

A Summer at Lake Okoboji

Excerpts from a Vacation Diary, 1899

edited by Clifford M. Carson

In 1899, Carrie McKinley Carson, with her husband Clarence and their son (referred to as "The Boy"), spent a leisurely summer vacation at Iowa's famous Lake Okoboji resort area. The family was from Marengo, Iowa, where Mr. Carson was superintendent of schools. Carrie was a dedicated diary-keeper, and her account of the family's stay in a small cottage on the Lake provides a revealing glimpse of the relaxed summer activities at the resort area.

The Lakes region in the late 1890s had no automobiles, no paved roads, no radios or televisions, and no clusters of condominiums. The railroads were the main developers of the Lakes resorts, and most vacationers traveled to the area by train. The wealthiest summer residents had large, elaborate waterfront homes, others stayed in the grand resort hotels, but many vacationers lived in modest (almost primitive) cottages or camped out in tents on the lake shore.

The principal means of transport on the lakes were the steamers which plied the waters. The schedules of these boats were flexible, and the captains accommodating. A steamer could be casually "flagged" by displaying a white cloth on a fishing pole. The Manhattan, on which the Carsons often traveled, was a veteran steamer, soon to be retired.

Mrs. Carson's diary, now in the Manuscript Collection of the Division of the State Historical Society, demonstrates the sense of adventure associated with a trip to the resort area. The beauty of the natural surroundings and the change of atmosphere were perfect for rest, relaxation, and recreation.

At last our long-talked of trip to a summer resort in the north is being realized. True, it is not very far north, but sufficiently so to give us an altitude of one thousand feet, a

totally different atmosphere and scenery unlike that of our locality.

We started from home last Friday morning, bringing with us bedding, groceries, plenty of warm, as well as cool, clothing and whatever else seemed necessary for our comfort.

Our trip from Marengo to Des Moines was very pleasant, reaching there at noon, where we ate our lunch. From Des M. to Ruthven it was very hot and dusty, but at the last named place we ran into a violent rain storm, which effectively settled the dust and cooled off the air.

We were to have had supper there, but everything was so soaked, and it was still raining, so Clarence went out and got us some tea, and we lunched off the remains of our dinner, which proved ample and satisfying. I had put the sandwiches in a tin box, which kept them fresh. . . .

We reached Arnold's Park at seven o'clock in the evening, having been on the train since nine in the morning, except for the short stop in Des Moines. At Arnold's Park we embarked on the "Manhattan" and crossed the lake, to our cottage, which is on the east side of the lake. The storm had been quite severe during the afternoon. It had hailed, and the wind had blown a gale, so the lake was very rough, and it was also very cold. We felt keenly the change from the excessive heat of the railway trip. I nearly froze going across — we were some time on the water, as

several other stops were made before we reached our destination.

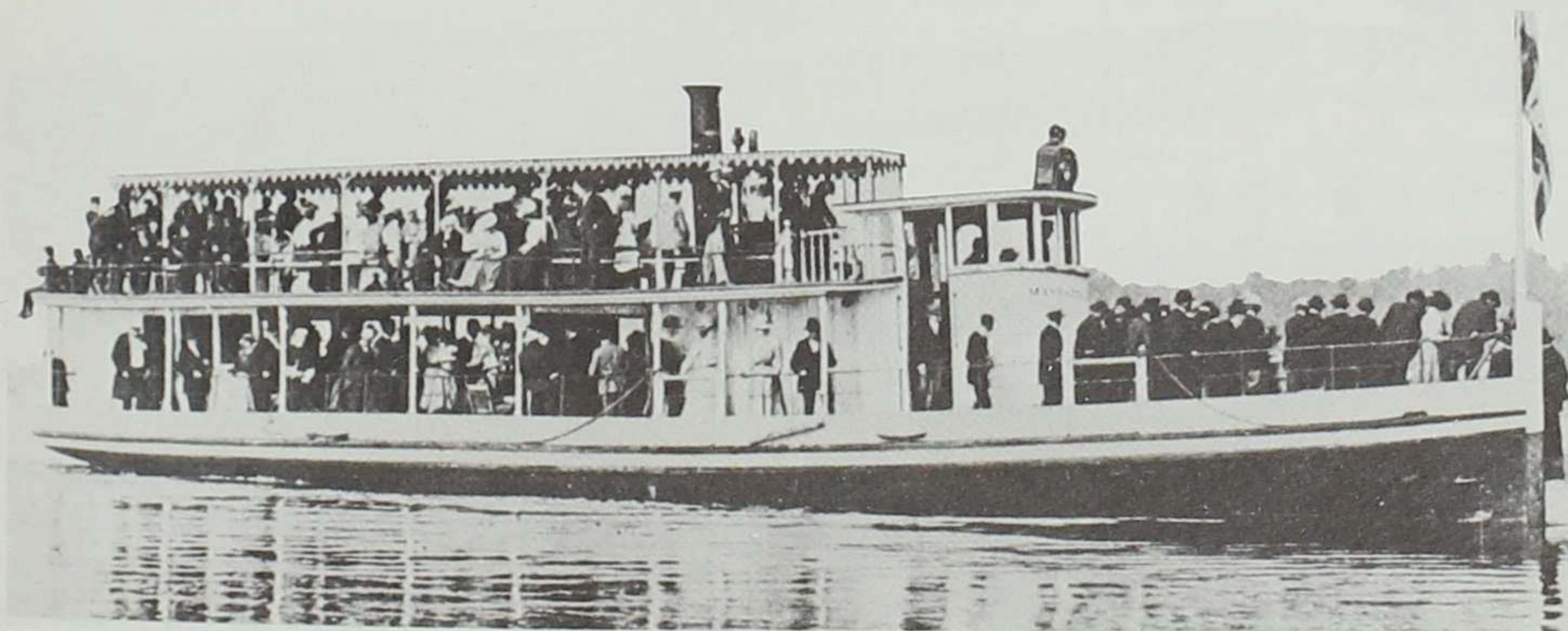
Just before we reached Hayward's Landing, our stopping-place, — the wind rose and it began to rain.... Clarence did not know whether he could find the key to the cottage, so the steamer waited at the landing while he reconnoitered, as it would have been necessary for us to return to Arnold's Park for the night, in case the key could not be located. Being successful in his hunt, the baggage was unloaded. The Boy [Carrie's son] and I had, in the meantime, gone up to the shelter of the cottage porch, as the air was raw, the rain cold, and we were becoming chilled through.... While we were waiting for the baggage to be unloaded, a lady from the cottage next door ran over and asked us in. We went gladly, as the rain drove in our faces, and our clothing was getting damp. She had a bright fire, which seemed very cheery, in view of the fact that we would not have anything but [a] gasoline [stove].

