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**Pamdenec: The “Golden Days” from 1920 to 1970**

I want to go back to Pamdenec, New Brunswick,  
 It has the prettiest girls I ever saw,  
 Situated on the Saint John River,  
 It's called the Rhine of all America.  
 In Pamdenec there's always something doing,  
 Swimming, gin-rummy or canoeing,  
 If you want to have a jolly good time,  
 Hop aboard the C.P.R. Line,  
 And get right off at Pamdenec, New Brunswick.<sup>1</sup>

Researchers generally rely on historical documents to gather information about the people, event, or story they wish to explore, but there are circumstances where those documents are not available and other means need to be found to collect information on a particular time or person or place. Such is the case with the story of Pamdenec – a small summer community about 15 miles west of Saint John, New Brunswick, where three generations of Saint John Jews spent the summer months from the 1920s to the 1960s. Little was recorded or preserved on paper from this time and place; instead, the story is one conveyed by reminiscences from oral interviews and memoirs written decades after the cottages were sold and the families dispersed. Families, events, and scenery were also captured on film and more than a hundred black and white images taken between the 1920s to the 1940s survive and complement the personal recollections.



Overview of Pamdenec.

Many of the written memoirs were collected in 2016 to accompany a long-requested and anticipated exhibition at the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum. Despite the lapse of decades since the contributors had been in Pamdenec, these stories were rich with recollections and a clear image of the importance of this community emerged. It was a story both familiar and new for those who viewed the exhibit – with many similarities to cottage life as experienced elsewhere – but with the addition of experience unique to Saint John, and one generally rooted in happy memories.

Pamdenec was situated along the St. John River and was originally an area used by the First Nation Wolastoqiyik people who stopped there on their way from inland communities to the shores of the Bay of Fundy. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the area was developed as a summer community for both Jewish and non-Jewish families who constructed cottages along the river and up the hillside. The area was reached by the Canadian Pacific Railway or river boats which made numerous stops on their journeys along the river between the port city of Saint John and the provincial capital in Fredericton.

The original Jewish settlers of this area were the Webber, Davis, Bassen, and Boyaner families who arrived in the early 1920s. Within twenty-five years there were more than fifty families spending the summer in cottages that they had either built, purchased, or rented.



Freda and Lil Jacobson and Rose Grosweiner, c. late 1920s or 1930s.

Samuel Davis recounted those early days in an oral interview recorded in 1984:

The Boyaners were there before us... there were the Ellmans, the [William] Webbers, maybe half a dozen families there. We got there in '21. 1921. ... The Indians came down every summer and they were right where the brook comes in, where our place is and I got to know them very well – they used to make baskets, they used to cut the ash trees down and I learned how to make those strips from a log and as a matter of fact I learned to paddle a canoe ... And I've been looking for, every once in awhile I'll go kicking rocks around looking for arrowheads ... Never [found] any arrowheads there.

The cottage occupied by Harry and Mary Cohen and their children, Stanley and Ann Ruth, was typical of the period. In his memoir “Memories of Pamdenec: A Love Letter,” Stanley Cohen described his family’s cottage:

My parents, my younger sister and I occupied a small, three-room cottage (my dad referred to it as “a camp,” as in fishing camp). It had belonged to my paternal grandfather. It had electricity, but no running water. However, the cottage next door, occupied by my uncle and aunt, had a well and an outdoor pump with a long handle; and we carried water pails from there for a few years until our across-the-road neighbors dug their own well and installed an outside tap from which we could fill our two large buckets. Along with a dipper, basins and pots, the pails sat on a table on our back porch and served us well for washing, bathing, and food preparation, much of which my mother did on that porch. The porch also housed a washing machine (a couple of outdoor clotheslines served as our dryer) and, before we acquired a refrigerator, an icebox. And, yes, the Iceman did come regularly with a huge block of the solidly frozen water that lasted a few days.

For the children who spent their summers in Pamdenec, the life was simple and represented a freedom that would not be seen today. Stan Cohen and the Guss sisters each provided an overview of summer life in the 1940s and 1950s. Stan Cohen remembered:

Sleeping late, eating a big breakfast—often including some freshly picked berries—venturing up the road to see what was doing or who else might be hanging out, swatting fly balls or maybe getting in an inning or two of pick-up softball, perhaps visiting the bottle opener at Mr. Marvin’s to look for new bottle caps to add to one’s collection, and then home for lunch or picking up lunch, changing into swim trunks and heading for the beach. If the weather were sunny and warm, one might spend all afternoon at the beach. Some people owned rowboats, one or two had canoes and some fancier folks had their own outboard motors. No one I knew owned a sailboat, let alone a yacht.



