THE ATTRACTIONS OF CRYSTAL LAKE AND VICINITY

By Rev. Frank T. Lee -- Part III

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Crystal Lake. The number of inland lakes in the state of Michigan, while not definitely known, has been conservatively estimated as at least five thousand, ranging in area from thirty square miles down to small unnamed ponds. These lakes constitute about one fiftieth of the total area of the state. Assuming that all of them in both peninsulas could be grained, more than twelve hundred square miles of land would be opened to cultivation. In addition, many nearby swamps would likewise be made available for farming purposes.

But although these lakes in themselves are a valuable asset, functioning as they do in many practical ways, —power, irrigation, logging operations, water supply, traffic, etc.— their most important function after all is not commercial. It lies, rather, in the unique advantages which they afford for needed summer outings for multitudes of tired people, and general recreation purposes. This has become recognized throughout Michigan, and now multitudes from outside the state are more and more availing themselves of these advantages. The pure air, cool temperature, simple conditions of life, facilities for boating, fishing, bathing, stimulate to renewed mental and physical vigor. Here, by these lakes, one may rest—

"Escaped awhile from cares that wear the life away."

Crystal Lake is about nine miles long from west to east more nearly from northwest to southwest), and from two to three in average width, it covers some twenty square miles or more. Its outline is somewhat irregular. It is surrounded by wooded hills, some of them of considerable height with steep bluffs. Its shores are sandy, its beaches wide, and its waters remarkably pure. Although shallow for a considerable distance out from the shore, farther out it is frequently two hundred feet deep, in some places even more. In one place it has been found to be six hundred feet. There are no low, marshy or reedy places in or about it. A traveler who recently returned from a tour abroad says that although he had visited the celebrated lakes of England and Scotland, of Switzerland and Italy, as well as those of our own country, he had never seen a more attractive body of water, all things considered, than Crystal Lake. This is high praise, but there is certainly not a little ground for it. The drive of twenty-five miles around the lake over a firm stone road and close by the shore for most of the way, is one of the delightful rides of the region, not soon to be forgotten.

Geology of the Region Prof. W. G. Waterman of Northwestern University and the Congregational Summer Assembly, author of an instructive pamphlet on "Forests and Dunes from Point Betsie to Sleeping Bear," has this to say of the geographical formation of the region about Crystal Lake:

"To understand the geography of the region, its geographical history must first be reviewed briefly. Little is known of the topography before the Glacial period, but the Crystal Lake basin at least was a deep valley, as shown by its present great depth, frequently over two hundred and in one place six hundred feet. The chart of offshore soundings in Lake Michigan also shows a submerged valley on the lake bottom west of Crystal Lake. When the glaciers passed over Michigan, they deposited clay, gravel and sand in great parallel ridges in a general east and west direction, which now appear as rows of hills. When the glaciers finally retreated, the south end of the present Lake Michigan was uncovered, while the ice still closed the Straits of Mackinaw, with the result that the water was ponded at the south and the level of the lake was raised until the water flowed out through the valley now occupied by the Chicago Drainage Canal, and discharged through the Mississippi River of that day. Marks of this high water stage known as "Lake Algonquin," may still be seen in elevated beaches and terraces several miles from the shores of the present lake. At this time harbor bars were built across the mouths of many former river valleys, closing them and turning the flooded basins into permanent lakes. Within this special region there are four such valleys, now known as Frankfort Harbor, Crystal Lake, Empire Harbor, and Glen Lake. South of this region, the Herring Lakes, Portage Lake, and others still further south, had a similar origin. Crystal Lake was closed by a bar about four miles long and one mile wide."

Two Glacial Moraines. Prof. Waterman then refers to the ridges or moraines of glacial material extending on both sides of the lake from the shore of Lake Michigan to the southeast. The northern or Point Betsie ridge varies from half a mile to a mile in width. About a mile from Lake Michigan it is divided by a depression which extends from Bass Bay on Crystal Lake to the west end of Long Lake. East of this depression it widens and its summit has been partly cleared for farms. Among these are several extensive orchards. The southern or Frankfort moraine is flat-topped and broader than the northern and extends to the valley of Betsie River. Frankfort Harbor is the flooded mouth of this river. The indications are that away back in Lake Algonquin times. Crystal Lake was connected with Lake Michigan toward the north by a channel passing west of Long Lake; toward the south through the valley of the present outlet; and to the west through the then unfilled valley which now contains Crystal Lake. During this time a broad harbor bar was built across the valley between the western ends of the two glacial ridges or moraines, which was approximately two miles long and three quarters of a mile wide, and now cuts off Crystal Lake from Lake Michigan.