We found our cottage to be a very plain structure, painted a light gray,



Carrie McKinley Carson, about 1899.

and resembling, very much, our wood-house [at home], with the addition of a porch on its front. It is situated on the rising ground about eighty or one hundred steps from the lake, the space between being filled with a growth of oaks, — some fine large trees, others of the scrub variety. From the limb of one of the large trees hangs a fine large swing; there are hooks on the porch for our hammock, and under the porch I found a



The lake steamer Manhattan. (courtesy of the Spirit Lake Beacon)

hammock-chair, which needed only a little "doctoring" to make it as good as new.

The cottage is divided into two rooms, — the sleeping and sitting-room, 14 x 16 feet, and the kitchen and dining-room, 10 x 16 feet. It is just right for us, but if we should have friends come to stay with us, I don't know where I would put them To be sure it is rather primitive in the matter of furniture and house keeping facilities, but there is everything that we actually need.

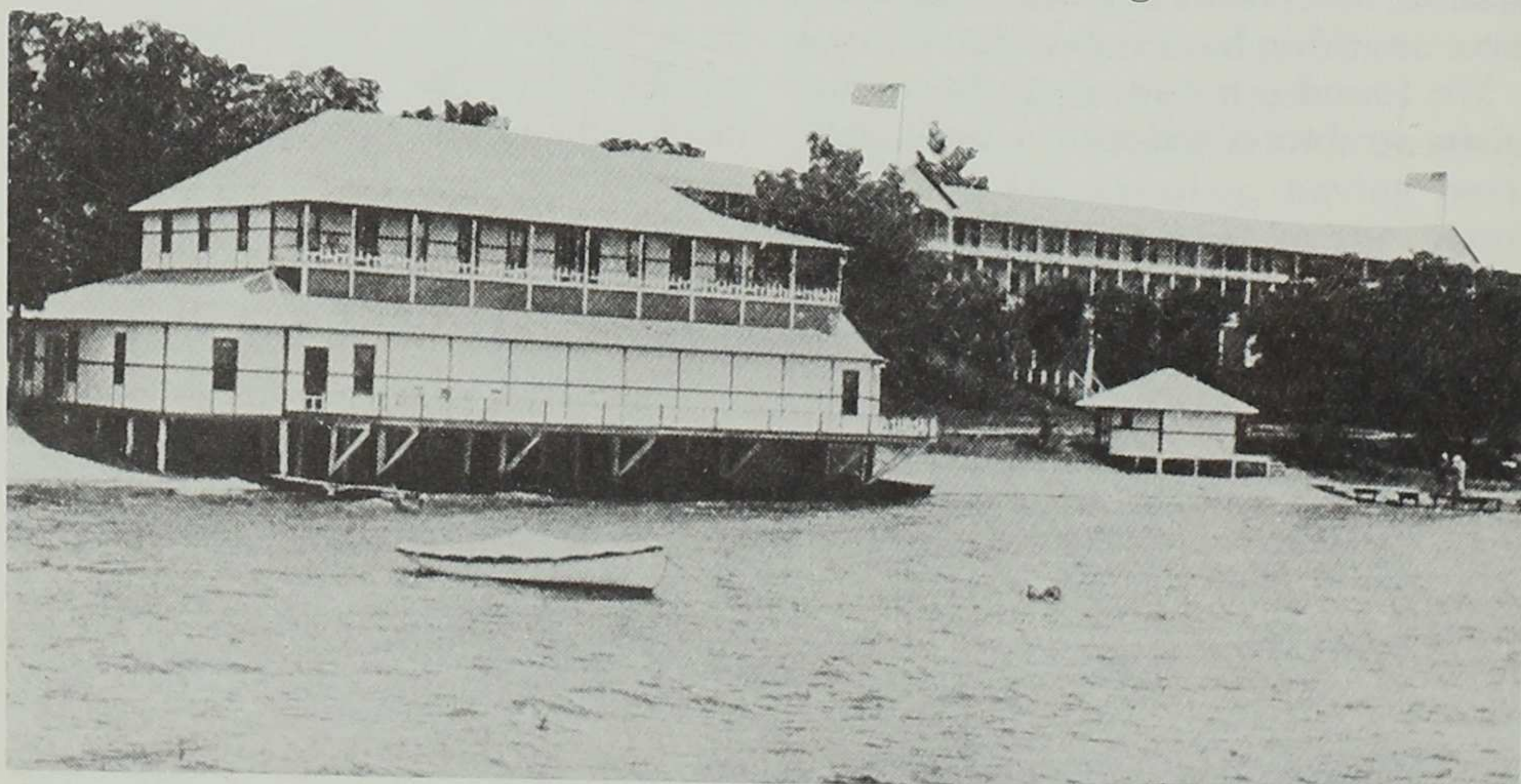
A bright rag carpet, considerably worn, covers the floor of the sitting-room, sash curtains, not very full, are at all the windows, and in the sitting-room there are shades; also, two beds and a cot, one rocker, four straight chairs and camp chair, an improvised ward-robe with a curtain in front, a small looking-glass which reflects a horribly distorted image of the person brave enough to look therein, and a shelf for books complete the

