



Island of the Sorrows

By GARY THOMSON

The burial trenches run in gently curving hollows across open meadow then disappear into bush cover, alder and sumac and wild rose. Field daisies and goldenrod make a gentle border. Symbolic white crosses stand in dogged rows, some pulled aslant by the settling earth.

Nature has softened the horror of this place of mass death, but Annie Simard, my guide, recalls it in chilling detail: "Porters carried the dead from the fever sheds or from the ships and dumped them here two, three, four deep. Most had no money, no clothes. Few friends or relatives to grieve for them. Many ran fever-crazy into the woods and were later buried where they dropped. On the worst day 112 died. June 24, 1847. The worst day of plague summer."

Few Canadians know of the sufferings attached to Grosse Ile, a green and pleasant St. Lawrence island lazily 50 kilometres below Quebec City.

For a hundred years and more it served as central quarantine station for the flood of European immigrants who were striving to reach the Canadian interior.

Public access to the island was always limited. After its closure in 1937 visitors had to secure permission from Canada's Department of Agriculture for limited viewing of the buildings.

Now, with Parks Canada's decision to open Grosse Ile as a National Historic Site in 1993, Canadians will

be allowed entry into a dramatic period setting of this country's development.

The rush of immigrants began shortly after the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815 as armies of men sought new livelihoods. Land clearances in Scotland and industrialization throughout Great Britain convinced many small farmers to emigrate. Years of famine in the 1840s drove tens of thousands of Irish peasants to embarkation ports at Cork, Dublin and Belfast.

The great timber fleets carried much of this "walking ballast" to North America. In their greed and haste many ship-masters provided skimpy provisions, overcrowding and sickly conditions for the impoverished migrants.

Often the ships carried fever and contagion. In 1832 the colonial legislature responded to local fears of a virulent cholera epidemic in Europe and Britain. Assembly members chose the isolated island of Grosse Ile on which to build a quarantine station.

The Passenger Act specified procedures for all incoming ships: Stop for inspection at designated buoy markers; signal the presence of on-board sick with a blue flag; procure a certificate of health before proceeding to Quebec.

Still, the volume of immigrant traffic that spring overwhelmed the small facility. By early June 397 ships had arrived and the dying began in earnest. Medical personnel passed many ships along to Quebec with only cursory inspection. By late summer the city reported 3,200 cholera deaths. More than that perished at Grosse Ile.

Annie Simard raises her arm over a broad bay on the northwest corner of the island. Now at low tide mud flats gleam in the sun. A cormorant flies toward the bordering spruce trees. "Cholera Bay" she says. "Here the victims of '32 were buried, when the tide was out. Workmen dug large pits in the mud with wooden forks. Pay was several shillings each body."

Today, visitors no longer need special permits to conjure the suffering and lamentations of Canada's early boat people. A new tourist organization in Montmagny, on the south shore opposite Grosse Ile, maintains sole responsibility for transporting and guiding sightseers. Founded in 1983, the non-profit *Corporation Pour la Mise en Valeur de Grosse Ile* has a mandate to monitor and evaluate for Parks Canada acceptable visitor numbers, potential problem spots and informative itineraries.

