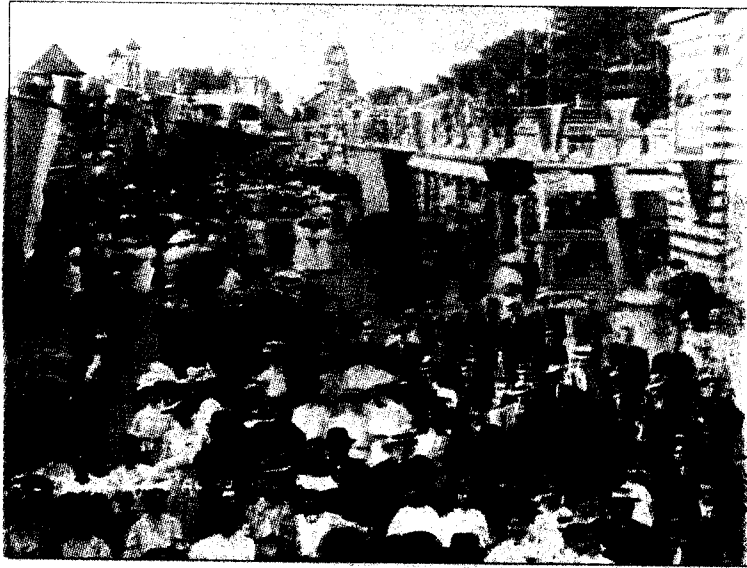


Decades later, Pleasure Island resurfaces



COURTESY OF TOWN OF COLONIE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AL-TRO PARK is filled with people in this circa 1909 image. The theme park was built near the border of Menands and North Albany in the late 19th century, when it was known as Pleasure Island.

Menands *Postcards dredge up memories of vanished theme park*

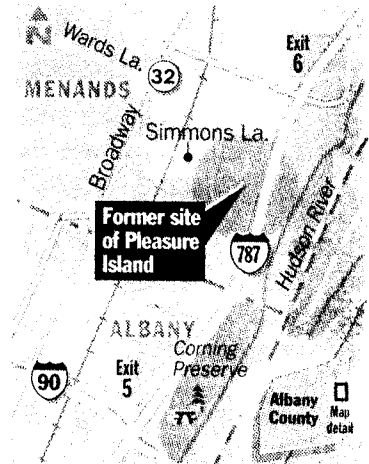
By **PAUL GRONDAHL**
Staff writer

Whatever happened to Pleasure Island?

Like some sort of lost Atlantis, the turn-of-the-century theme park vanished without a trace along the Hudson River near the border between Menands and North Albany.

Even among local historians, it's an obscure and faded footnote, although the discovery of vintage postcard images is raising its profile.

"Not many remember it anymore," said Kevin Franklin, Menands historian, who retired last



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month after 31 years with the department.

Franklin uncovered postcards from the early 1900s depicting Al-Tro Park (located midway be-

Please see **ISLAND A4** ▶



PAUL BUCKOWSKI/TIMES UNION

NO TRACE of Pleasure Island remains at the end of Simmons Lane in Menands. Nearby Interstate 787 now covers part of the site.

ISLAND: Theme park has long since vanished

▼ CONTINUED FROM A1

tween Albany and Troy), a later incarnation of Pleasure Island.

Franklin recently gave the historic photos to the Town of Colonie Historical Society for use on the town's Web site.

Beginning in the late-1800s, thousands of revelers jammed Pleasure Island on summer weekends on a riverside plot — near today's Albany International plant on Broadway at Simmons Lane.

Today, nothing is left. It's an overgrown vacant lot at the end of Simmons Lane, near a U-Haul self-storage facility. The parcel ends at Interstate 787, which was built on fill that covered over parts of Pleasure Island.

What the highway construction didn't destroy in the '60s had been partially ruined earlier by heavy flooding and ice jams that scoured the island each spring before the Sacandaga Reservoir was built to control the floods along the Hudson.

"It would take an archaeological team to find anything now," Franklin said.

A century ago, though, people streamed there by steamboat and horse-drawn carriage to wager on trotter horse races and bicycle competitions. They strolled a boardwalk lined with amusements, rode a roller coaster and miniature scenic railway. They watched high-dive teams who performed precision flips into the river.

“It would take an archaeological team to find anything now.”

KEVIN FRANKLIN
retired Menands
historian

It was the Great Escape, Saratoga Race Course and a county fair rolled into one.

"Should a longer walk be desired, the ramble can be extended to Pleasure Island, a notable resort in the summer, from which the music of a band, by distance mellowed, floats dreamily in the air each afternoon and evening," read an 1886 account in a book of local history.

Like the ephemeral summer pleasures of sweet corn, Hand melons and pond swimming, Pleasure Island soon faded away.

In its heyday, the place teemed with excitement. "The crowd of pleasure-seekers at Pleasure Island yesterday was very large," the *Albany Argus* reported on July 4, 1885, festivities. The story described a two-mile bicycle race, sack race, barrel race, swimming exhibition, roller-skating show, trotter race and fireworks.

Also known as "Dreamland," Pleasure Island wasn't quite an island. Pedestrians crossed the old Erie Canal by a small bridge at Garbarance Lane (Simmons Lane today), which led to tenant farms operated by the Garbarance family. The lane led to the riverside theme park.

The Albany & Troy Steamboat Co. also ran the *W.M. Whitney* and *J.G. Sanders* steamboats, with hourly stops at Pleasure Island during the summer.

The theme park offered attractions such as the Old Red Mill, a faux farm setting that carried a 10-cent admission. Other amusements included dancing to the Banda Roma, a 40-piece orchestra, in the vast dance hall. Nearby was a sprawling roller-skating rink. Regular performers in the early 1900s included the Seven Florene troupe of acrobats, Professor Wormwood's celebrated baboon and monkey circus, a German village and Japanese garden.

"Very little documentation exists anymore, but it was very popular in its day," said Albany historian Virginia Bowers.

In 1907, Pleasure Island became Al-Tro Park, but changing tastes in leisure caused it to die out by the early 1920s, according to Franklin. The concept eventually was transformed into nearby Mid-City Park, opened in the late 1920s. Mid-City was well off the river and across Broadway. It featured a roller coaster, merry-go-round, swimming pool and roller-skating rink and stood next to Hawkins Stadium.

"It was fading seriously in the Depression years, though the pool and rink persisted," William Kennedy wrote in "O Albany!"

Mid-City Park, too, faded away after a few decades.

"They were magnificent amusement parks and they're all gone, now," Franklin said. "They were a passing summer diversion. I wish there was something more left of them, other than a few old photos."