furnishings of the room. In the other room are a table, an ice-chest, two cupboards made of goods boxes, and a nice little gasoline stove, — two-hole, — with oven, another shelf for a water bucket, and a broken chair upon which to set the wash-pan.

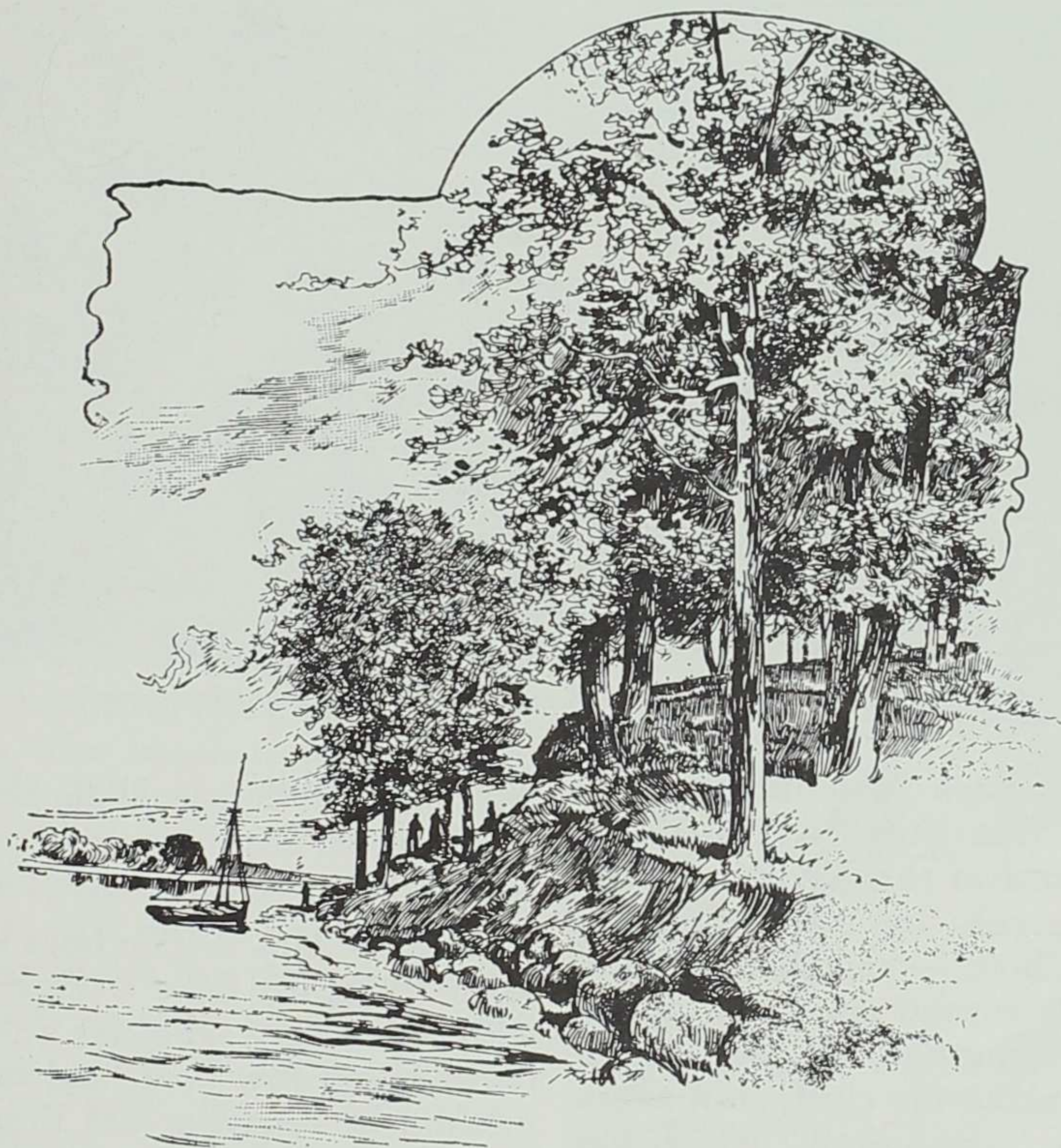
JULY 29. SAT. The first thing I did when I arose this morning was to rush to the windows for a view of the lake. I wished to be sure that it was still there. There it lay, — dark blue, with the morning sun touching its waves with golden light, — a beautiful sheet of water, truly.