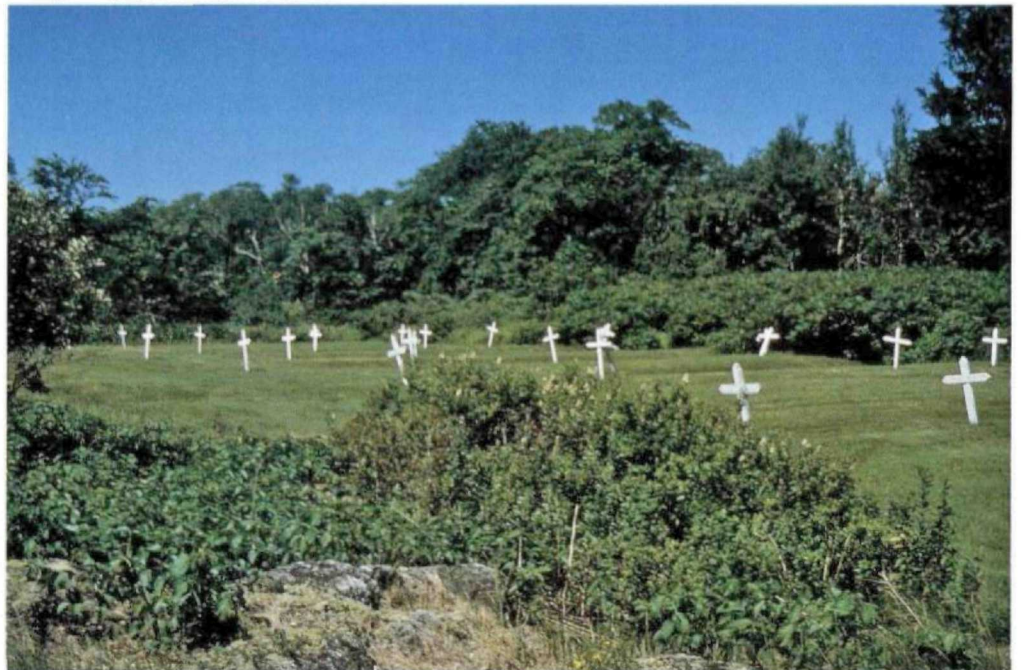
Company President Jean-Marie Dionne told me, "We insist on common sense viewing: Keep together on marked trails. No entry to most buildings. Respect the grave sites and memorials."

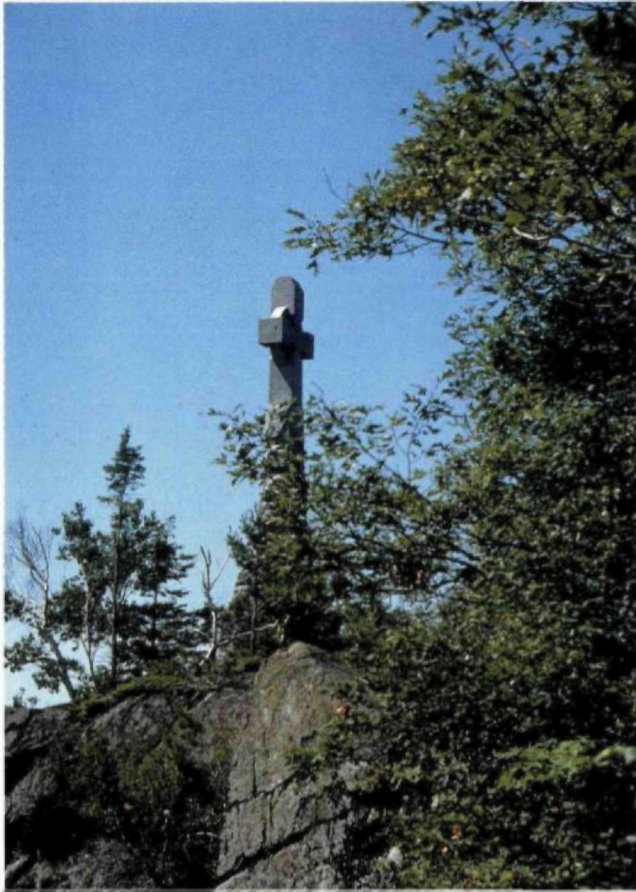
To establish a context for Grosse Ile, M. Dionne directs visitors first to the elaborate interpretive display in the new tourist office in Montmagny.



