



The
Tip
of the
Mitt
Journal



The Rainbow Inn

Northern Michigan's African American resort hotel

by **Richard A. Wiles**

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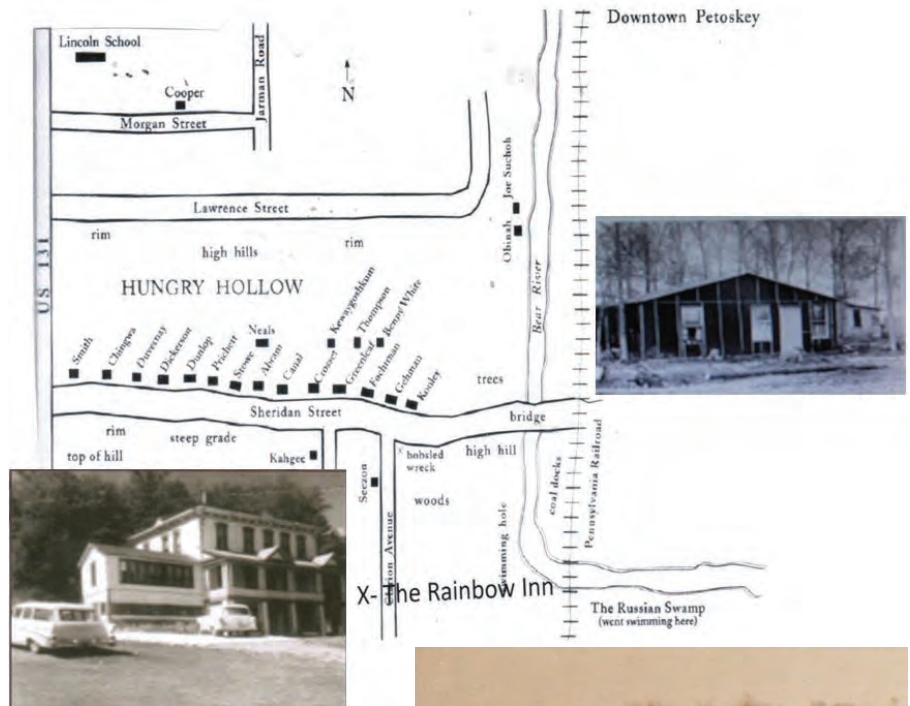
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THE RAINBOW INN: Northern Michigan's Black-owned resort hotel

By Richard A. Wiles

William and Gail West's RAINBOW INN, located at 1630 Clarion Ave., Petoskey, Michigan, sat on the southern edge of this mid-west's premier summer resort city from May 1950, until March of 1965. During that time period it was the Tip of the Mitt's only African American-owned resort hotel and restaurant. Its clientele included people of all colors: Black, red, brown and white. Today, in 2016, that would be a common occurrence, but in the 1950s, and into the mid 1960s, it was certainly not.

It was not even common in many of the northern states of the country during that post-World War II era. Outside the major metropolitan areas such as Chicago, New York, Detroit or Philadelphia, the practice of "Jim Crow" discrimination was just as pre-dominate (de facto) in the north, as it was in the southern half of the country (de jure). White-owned businesses chose not to serve Black people, Latino



people, Native American people and sometimes even people of the Jewish faith. That meant that hotels, restaurants, bars, and even gas stations and department stores were often off-limits to people of color when they traveled.





"A Northern Las Vegas for Black people

A tiny town of less than 100 people envisioned a special town for gambling and entertainment facilities for Black people. Realtors helped boom the population to nearly 23,000. It had gambling casinos, hotels and entertainment facilities. Top name performers came to the town of Idlewild in Lake County, Michigan. Black people came from everywhere and built business establishments which ranged from hot dog stands to elaborate mercantile establishments. The performers included Louis Armstrong, Sarah Vaughn, Dinah Washington, Al Hibler. The real estate people had a field day selling lots. Many were sold with promises of water and plumbing facilities, nearby bank institutions and schools and more. A few years later, with the passing of the Civil Rights Act, Black people began to leave the town for other and more attractive facilities. It wasn't long before the town dived back to its original state and is now as poor as ever."