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SUNDAY. JULY 31. Yesterday morning when it was too late for me to get ready, we learned that religious services are held every Sunday morning at "The Inn" — the finest hotel on the lake. The two C's [Carrie's husband and son] grabbed their hats, flagged a steamer, and went "just as they were." It was an ideally beautiful morning. The air so fresh



The Inn, West Lake Okoboji. (from Spirit Lake and the Okobojs, 1907)



An idyllic view of the lake front from a railroad promotional pamphlet entitled Mid-Summer Paradise. The rail lines published several such brochures extolling the virtues of the Lakes and illustrated with romanticized drawings of the resort area.

and pure, and I could not help wishing, as I watched the steamer round the curve of the shore, that I were a man, and could go wherever I wished all in the same pair of trousers. Men don't half appreciate their privileges.

"The Inn" is said to be one of the most picturesque summer hotels in the country. It is enlarged each year, as its patronage increases. It is built on the side of a bluff with a beautiful outlook over the lake. The dancing

pavilion is built on piles, rising high above the water. The wash of the waves mingling with the music of the orchestra. Here all public gatherings are held, — including the Sunday service; and always through the music, the sermon, [and] the conversation, runs the murmur of the waves, — a soothing, musical sound, of which one never tires. It makes one think of Venice, and the descriptions of her wave-washed structures, as painted by poet and artist.



Pillsbury Point, from a late nineteenth century hand-colored post card.

When the boys came home, they announced that there was to be a sacred concert at the pavilion in the evening, given by the Waterloo Episcopal Choir, — and that we were all going. It turned cool and cloudy during the afternoon, and by starting time it seemed quite chilly; but as we went in the “Manhattan,” which has a cabin, we did not suffer. The concert was very good, and we enjoyed it greatly. On the way to “The Inn” we ran across the “Hiawatha” a smaller vessel than the “Manhattan,” and a race ensued for first place at the landing. We seemed fairly to fly, and I fancied from the sounds issuing from the engine-room, that the man who shoveled coal had no occasion to shiver. The smaller craft, however, proved the swifter, and we were obliged to pull in behind. Never having lived near the water, I have such a terror of it that I cannot enjoy it as I should. I fairly hold my breath when we are in the row boat, if we go out

where the water is more than knee deep. . . .

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MONDAY. AUG. 1. The boys went “to town” — Spirit Lake — this morning with a neighbor who has a team, (he borrows our row boat, and takes this method of repaying us) thus saving hack-fare. It was necessary to purchase bathing suits for the family. I did not like the idea of a ready made suit for myself, but I could not know whether we were going in time to get a suit made. . . . We took our first plunge this afternoon; it was rather a cool day to initiate ourselves, but the boy was so anxious to go, and as the sun shone warmly, we were soon very comfortable.

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TUES. AUG. 2. By putting cushions on the seats of the rowboat we can stay out a long while without getting tired.

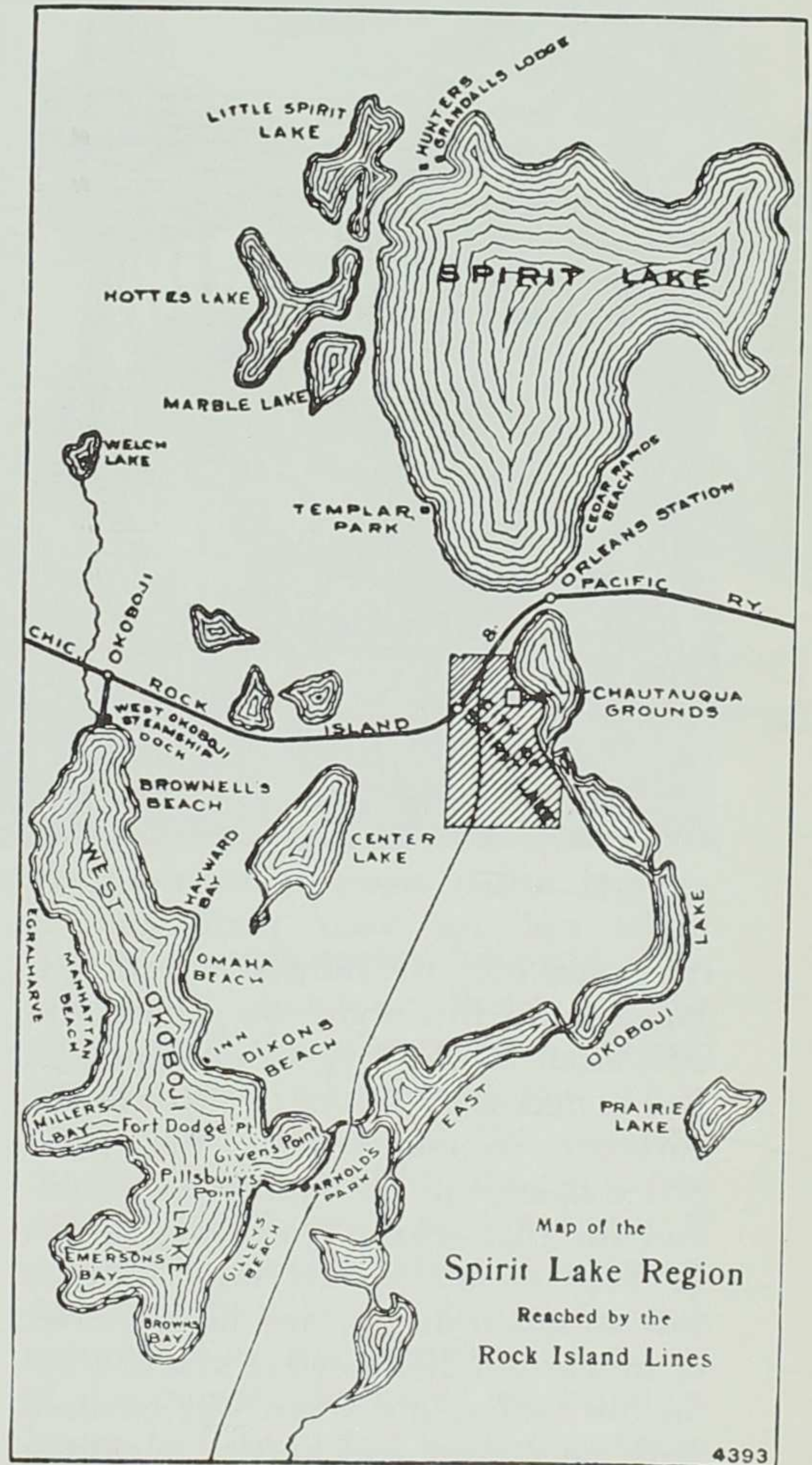
The boy . . . and his papa and Mr.

