

Jack and Jill Ranch to Double JJ Resort – A History

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The Storm Family, original owners of the Double JJ Ranch

In 1914 George and Clara (ne Storm) Stauch left their home in Chicago, Illinois with their three children, Roma, George and Robert, and settle on 80 acres of farmland in Western Michigan. The

farm included a brick home built by the Kennedy family in 1894. The land also had a large, spring fed lake called Big Wildcat Lake.

In 1930, daughter Roma was employed as a teacher at a private school for girls. She was the first to use the lake setting and surrounding woods at her father's farm commercially. She presented a summer camping experience at Wildcat Lake to her students, hoping to get their parents' approval. Roma would be the councilor and instruct 8- to 12-year-olds in outdoor camping, crafts, swimming, drama, dancing, and sports, including horseback riding. Her project got parental approval, and her first year brought 23 girls to her camp. The camp was named "Cedar Shores" because of the hundreds of white cedar trees surrounding the lake.

The depression of the early thirties cut short Roma's efforts and the Cedar Shores experience faded into history.

The beauty of the lake and ease of camping was well known in the community, and during the summer of 1933 the family invited local church congregations to send their children to the farm for a supervised, well counseled summer vacation. This was the Cedar Shores experience two years later, but with kids. To honor their young guests the family renamed the farm "The Jack and Jill Ranch". Although the kids' ranch remained only two years (followed by a more grandiose camping experience) the name Jack and Jill Ranch was a success beyond imagination and the property was called by that name until the mid-1970s when the owners decided to change the name to the Double JJ Ranch Resort, and in 2009 to the Double JJ Resort.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, dude ranches began to spring up in the Michigan landscape (minus the mountains, canyons and high desert plains). A few places bearing the moniker "ranch" – such as the Rainbow Ranch in New Era, which opened in 1949 – offered horseback riding, but not a complete ranch vacation. In 1954, 7,755 Michigianians checked into bunkhouses at six dude ranches located in the northern part of the state. Besides horseback riding, ranches might have offered square-dance hoedowns, hayrides, cookouts, archery, fishing, canoeing, swimming and water-skiing. Staff often doubled as teachers and entertainers.

The dude ranches of the American West were mostly working ranches, where cattle were raised as a business, but paying guests could learn to ride horseback, participate in the required daily chores and socialize with real cowboys. In the old days a "dude" was a tenderfoot who came West and tried to emulate a cowboy in dress and manner. In mid-America, the term referred to a "city feller" who was a guest on a dude ranch. A female due was a "dudette".

George Storm, the son (having changed his name from Stauch to Storm) was teaching psychology at the University of Miami, Florida in 1934. In addition to his classes in speech, public speaking, and psychology, he was head counselor to departing senior students. He learned that they enjoyed their vacations with people their own age. His concept of bringing people of the same age (18 to 35) together for an outdoor vacation and camping experience was a winner. He had just the place: The Jack and Jill Ranch. In 1936 George Storm, the visionary, took control and with family help embarked on his concept. He named the new venture The Jack and Jill Colony Camp - later changing it to the Jack and Jill Ranch. The Ranch grew and expanded as George bought neighboring farms and extended marketing.

The Jack and Jill Ranch welcomed its first guests in 1937. George K. Storm, with his staff of 65 wranglers and 65 horses, could accommodate 175 people. A special feature was a steak dinner grilled by the wranglers. The ranch also hosted a greased pig chase, a spitting contest, a wood-chopping contest for the men and a rolling-pin throwing contest for the women.

Jack and Jill Ranch was the only vacation camp of its kind in the United States according to an article in The Montague Observer in May 1942. It caters only to young men and women between the ages of 19 and 35 and positively does not take guests who belong to the “rocking chair” brigade.

Every minute of the vacationer’s time is planned for them – if they want it that way. There are overnight canoe trips up White River, pack trips on horseback to Lake Michigan, instructions in archery and riflery, tennis, swimming in Big Wildcat Lake, hiking and on some evenings, dancing, stunt-nights, ping-pong and any of a dozen other forms of entertainment.

With 1942 being only the fifth year for the camp it had achieved great popularity with vacationers coming from as far south as Alabama, as far west Nebraska, and as far east as New York and New Jersey. The ranch opened six weeks earlier that year – on May 1. They had accommodations for 110 guests and 40 employees.

George has been in business with his brother Robert during this time. He bought out his brother around 1948. Over the years, others owned the ranch and made their mark.

In 1955 Wally Wojack purchased the 2,300-acre horse ranch that he had been closely involved with since arriving as a guest in 1950. Wojack and a group of Rothbury- area locals planted a barren hayfield with 6-inch white pine seedlings furnished by the State of Michigan creating a small forest of now over 70-foot tall pines called Sherwood Forest. This is where the Electric Forest is held every year. Wally was considered the local historian, story teller, and mentor for many of the ranch hands and employees, and his passion for nature and people helped build lasting memories for all the guests. He lived and actively worked at the ranch he loved until his passing. Walter C. Wojack was born in Cleveland, OH on 2 November 1927. He died in Aultman Hospital in Canton on April 8, 2017, at the age of 89. He had two sons, Randall and Christopher, with his wife Sandra, who died 2 Nov 2012.