During this time period the state of Michigan, outside of the city of Detroit, was not "user friendly" to African Americans, or other non-white travelers. This was especially true in the Upper Peninsula of the state and in the northern part of the Lower Peninsula, the Tip of the Mitt. One exception to this was in western Michigan's Lake County near the small town of Baldwin. Since 1912, a summer resort specifically for Black people had been created. It was named Idlewild. Further north, during all of 1940s, the 1950s and most of the 1960s, African American summer vacationers were few and far between. This was especially true in the Petoskey-Charlevoix-Harbor

Springs, and the Cheboygan-Mackinac Island areas.

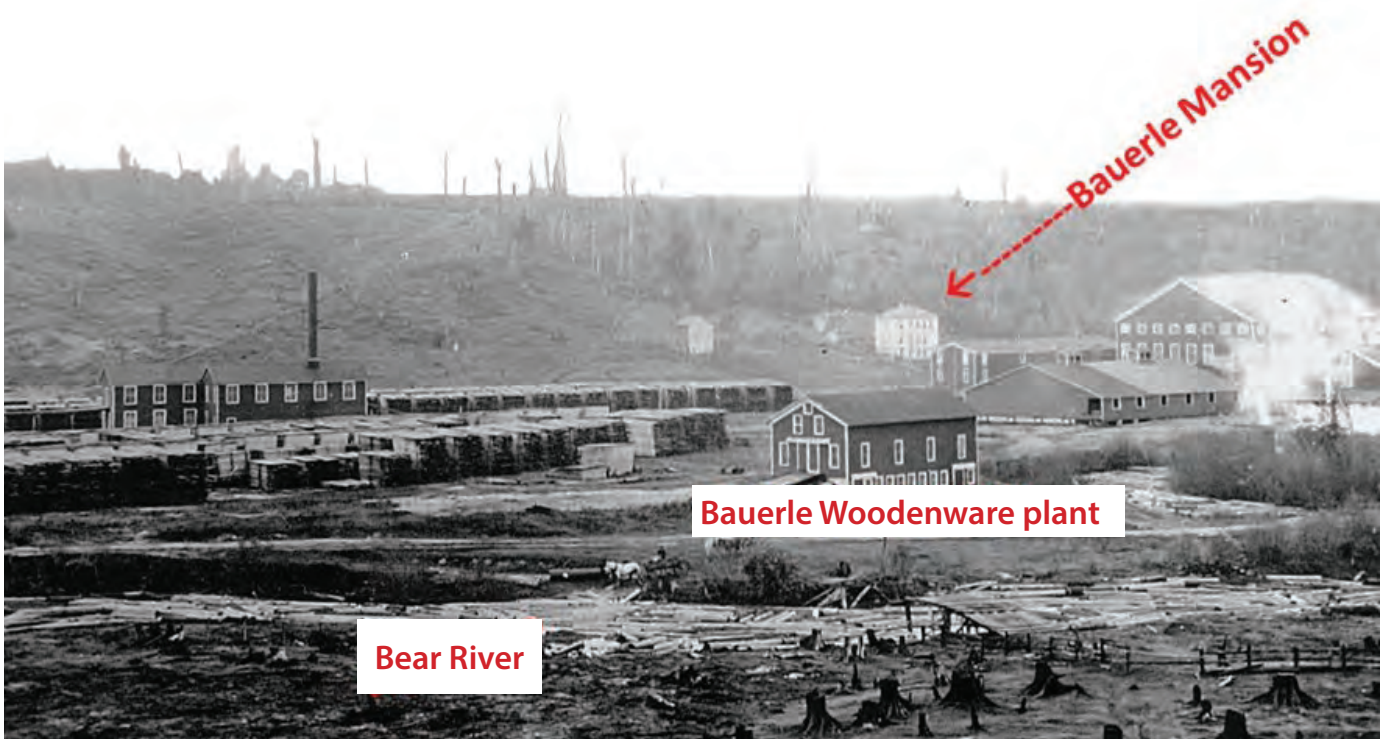
Ironically, the truth was that during the summer months (when most people traveled) there were many African Americans living in northern Michigan. They were the employees of wealthy white people from the major mid-western cities of St. Louis, Chicago, Cincinnati and Detroit. These resorters came north each summer with their nannies, their maids, their chauffeurs and their kitchen help for a July 4th-to-Labor Day summer resort season. Most of their employees were Black, working for a wage as a domestic servant.