How Crystal Lake was Lowered and Great Business Expectations Came to Naught.
Very few people who are familiar with the present appearance of Crystal Lake and the wide beach which completely surrounds it, realize that up to 1873 the water was much higher than it is at present—eight or ten feet at least. It reached to the woods and the foot of the surrounding hills, leaving little or no space between the water and the over-hanging trees. Its area at that time was some two thousand acres more of surface than at present, and during severe storms the waves were much higher and the white caps more numerous. On the early maps of the region, indeed, the lake was called "Cap Lake," probably so named because of the special prominence of the white caps upon its surface, even with but moderate wind.

The circumstances connected with the lowering of the lake in 1873 and the story of the origin, activities and failure of the "Betsie River Improvement Co.," which was closely related to it has been graphically told by Hon. W. L. Case of Benzonia in a series of articles for the Benzie County Record and reprinted in pamphlet form. It will be unnecessary to repeat it here in detail. Briefly, to summarize the narrative the project of opening a channel between the outlet of the lake (four or five miles west of Beulah) and Betsie River which was nearly a mile distant to the south, was undertaken by Benzonia parties to permit the passage of small sized steam craft from Lake Michigan and Frankfort by way of Betsie River and the outlet up into Crystal Lake. This would make possible the transportation of the great amount of cord wood which was required for the extensive iron furnaces which were then operating in South Frankfort (now Elberta), of timber in which the region abounded to be sawed into lumber, and of tan bark to the Frankfort docks for shipment It was also planned to build a steamer for traffic on the river and channel. The "Betsie River Improvement Co.," with many stockholders and great expectations, was behind the undertaking. But alas! there was a fatal flaw in the scheme, as was realized when it was too late, in that no reliable engineer was consulted regarding the difference in the level of the lake and the river, and the dependable flow of water in the latter.

A still further part of the scheme, which developed a little later, was to extend the water-way to Platte Lake, which was only two or three miles to the north or northeast of Crystal Lake. It would be a simple and easy matter, it was thought, to cut a canal or ditch to connect the two lakes by way of Long Lake and Rush Lake, then dam up the outlet of Platte Lake and thus bring the whole Platte River system down through Crystal Lake, the outlet canal, and Betsie River to Frankfort and Lake Michigan. This time a careful survey was made before beginning to cut the canal. But the surveying party soon discovered that it was up hill from Platte Lake to Crystal, and if the canal were cut through, it would drain the latter into Platte Lake instead of the. reverse, which was the expectation. So this part of the plan had to be abandoned, much to the disappointment of those concerned.'

Outcome of the Scheme -- Meanwhile work on the channel from the outlet of Crystal Lake to Betsie River continued, and in due time it was so far advanced that it was believed the lake might safely be tapped, and all impatiently awaited the event When finally the obstructions were removed, the outpour of the water was so great as soon to become an uncontrollable torrent and the roar of it could be distinctly heard at Benzonia. five miles away. Soon the entire swamp bottom was flooded, filling the lowlands on both sides of Betsie River, carrying hundreds of stranded saw logs back to the very edge of the highland bluffs. For several days the flood continued, and each day the shore became wider as the lake was lowered. The out come of all was that the canal project had to be given up. After the flood had spent its fury there was only the outlet stream with its narrow and rapid current. The disappointment of the stockholders of the Improvement Co. was keenly felt.

Still, there was Betsie River, and from its banks a mile west of Benzonia, there might still be large commercial traffic when the steamboat was completed. This was in the early summer of the year following, 1874. The shipyard was on the bank of the river near the present Rice' Mill. The boat was flat bottomed, forty feet long by twelve broad, with paddle wheel at the stem. Its trial trip down the river, after being launched, proved to be a grievous disappointment. Much of the distance it was obliged to go stem first, and with its own wheel dredge out a channel deep float

This. was its first as also its last trip on the Betsie. The attempt was never repeated. For some time thereafter the boat was used for traffic in Frankfort harbor. In the absence of a regular name it was dubbed "Mud Hen." Later it was sold and taken to the upper waters of the Mississippi, where it made a good record.

But while these varied projects failed of success and the great expectations of the Improvement Co. came to naught, the river was afterward utilized for floating great quantities of logs to Frankfort, both from the east Crystal Lake region through the outlet channel, and from many miles along the river farther inland. This latter work was for a number of years superintended by Mr. L. P. Judson, who still resides in Benzonia, active and vigorous, although in his eighty-fourth year.

For many years after the lake was lowered, the outlet channel was blocked by sand bars, causing the water to rise enough to interfere with railroad traffic, after the Ann Arbor was opened to Frankfort—the track being close to the shore for some distance west of Beulah. Accordingly a few years ago the county established what was considered to be the most suitable permanent level for all interests, and a substantial concrete dam was constructed which automatically controls the water level of the lake.

From the time the Ann Arbor R. R. was opened to Frankfort, Crystal Lake began to come into public notice as the most attractive body of water in the state.