In honor and memory of Walter “Wally” Wojack the Double JJ Resort holds the annual Wally Wojack Memorial Rodeo the Saturday of Labor Day weekend each year. Rodeo athletes from across the region compete in the 3,000-seat rodeo arena in bull riding, barrel racing, team roping and all the classic rodeo stunts for a weekend the whole family can enjoy.

In May 1958, it was reported that George Storms had sold Jack & Jill Ranch to Seth L. Winslow of Chicago. He and his wife Jean still maintained it in 1968.

In 1975, Alan VanDuinen was creating some unique objects that were used as trophies at the Double JJ for their guests who excelled in horsemanship, archery and riflery. The trophies were made from horseshoe nails and other common household gadgets and were mounted on pine wood blocks or driftwood.

From 1987 until 2010 Joan and Bob Lipsitz of Detroit operated the ranch in partnership with Wally Wojack. In 1992, at the cost of \$1 million, they built the beautiful Thoroughbred Golf Club. In 1993, condos and a hotel were added to the Thoroughbred complex and in 1997 the first year-around facility opened – the Sundance Saloon and Steakhouse overlooking the golf course.

With the facility primarily used by men and women, they were being asked for activities for the kids, a place where the whole family could come. The Lipsitzes responded by building the Back Forty, which opened in July 1998. At the center of the Back Forty is an Old West Main Street with shops and restaurants. There is a kids' boarding camp, log cabins for family rental, a recreational vehicle park tucked in the woods, an outdoor water park with a 145-foot slide and lots of outdoor, ranch-inspired activities.

Receiving the state's first tourism grant for \$600,000 for road and infrastructure, the development ventured into the construction of 23 private log vacation homes, with an additional 35 more to come.

In 2002, Hospitality business veteran Chris Hart joined the Double JJ as general manager. Hart oversaw the day-to-day operations of the ranch. Joan Lipsitz headed up ranch administration and marketing, and also did all of the interior design and decorating of the public facilities. Bob was then able to concentrate on development and future expansion,

In 2005 the New Frontier complex was created which was to include a 19,000 square foot conference center (which was never built due to financial difficulties) and a 60,000 square foot mine-shaft-themed indoor water park with two slide towers, wave pool, a 45-foot rock waterfall with climbs to elevated pools, and adult and children's arcades.

In 2008 The Rothbury Festival (now known as the Electric Forrest Festival) was held on Double JJ's property for the first time. Performers during the first festival included the Dave Matthews Band, Jakob Dylan & the Gold Mountain Rebels, Snoop Dogg, 311, and John Mayer among more than 60 other acts.

In July 2008 the Double JJ Ranch filed for bankruptcy. The resort was slated to be sold at an auction, however Progressive Resorts LLC stepped forward at the last minute to purchase the entire resort and re-opened it as such in August. The Rothbury Festival was held again in 2009 and was on hiatus in 2010.

In January 2010 there were new owners of the Double JJ Resort. Co-owner John Britton of Erie, PA, was part of the Progressive Resorts LLC which purchased the 2,000 acre resort in July 2009 for about \$12 million from the US Bankruptcy Court in GR from previous owners Bob & Joan Lipsitz. The new ownership group hired American Resort Management LLC of Erie, PA to manage the resort when it was first purchased. Since then, Britton indicated that the owners have taken a more active management role and hired Tom Makowski as general manager. They are also working with Walter "Wally" Wojack, a former co-owner with the Lipsitzes who also a creditor in the Double JJ bankruptcy. Understanding the value of Wally to the property and the culture of Double JJ, the group welcomed him with open arms and hoped for his continued heritage with the resort.

By September 2014 a news article reported that new owners, Antler Bar Amusements, were making a number of renovations and upgrades to the Double JJ Resort property. At the lead was Matthew

Halbower, a Chicago businessman and Whitehall native. His father, Norman Halbower, a retired attorney, was onsite managing the transition of the property. In addition to changing the landscape of the golf course, new roofs were put on the restaurants, Indoor Water Park, Loft, Wagon Wheel and the Back Forty buildings. All 94 of the cabins on site were cleaned and the flooring replaced. New HVAC systems were installed in all the cabins and lofts as well. The overall investment was \$2.4 million. Norm Halbower is still listed as owner.

The Electric Forrest Festival has been held at the resort every year since 2011, with the exception of 2020, however, due to the pandemic. It is estimated that between 45,000 to 50,000 people attend the event. In 2023 the Village of Rothbury received over \$300,000 from the festival, which goes toward Village enhancements. In April 2024 the Village of Rothbury Council voted to change the number of festival attendees from 50,000 to 70,000. Also the festival has been moved up and will be held from June 17-22, 2025 to coincide with the Summer Solstice.

Today there are 2,000 acres of ranch property, three large lakes, the Arthur Hill's designed Thoroughbred Golf Club (1993), Sundance Saloon & Steakhouse (1996), Back Forty resort for kids and families (1998), and the Gold Rush Indoor Waterpark and adjoining condo rental suites (2006). The Grand View Golf Course, designed by David Goerbig in 1994, was acquired in 2017.

As the ranch is open year around, they also offer horse-drawn sleigh rides, snow tubing hills, hiking, cross-country skiing and horseback riding in the winter. They make their own snow for the tubing hill and snowboarding.