Straight went trolling for pike, the evening being the best time for that kind of fishing. After about half-an-hour, the Boy surprised them by hauling in his first fish, — a "bull-head."

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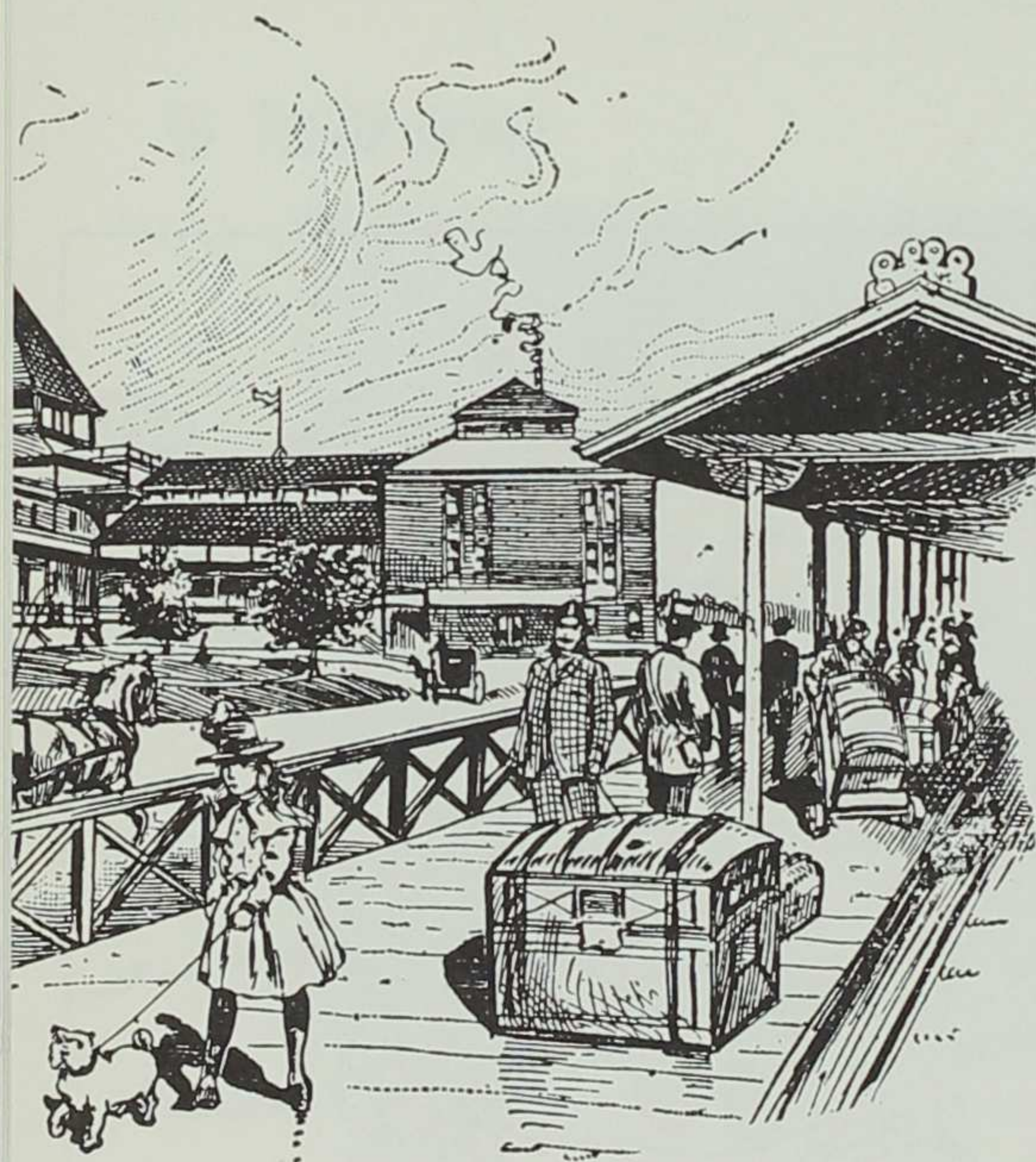
THURS. AUG. 3. The boys went to town again, with Mr. Straight, — for the ride. It rained last night and the roads are probably muddy, but the morning is lovely. The boys were home by dinner-time, after which we rowed down to Omaha Beach, a beautiful place south of us, — perhaps a mile. The cottages at this place are beautiful ones, built by men of means. The beach is narrow here, but the bank, probably fifteen feet high, is sodded down the sides to the beach, and ornamented with flowers. The lawns are nicely kept, and the settlement shows the thrift and neatness of city homes. Omaha is near "The Inn," only a short distance across the lake from Manhattan Beach Hotel, and not far from Arnold's Park, — the social centers on the lake.

