewish summer residents asked to join the Outing Association. I think it was around 1950. There were Jewish-owned houses all around it. One group of members said that if the Jews were allowed to join they would end up taking it over. Mr. Tillsley and others argued that the Jews would be good members and they should be allowed in. Their side won out. I think it prolonged the life of the clubhouse. But the opponents were right. For my generation it was a Jewish clubhouse!

There are many stories of summer life in Pamdenec. It was a vibrant and active community. Of course it was not all Jewish, it was an example of Canadian cosmopolitanism. People learned to live together. It made the country better.

There are many stories about Pamdenec, about skinny dipping and tennis tournaments, about bonfires where four brothers sang all the parts of an opera, about dances and swimming and boating. About learning to smoke, about writing stories, songs and plays. A former member of the Senate of Canada and a former mayor of Saint John spent childhood summers there. There were doctors, lawyers, merchants, tailors, movie distributors, and many others. It is an historic place with an interesting past, and the summer Jewish community was a big part of it.