Ita Freedman on the beach in  
Pamdenec

The written memoir of the Guss family was a group effort of the three Guss sisters – Keren, Faith and Judy:

Every morning we walked up to the top of the steep dirt hill, past Jack and Rose Freedman's house, over the railroad tracks to where the Postmaster had an "office." We collected all the mail and then trooped down the hill and delivered the mail to all the residents of Pamdenec. (Can you imagine the Post Office letting us do that NOW!)

After lunch we all assembled at the beach in front of the Bernstein's House. The beach was an assemblage of rocks and stones that extended into the icy cold water. We all wore our sneakers into the water to protect our feet, and then threw them to shore when we started to swim. Of course, we depended on each other to throw us our sneakers and a towel when we were ready to come out!

As we got older, we'd assemble at our house after dinner to play "capture the flag" in the woods behind our house. Those thick woods went down a hill in

which we had worn many paths, all leading to a brook called “The Brook”. I don’t think it had a name. We had made a little bridge with stones so that we could cross. On the other side of the brook was Grand Bay, and particularly the “grand” estate of the Davis / Wiezel clan. ...

A video interview with Erminie Bernstein Cohen revealed the adventures of several teenage girls in the 1940s. She reported that her fondest memories were of the days spent at “Schegarbern Beach,” located downriver at Hamm’s Point. Erminie was accompanied by her friends Marcia Freedman, Phyllis Schecter, Helen and Rose Garson, and Alice Gold on these day-long excursions. The girls loaded a rowboat, named the “Erminie J,” with a picnic lunch. Phyllis Schecter swam alongside as there was not enough room for everyone in the boat. They spent the day swimming and then returned at night. No one worried as long as they came home in time for dinner.



Elman cottage under construction in Pamdenec, early 1920s.

The mothers who spent the summers in Pamdenec, also enjoyed some freedom from their regular housekeeping chores and were able to socialize together, but still needed to prepare meals and desserts for children hungry from a day of adventures. Sometimes good intentions were foiled by circumstances, as Norman Hamburg recorded in his memoir:

One time I picked blueberries ... up at the tracks. We used to have 15 people come and stay in our homes, the two houses all summer. So there was a pile of people and my grandmother and Oscar’s mother in law used to come and they used to bake so I had picked three quart bottles, milk bottles, the glass ones, of blueberries and to pick three quart bottles – that was work. That took a long time and I had taken my bike to the tracks to do it and, you know, I was holding the handlebars, two in one hand and one in the other and I came down the

bumpy road and I made it all the way down and just as I'm turning on to our road, I was like 50 feet away and I hit a root going across and all three bottles smashed. And I'm telling you, I remember myself, but they tell me, I went into the little house and I was so upset I cried all afternoon. All that work! And they were going to make blueberry pies! I'll never forget it, never!

The evenings were devoted to dances, drive in movies, and baseball games. Diane Koven, who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s remembered in her 1984 oral interview that:

...even in the evenings there was always something going on with the adults, the kids, everybody did things together, they had bingo, they had Sadie Hawkins dances, and a lot of different activities that you looked forward [to] from summer to summer. And at the beginning of the summer you made your plans. I remember the Sadie Hawkins, we'd all be talking about who our dates would be and then what you were going to take in your picnic lunch because everybody had to bring a box lunch. Some of the boys would ask when they were invited to the party what's going to be in the picnic lunch. That was how they decided who their dates should be.

The Young Men's Hebrew Association organized a baseball team in the C.P.R. League in the 1940s and community members hurried through supper before heading out to cheer on the team. Solly Goldberg was the coach and shortstop. Bernard Freedman was one of the three catchers and listed the other players: pitchers: Sam Everett, Charlie Chaplin, Seymour Miller; catchers: Zel Fine, Bernie Freedman, B.J. (Ben) Jacobson; 1<sup>st</sup> base: Jerry Koven; 2<sup>nd</sup> base: Harry Levine; 3<sup>rd</sup> base: Sonny Smith; Shortstop: Solly Goldberg; outfield: Bucky Jacobson, I.J. Davis, Ben Cohen, Joe Gordon; relief players: Cyril Gilbert, Mortie Bernstein, Seymour Rozovsky, Wolfe Gordon, Morry Gordon. There were also games between teams from "uphill" and "downhill" and from Pamdenec and Epworth Park. Results of these games were often recorded in the Saint John newspapers.