After our return, C. went fishing while the Boy and I went in bathing; the water was rather cold, so did not stay in long. A party who live in the second cottage from ours, — two men and two girls, go in in all kinds of weather, — and the shrieking and screaming that go on, as well as the other antics in which they indulge, keep Hayward's Bay entertained in a very lively way. The men throw water on the girls, or throw them down in the water, or do any and everything to make them shriek. Yesterday, after they had been in the



water long enough to give a fish cramps, one of the girls, all wet and soaked as she was, got into a rowboat with one of the men, and went for a row.

We go to the *Post Office* here for everything we want, — even for sour milk, sweet milk (!), cream, ice, sweet-corn and other vegetables and letters! The post-master is a sort of



*One of the busy train platforms at the resort area.
(Mid-Summer Paradise)*

general utility man, — he not only looks out for your mail, but is drayman, etc. He helped C. get our luggage up the night we came, was custodian of the key to our cottage, and is necessary to the comfort of the cottagers in many ways. The post-office is kept in the family residence, and for that reason, perhaps, cannot be kept clean. At any rate, I never saw so much dirt in one house. Piles of unwashed dishes were stacked upon the tables, the stove was covered with pots, pans and kettles, awaiting the ministration of dish-cloth and water, while the floor was sticky with all kinds of dirt. And the flies! They seemed to be holding a world-convention and not a delegate was absent. The idea of using milk from such surroundings rather staggered me, and I confess to a desire to run away . . . [but] I stated my errand and was supplied with a generous bucket

of good, thick sour milk. There were no flies, either in it nor on it, tho' how they managed to be kept out, was a miracle. The cottage-cheese and griddle-cakes made from it were fine, and as long as we kept out of mind where the milk from which they were made came, we enjoyed them.

MON. AUG. 7. . . . Yesterday was excursion day to Arnold's Park. Mr. Straight and his family went, and on his return he said that it was estimated there were over seven thousand people present at one time. There were thirteen trains, of from ten to thirteen coaches each, standing on the tracks, in addition to all the passengers who arrived on steamers. This serves to show how popular Okoboji is becoming as a resort. Also it shows how the Sabbath is kept, or broken, rather, at such places.