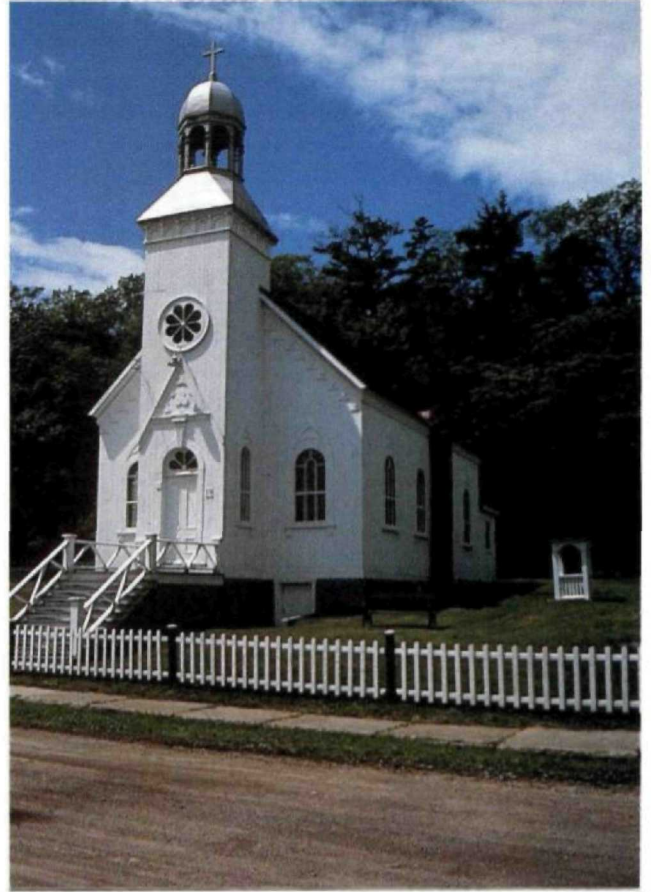
Fever shed #4, one of 12 such buildings. The interior walls were painted red in the belief that the colour promoted recovery. Windows were painted red to keep out "harmful" daylight. The sick lay in crowded rows of bunks.

Victims of the 1847 typhus tragedy lie in mass graves in this field under simple white crosses. There are over 5,000 recorded deaths for the famine years, although it is thought by some that as many as 12,000 perished. All photographs are by the author.

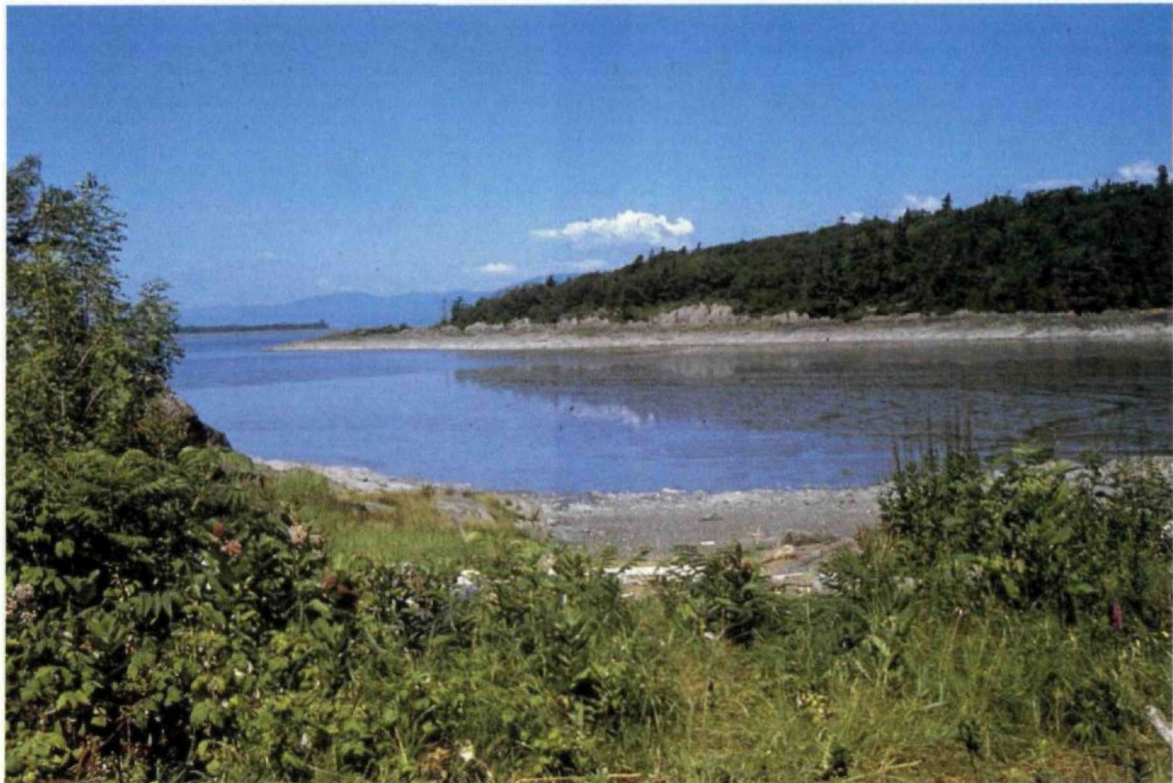




The 40 foot high Celtic cross was erected in 1909 by the Ancient Order of Hibernians as a memorial to the typhus victims: "Sacred to the memory of thousands of Irish emigrants, who, to preserve the Faith, suffered hunger and exile in 1847-48, and stricken with fever, ended here their sorrowful pilgrimage".