Hebrew School picnic,  
1924.

Also recorded in Saint John newspapers were stories about community events in Pamdenec, most notably the annual picnics held for the Hebrew School children, including this account from *The Evening Times-Star* of July 31, 1924:

The first annual picnic of the pupils of the Hebrew school in the city was held yesterday at Pamdenec and was a thoroughly enjoyed event. The picnic was held under the auspices of the congregation Shaarei Zedek.(...) and those in charge were Hiram Jacobson, president; William Webber, vice-president; I. Ellman and A. Babb, principal of the school. The committee in charge of the sports consisted of Mitchell Bernstein, Maurice Ellman and Eli Boyaner.

There were about 75 pupils at the picnic and they were all conveyed to and from Pamdenec in automobiles which were provided by Eli Boyaner, Louis Urdang and H. Marcus. The party left the Synagogue at 9 o'clock in the morning and the drive to Pamdenec occupied about an hour. The morning was spent in games of all kinds and a bountiful dinner was served at noon.

During the programme of races and sports in the afternoon there was an interval for the service of refreshments and supper was served at 7 o'clock. After supper the announcement of prize winners was made and the 35 successful contestants received the acceptable prizes.

The picnickers returned to the city about 10 o'clock and one and all voted the day a complete success. Many adults were visitors at the picnic and assisted in entertaining the children.

Occasional newspaper reports would also appear on the social pages of teas held at some of the homes in Pamdenec sponsored by members of the Hadassah-WIZO.

Life in Pamdenec offered an escape from city life and relaxation for Jewish families, but some things were inescapable. Sam Davis remembered that the Jewish community did not have access to the clubhouse or the tennis court in Pamdenec. The Bassen family built a tennis court on their property, complete with fencing and organized their own tournament:

... Morrie Elman was an exceptionally good tennis player. He didn't have the muscle but he had skill. And he probably should have been the champ or near to it and then there were others - Frank Boyaner had a very strong game and so on and so forth. And they began this process of competition and the fellas from town - the Marcuses. And gradually it developed - this kid Abe Davis is just putting them one by one - he just plays you and he beats you. When they got down to the final - I can't for the life of me remember who the other fellow was but Abe won the championship and they gave him a cup. It was just a cup, a silver cup about six inches high ...





Harry and Mary  
Cohen with children  
Stan and Ann.

In his memoirs, Stan Cohen recalled his experiences from the late 1930s and 1940s:

... the village was my first lesson in segregation. The beaches, for example, were clearly either Jewish or non-Jewish, but definitely separate. Meanwhile, our non-Jewish neighbors had their own beach somewhere between the Garsons and the Liebermans; but none of us ventured there, nor were we invited. ... The non-water recreational facilities in the village were owned and run by the Pamdenec Outing Association. During my formative years no Jew need apply for membership: it was not available. The association owned a clubhouse, where it held occasional dances and other events. (I got as far as the porch but had no idea what was inside.) ... the outing association's clubhouse was off limits till many years later (the early 1960s, I believe) when the association's treasury needed enhancing, and suddenly the doors and memberships were open to members of the Jewish community. I do not know when Jews were also allowed onto the association's tennis courts that we could only watch from behind a link fence during our years of growing up. When integration finally occurred, most Jewish kids went off to summer camp and didn't need the association's facilities.

It was not until the 1950s that Jewish families gained access to the clubhouse and this was where they gathered to organize plays and musicals.

The beginning and end of the Second World War were also marked in Pamdenec, the first as the summer was ending and families were returning to Saint John; the second in the midst of summer activities.



Guss Family.

Summers in Pamdenec came to an end as families chose to send their children to Camp Kadimah, a Jewish summer camp established on the south shore of Nova Scotia. Many of the cottages the Jewish community built survive, as renovated and modernized year-round homes, but it can be challenging to find traces of the beaches and fields frequented by past generations of Jewish children and their parents. Even so, the indelible memories of this landscape remain.

The memoirs of Pamdenec, those that were recorded in interviews or written down, focused most closely on the positive experience. Allen Selby described it as “A happy time. A gentle time.” and Diane Koven noted that “everybody was happy in those days.” It is fitting to end this exploration of landscape as recalled through the memoirs preserved in the Saint John Jewish Historical Museum with a verse from “Last September,” a song composed by Michael Bassen and Gary Davis in the early 1960s:

Months ago, golden days of September  
 In a mist I see you, I remember.  
 It was warm in a way  
 That still haunts me today,  
 Lingering in melancholy joy.