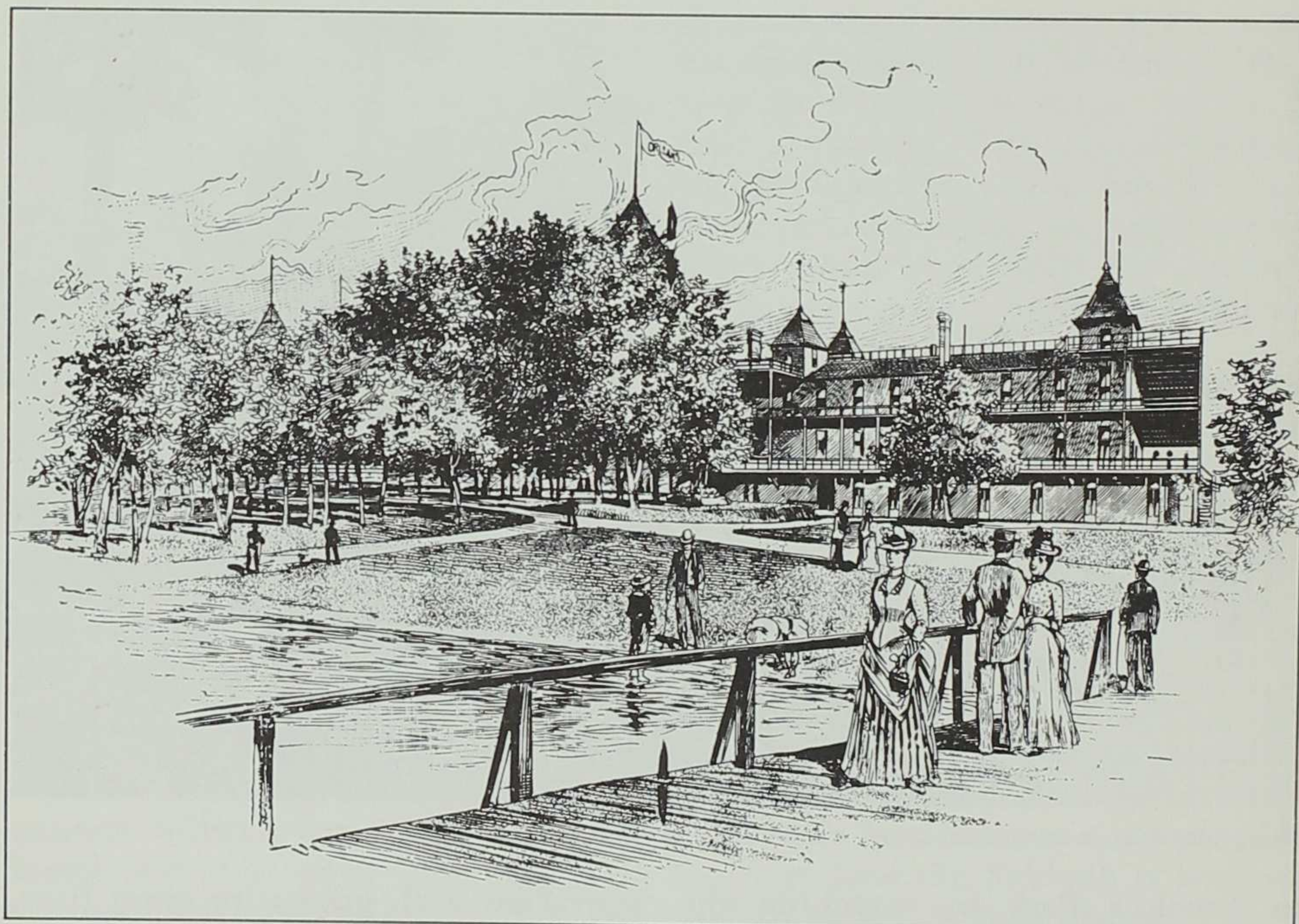
FRI. AUG. 11. Wed. afternoon we planned to spend Thursday in making the trip around the lakes, thru the two Okobojis and Spirit Lake. . . . Thursday morning was bright, clear and cool, with a strong south wind blowing, and the lake very rough. The "Iowa," the steamer on which we were to make the trip, came for us about eight o'clock. We were the only passengers, and as the steamer plowed through the waves, we received all the benefits of a strong lake breeze, and the spray which dashed over the steamer rail. The forward part of the deck was soon covered with water, as was my right sleeve. One might bear considerable discomfort, tho' for the sake of such a ride, and such a breeze in August. The Boy amused himself all the way



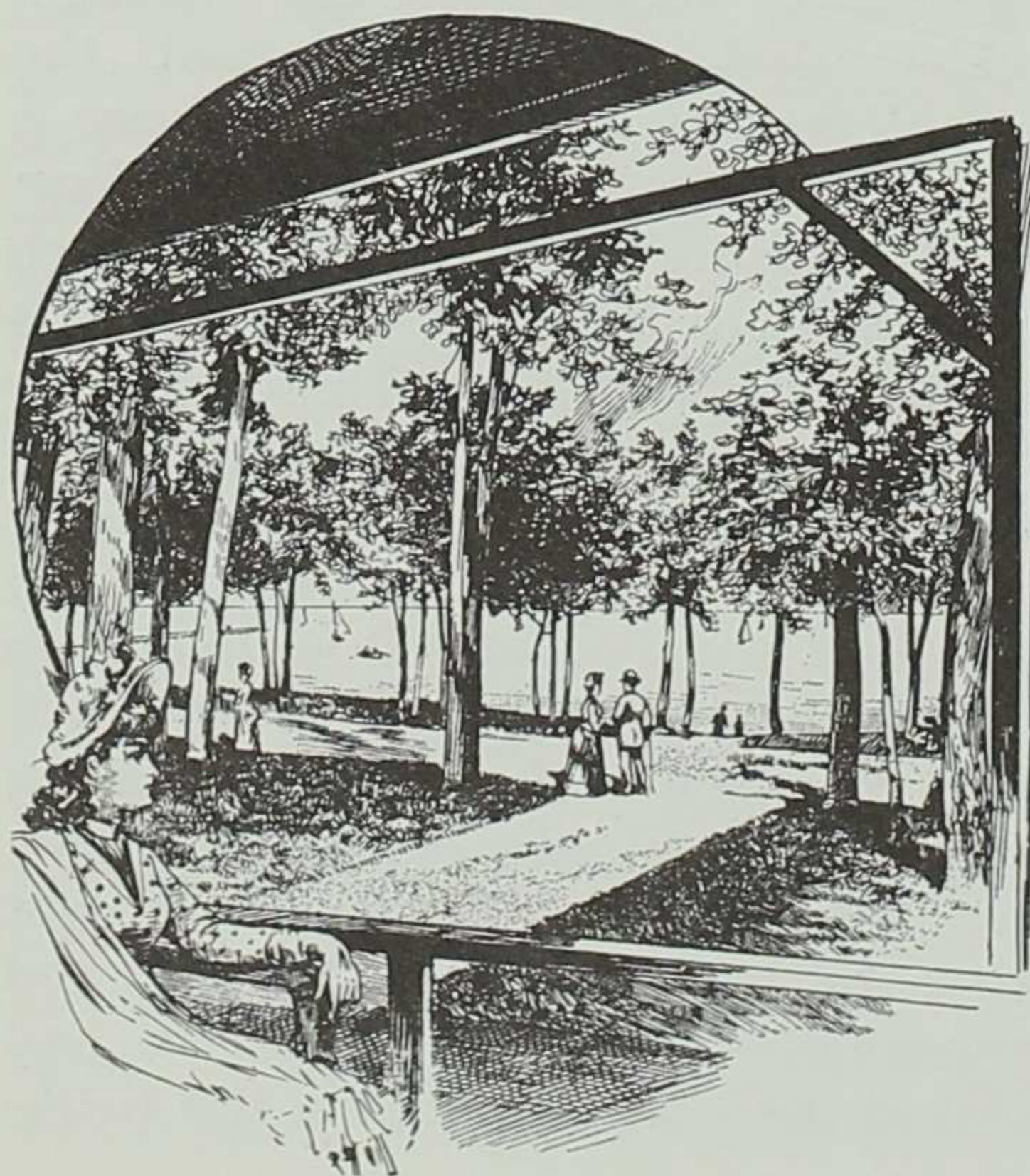
This group— apparently a family — posed for the camera in the late 1890s.