William Thomas West, a porter and chef on the Pennsylvania Railroad was one of these African Americans coming north each resort season. The railroad provided passenger service to Petoskey, Harbor Springs, and Mackinaw City during the 1940s and 1950s and briefly into the 1960s. West lived in the Columbus, Ohio, area and was a 25-year veteran of the railroad company.

For many years prior to his retirement in 1949, West had noticed the large, three-story former lumber baron mansion located close to the railroad tracks as the Northern Arrow passenger train would roll into Petoskey. During the summer of 1949, he purchased the structure which, at the time, was being used as a boarding house. West recognized the need for

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Petoskey in 1890, looking west

a hotel and restaurant in the area that would serve people of color. The large building, along with its carriage house, was located at 1630 Clarion Avenue, in an area locals referred to as “Hungry Hollow.” It was situated at the very southern section of Petoskey’s city limits and was mostly populated with Native American homeowners or renters. The large, white structure was the former mansion of Petoskey’s woodenware manufacturer, Frederick Bauerle. He had the home built for his family in the early 1880s. After many renovations, it served as a boarding house beginning in the 1940s.

West, a World War I veteran, had over 30 years of experience in the food industry. He used his savings for retirement to buy the large building on a land contract. After a year of remodeling, West and his wife, Gail,



Chef William Thomas West

opened the restaurant and hotel in the spring of 1950. He named his business the Rainbow Inn, which, according to family, was the Wests’ way of saying “people of all color” were welcome.

Using ads in African American newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Michigan Chronicle*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and Cleveland’s *Call & Post*, the Wests advertised their inn as a northern Michigan destination spot for Black vacationers. They could enjoy the north and know they had a place to sleep and eat while doing so. Besides the tourist trade, the Rainbow Inn was a favorite dining spot for the many African American domestic servants who summured with their white employers in the Petoskey, Harbor Springs and Charlevoix area. The Rainbow Inn would be especially busy on Thursdays, the traditional “maids’ day off.”

The West’s inn was mentioned in “The Negro Motorist Green Book and Travelers’ Guide (Vacation and Recreation Without Aggravation) published by



"The Red Arrow, one of the Pennsylvania Railroad Co. trains is also known as the 'Red Special' in this area. The train comes from such places as St. Louis, Cincinnati, Fort Wayne and Chicago before stopping at Petoskey. From here it goes to Mackinaw City where it turns around and heads back." (from the Jan. 17, 1961. Graphic Resorter)

Victor Green of New York City. Green was an African American postal carrier and avid traveler by automobile who first published his travel guide in 1936. The Green Book listed hotels, restaurants, service stations, barber shops and beauty salons and taverns in each state that would serve African Americans. After facing some embarrassing situations while on his travels, Green decided he would create a guide for fellow Black people to follow. He asked for suggestions beginning with his first publication and soon was receiving many tips.

There were few establishments in Michigan outside of Detroit and Grand Rapids that were listed in his guide.

According to the civil rights leader Julian Bond, recalling his parents' use of the Green Book, "... it was a guide-book that told you not where the best places to eat were, but where there was any place at all to eat. You needed the Green Book to tell you where you could go without having doors slammed in your face."

The Rainbow Inn in Petoskey was one of those places where the door was open. Not only for Black Americans but Native American, Asian, Latino and other non-white travelers or residents of northern Michigan. And, white travelers and clientele were welcome, too.



The Green Book listed hotels, restaurants, service stations, barber shops and beauty salons and taverns in each state that would serve Black Americans.

