

CULTURAL MOMENT FOR MAY 4, 2026 CELEBRATES HOW BIG ISLAND BECAME PIGGY ISLAND (BRIEFLY) – PART 1

For a very short while, Big Island, located in the middle of Luther Marsh, was known as "Piggy Island." The following information comes from the person involved, and in no way was he or any animals involved harmed!

As Alan Jackson once sang, "Could have been the whiskey. Might have been the gin." Well, it was definitely Irish Whiskey on an evening after work some time ago at the Luther Marsh as a few Grand River Conservation employees sat around a table in Damascus wondering what they could do to liven things up.

"What could we do?" one asked.

"Well, we could have a boar hunt in the Marsh in the fall," replied another.

Good idea? Maybe, maybe not.

Resourceful as one of the men were, Jack Benham went to Harry Duncan, a councillor for West Luther and pig farmer who supplied a sow with a litter of piglets in exchange for a load of grain.

So with 15 men working one day, they loaded up the sow and piglets into rowboats and took them to Big Island, some 200 acres in the middle of Luther Marsh. Once they arrived, pigs do what pigs do: they root around to forage for food, and all was well.

Some weeks later a group of avid bird watchers from Guelph planned a weekend birding at the Luther Marsh at (you guessed it) Big Island. They rented canoes, paddled across and set up their campsites and settled in for a nice, quiet birding experience. While they were off exploring the island in search of sightings and photos, pigs do what pigs do: they invaded a nice little camp that offered free food, tents to demolish and generally make a mess of everything.

When the birders arrived back at their camp, they were sure there was some sort of pig operation on the island that they wanted no part of so they left but didn't leave it at that. The bird watchers then contacted the Ministry of Lands and Forests in Toronto to report these animals. As the news travelled to the GRCA's head office in Cambridge, all hell had broken loose. How could the GRCA condone a commercial pig operation on an island in the Luther Marsh?



One of the 13 pigs who briefly called Big Island home. (Photo from Jack Benham)

Head office types do what head office types do: they ordered the staff at Luther Marsh to deal with the pigs. However, after a couple of months of freedom these feral pigs did not want to co-operate any more than penned pigs want to co-operate, so the staff went back to shore and gathered some lumber to build a corral. They baited the enclosure with corn and hoped for the best.

The plan worked. All 12 pigs and their mother were in the corral. The sow was a mean one and needed a little more coaxing, so Jack had a rope and told the lads to get ready to tackle and lay her on her side so he could hogtie her. The sow was lassoed and when Jack looked around no one was in sight. Mother Pig decided to make a run for it, dragging Jack along. There was only one person not laughing at the sight.

The laughter died down, the sow was finally tied up sufficiently that she couldn't run, and the pigs were put into sacks and tied up tight. They got them all to the rowboats but then another problem: the sow had gained a bunch of weight, and the rowboat would not be enough to get her to the shore. A call went to head office to get an airboat to the Luther Marsh as soon as possible.

The airboat arrived over to Big Island, and the sow was loaded on the front. If the boat sped up, the front dipped down into the water, so a very slow-paced procession inched its way to shore while the sow squealed constantly. Meanwhile, on shore some tourists had come to visit the Marsh and saw what they were sure was a lion being captured. They too left in a hurry...

To be continued in Part 2...

Submitted by Bonny McDougall, Wellington North Cultural Roundtable