to Arnold's Park by watching the "rainbow in the spray," — it was very distinct. After making the usual stops, we passed through two drawbridges into East Okoboji Lake. We traversed the entire length of this lake. It is not so interesting as West Lake, the water not so clear nor the shore so picturesque. At half-past ten o'clock, after a two hours' ride we landed at the pier of Hotel Orleans. This structure was erected by the B. C. R. & N. Ry. Co. [Burlington, Cedar Rapids and Northern Railway], in the hope of making it a famous summer resort. It was a fine building, with accommodations for hundreds of guests, requiring a force of one hundred persons to operate it. The furnishings were lavish; the silver for the dining room cost more than a thousand dollars. The rooms were

furnished with grates for open fires, electricity, and everything for the comfort of the guests. The colored waiters were all in caps and white aprons. It seemed to the management, that in order to put the establishment on a paying basis, it would be necessary to sell whiskey. Accordingly it was dealt out in such quantities as would meet the needs of the patron; the hotel immediately began to fill up, and for two or three summers crowds of wealthy guests filled its rooms. The reputation which it soon acquired, of being no better than an ordinary saloon, gave rise to much unfavorable criticism; matters were finally carried to such a point that respectable people did not wish to patronize the Orleans; and eventually the law stepped in and closed the place. Realizing the futili-



The Hotel Orleans, looking placid, graceful, and appealing in a drawing from a B.C.R. & N. Ry. promotional brochure — not at all like the sin center Carrie described.



Note on Sources

Several of Carrie McKinley Carson's diaries, dating from the 1870s through the 1930s, are in the Manuscript Collection of the Division of the State Historical Society, Iowa City, Iowa. This portion of the 1899 summer diary has been shortened where indicated, and minor punctuation errors have been corrected. Mrs. Carson's diaries also cover lake vacations in later years.

Readers interested in the Iowa Lakes might wish to consult Donovan Hofsommer's *Prairie Oasis* (Des Moines: Waukon & Mississippi Press, 1975).

A view from the veranda of the Orleans. (Mid-Summer Paradise)

ty of attempting to carry on so extensive a business, and one requiring such a large working force, in a part of the country no more widely known than is this section of Iowa, it has been decided by the company to tear it down. The work was commenced a few weeks ago, so that we saw only a portion of the building; enough, however, to realize what a delightful place it must have been, and what happy times somebody might have had there, if only the demon drink could have been kept out.

It was located on a beautiful spot, on the neck of land between Spirit Lake on the north and East Okoboji on the south. A fine terraced lawn extended toward Spirit Lake, on which stood fine trees with rustic seats in their shade. In addition to these, picnic-tables, fountains, etc. A pavilion and boathouse down on the lake shore gave opportunity for bathing and a fine place to rest and watch the lake with its unending beauty....

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THURS. AUG. 17. The lake has been too rough for successful fishing today: consequently, we are without fish for dinner. C. and Boy went out, but the boat rocked so it made them sick.... The lake is lovely in any weather. When rough, as it has been today, the waves are rich green, white-crested. On still, cloudy days, the colors are beautiful; one evening lately, one portion of the water was gold while the rest was steel-blue

(after sunset). I have seen it assume all aspects and colors. The romping waves, when they run up on the shore, make me think of a troop of children at play; they seem the embodiment of frolicsomeness.

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MON. AUG. 21. We had hoped, yesterday, to repeat our trip of the Sunday before, — walk to the Inn and return by steamer; but Saturday evening at ten-thirty o'clock a severe electrical storm transpired, lasting for several hours. When we got up yesterday morning we found the lake rougher than we had ever seen it. The white caps were all over the lake, and the waves rushing up on the beach and breaking into foam, made such a noise that it was impossible to make one's self heard, or for a steamer to venture out. It was clear, cool and bright, but too wet to walk....

WED. AUG. 23. Our fun will soon end. We expect to go home tomorrow and leave the fish and frogs in peace for a year. It has been a fine vacation and we have enjoyed it very much. If we could only take the lake home with us! We shall miss it! □