The Roman Catholic church was dedicated to St. Luke in 1875. Close by is the bell from an 1832 church destroyed by fire.



View overlooking "Cholera Bay". In these mud flats were buried victims of the 1832 epidemic.

Four broad aisles of building models, maps, period photos, and a French language video emphasize the island's early medical importance. Here a miniature horse-drawn ambulance rumbles toward the hospital. Nearby stands a newly painted guardhouse. In the original, armed men prohibited quarantined patients moving out of restricted areas.

Still, nothing here can prepare the visitor for the poignancy of Grosse Ile's greatest tragedy. Approach to the island leads close to a towering Celtic cross on the southwest tip. Stark and beautiful, the monument commemorates the Irish summer of sorrow, 1847.

Two years of disastrous potato blight and disease drove many thousands of Irish tenant farmers to emigrate that summer. Fearing sickness and overcrowding, American ports had closed to the newcomers.

Thus by 31 May, 40 vessels with 15,000 passengers stretched in a line two miles down the St. Lawrence. All held sick or dead. One report tells of bodies being winched out of a hold, the golden hair of a girl drifting in a breeze.

On Grosse Ile 1,200 sick suffered the delirium, raging thirst, headache and diarrhea of typhus. They crowded the little wooden church, stifling canvas tents and new raised sheds. They huddled on the ground, under sparse shade.

By midsummer 22 of the 26 doctors on the island had suffered typhus symptoms. Catholic and Anglican priests worked in the fetid sheds and hauled buckets of river water to soothe raging fevers. Nursing staff, soldiers, and cooks fought to provide adequate food, sleeping areas and common comforts.

Death came in staggering numbers, 50 per day on average. The resident Roman Catholic priest wrote in his register, "I, the undersigned, have this day buried Patrick Murphy, John Kelly, Maria Brown and forty three others . . ."

Workmen filled the common burial trenches; and to cover the bodies brought additional topsoil from Montmagny. The Hospital Steward gathered money and personal effects of the dead who had no relatives. Some funds he used to care for orphaned children. All of these orphans were later adopted by families along the river, with the proviso that they keep their Irish names.

By summer's end more than 70,000 Irish immigrants had stopped at Grosse Ile. Of these 9,000 needed hospitalization. Officials noted 5,300 deaths, with many more unrecorded.

Never again did Grosse Isle face an equivalent nightmare. Efficient, fast steamships brought healthier passengers. Vigilant inspection halted later epidemics from Europe — typhus in 1868, yellow fever in 1889 and bubonic plague in 1902. Mostly, doctors concentrated on inoculation against the "childhood diseases", smallpox, diphtheria, and scarlet fever.

Government funding went to modernizing and updating existing facilities. In the 1890s new steam chambers were installed to disinfect clothing and baggage. A decade later workmen constructed a hotel for immigrants travelling first class; and later a hotel for each of second and third class.

After World War I many steamer captains preferred to travel through to Montreal, thus avoiding the dockless island. If necessary they used ship-to-shore radio to call a doctor on board.

In 1937 Grosse Ile closed as an immigration hospital. Now owned by Agriculture Canada, it serves as quarantine centre for animals and as a training facility for veterinarians in exotic diseases.

During World War II Canada's Department of National Defence conducted secret "germ-warfare" testing on the island, including experiments on an "anthrax bomb". Other "germ-warfare" tests are said to have been conducted during the height of the Cold War in the 1950s.

Several factors determine Grosse Ile's selection as a National Historic Park: its importance to the early development of Canada; collection of extant artifacts, and development feasibility.

Many of the island's 54 buildings and wharves need repair and stabilizing, with recent cost estimates reaching \$250,000.

The island's historical importance is paramount. Countless thousands of immigrants fleeing economic oppression and social upheaval made first, tentative contact with Canada at Grosse Ile. Their later efforts and success at nation-building form an epic tale of which we are all a part. ♦

Freelance writer Gary Thomson lives in Belleville, Ontario.

