

WEEKEND

A Touch of Scandinavia

Most visitors to Wisconsin's scenic Door County skip modest Washington Island. They don't know what they're missing. BY MELANIE R. McMANUS

An acrid smell wafts up from the glass in front of me. I've ordered a shot of Angostura bitters, *the* drink at Nelsen's Hall Bitters Pub, on tiny Washington Island, Wisconsin, and now I have to drink it. All eyes are on me as I toss the stuff down and gulp the beer chaser. I grin, and the table erupts in applause.

"Congratulations!" exclaims the waitress, who dunks my thumb in more bitters and rolls it onto a card that proclaims me a member of the Nelsen's Hall Bitters Club. "You're now a true islander."

Nelsen's Hall, a 103-year-old tavern on this island off the tip of Door County, serves more bitters than any other spot in the world; it has a trophy from the Angostura company of Trinidad to prove it. Yet most of the two million visitors who

yearly flock to Door County—which includes Washington Island—don't know about the Bitters Club; they prefer to stay on the mainland, with its boutiques, inns, and galleries. Washington Island, you see, is something of a secret kept by travelers who love history and nature, and dislike crowds. Those brave enough to ferry across Death's Door—the name of the treacherous channel between the island and the peninsula—never regret it.

Washington Island was settled in the mid-1800s by immigrants from Iceland, who felt at home in its rockbound landscape. They attracted like-minded Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, and the place developed into a fishing, farming, and logging community. The island's pride in its Scandinavian heritage shows, in the Scandinavian flags that ripple in the harbor, the wooden stave church—*stavkirke*—painstakingly built by islanders, and in the Icelandic horses kept at Field Wood Farm.

These small horses have a reputation for strength and even tempers, I learn when I stop by. As farm owner Laurie Veness readies to take a group on an excursion, she explains that these horses have five, not the usual four, gaits.

Veness, local guide Ed Livingston tells me, is sister-in-law to the chief carpenter of the *stavkirke* project. This community of 680 is close-knit. "If you look back on your family tree here," Livingston notes, laughing, "pretty soon you find out you are your own grandfather."

Livingston has steered me to another source of local pride, Schoolhouse Beach, with layers of limestone rocks that have

been tumbled to a satiny sheen. I am tempted to pocket one, but don't; the beach used to be piled high with stones, but sticky fingers have helped deplete it.

Not even the most determined could pry loose Rock Island, a mile offshore, Wisconsin's most isolated state park and home to the ghostly legacy of Iceland emigrant Chester H. Thordarson. I hop on the ferry for the 15-minute crossing.



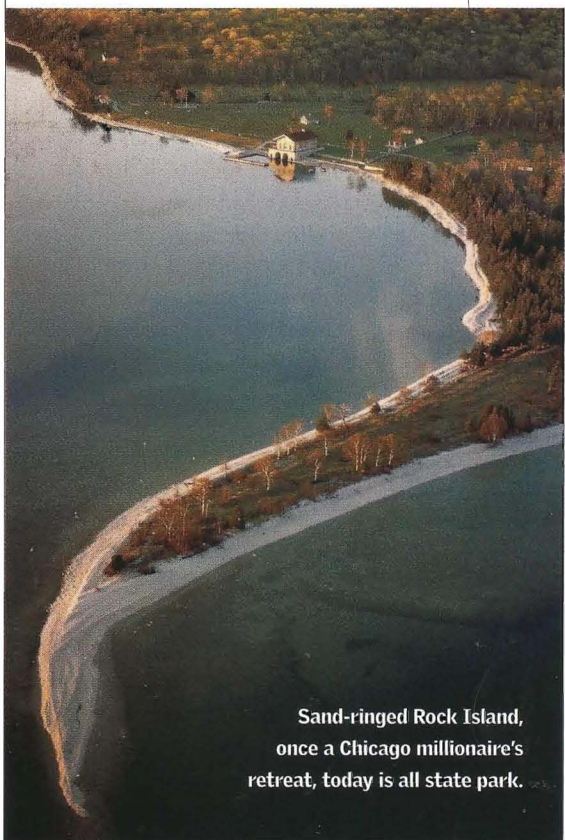
The Washington Island ferry, ready to board.

Thordarson, a millionaire inventor and owner of a Chicago company, bought much of the island in the early 1900s as a retreat. I check out the buildings that remain of his estate; ten are on the National Register of Historic Places, including Viking Hall boathouse, whose cavernous upper room is furnished with large carved-oak pieces. One structure predates Thordarson's presence here: Potawatowmie Light, Wisconsin's oldest. I clamber up to the lantern room and find a phenomenal view of Lake Michigan.

My last day I consider going back to Nelsen's Hall for a final shot of bitters. The pub was founded by Tom Nelsen, a Dane said to have downed a pint a day. A second shot should do it for me.

travelwise **Best For:** Adults and older children. **Basics:** Washington Island Chamber of Commerce, 920-847-2179; www.washingtonislandwi.org. Nelsen's Hall Bitters Pub, 800-635-7367; www.washingtonisland.com/nelsens. Field Wood Farm, W. Harbor Rd.; 920-847-2490.

MELANIE R. McMANUS writes often about her home state of Wisconsin.



Sand-ringed Rock Island, once a Chicago millionaire's retreat, today is all state park.