Not far from the Rainbow Inn, a few miles west of Petoskey along U.S. 31, lies the hamlet of Bay Shore. During the late 1940s and the 1950s it was home to Zack Whyte in the summers. Whyte was a band leader in the 1930s and 1940s. His band, Zack Whyte & The Chocolate Beau Brummels, performed throughout the midwest.

Whyte lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, and first came north to the area to play in Charlevoix during one of the summer seasons. He liked the area and purchased a home in Bay Shore where he entertained guests with his piano and with other musicians who would occasionally drop by.

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Legend has it that the Bay Shore home was visited by such famous Black entertainers as Louis Armstrong, Cab Calloway, and definitely Duke Ellington. The Petoskey Evening News reported on its front page edition of Tuesday, Aug. 26, 1962, that indeed Duke Ellington and his band had come to Bay Shore to visit Whyte. The headline read, "Duke Ellington Pauses in Bay Shore on North Michigan Trip."

Ellington and his band were on a tour bus headed for Cheboygan and then Sault Ste. Marie, but stopped to see his old friend Zack Whyte. Ellington told the local newspaper reporter he and his band needed a little "resin" time. The band included Louis Bellson on drums and all the regulars who then stayed the night at Whyte's while jamming well past midnight. Prior to Ellington's visit, Whyte had made it known that Duke and his band would be coming and Whyte invited many of his regular patrons (who often frequented his home for music) to join them. Most of those invited guests were the domestic help for Petoskey-Charlevoix summer resorters.

On July 2, 1964, after many years of protests and demands for legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed by the Congress of the United States. The Act's Title II portion stated, "All persons shall be entitled to the full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, and privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation, as defined in this section, without discrimination or segregation on the ground of race, color, religion, or national origin.



Zack Whyte and The Chocolate Beau Brummels

Simply stated, the act outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion or national origin in hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and all other public accommodations engaged in interstate commerce. It meant the end of all-Black resorts like The Idlewild Resort in Michigan and other similar resorts nationwide. Now Las Vegas was open to all people of color.

On the morning of March 8, 1965, it was the "end of the Rainbow." The Rainbow Inn was destroyed by fire. According to a newspaper account at the time, "... the cause of the fire was not known but Mr. West said he was in the building early in the morning and started a fire to warm the building. He went home (his house was located nearby) to get his overshoes and when he opened the door upon returning saw smoke and flames."

The massive structure was never



rebuilt and its foundation remained in place until the spring of 2013 when it was removed to help facilitate the sale of the property. Thomas West died in his nearby Clarion Avenue home on April 21, 1970, and wife Gail passed away in May of 1977. The Rainbow Inn now remains only as a historical memory. 🌿

Richard A. Wiles is a retired history and reading instructor at Petoskey High School and a former Spring Arbor University class instructor in research. He has written five White Paper research projects for the Petoskey Public Library involving historical events in the area, including the crash of the B-52 Air Force bombing trainer

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11 a.m. Monday,
March 8, 1965: "The
end of the Rainbow"

"Just a gutted shell was left of the William T. West house yesterday after fire raged through the three-story wooden building. Volunteer fireman Norman Schmalzried died following a heart attack while rushing the second fire truck to the house and the fire truck damaged five parked cars at the Pierce Chrysler-Plymouth lot on W. Mitchell-st. after he slumped over the wheel. (News photo by Fred Lovelace, from March 9, 1965 *Petoskey News-Review*)"



The West property for sale in 2013



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West's wife, Gail, is pictured here with (from left) Rainbow Inn servers Johnny and Mary, and the Wests' daughter, also named Gail.

into Little Traverse Bay in 1971.

Wiles holds a Bachelor's degree in history from the University of Toledo, a Master's degree in reading development-psychology from Michigan State University and an Educational Specialist degree in community leadership from Central Michigan University.

PHOTOS courtesy of:

The Thomas & Gail West family, Los Angeles, CA, The Petoskey District Library, The Little Traverse Bay Historical Museum, The Greenwood Cemetery Historical Newspaper File, the author.

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William West, Rainbow Inn co-owner/chef



Gail West, Rainbow Inn co-owner



The Wests entertain guests in the front yard of the Rainbow Inn.