

When Roads Were Trails: C. E. Spicer Recalls Early Days In Benzie

Copied by Harold W. Saffron, Sr.
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Harking back to the early roads of Benzie, that brought the first pioneer farmers into the region, and later on brought the timber cruisers and lumbers; and now bring the resorters and tourists, the Resort Reporter took up the subject with Prof. C. E. Spicer, one of Benzie's earliest residents and now a regular resorter of the northwest shore of Crystal Lake, as well as assistant superintendent of the Joliet, Ill High School and Junior College,' the latter the first public college to be established in America.

Prof. Spicer came to this part of Michigan at the tender age of six. He, with his mother, arrived In Frankfort on a Mackinaw Boat, which is to say, a fishing tug, after having made a prolonged attempt of more than a month to reach that harbor from Manistee. There were no regular boats running then and attempts to make the trip in small sailboats had failed. Anyway, Mrs. Spicer and her little son came into Frankfort on that morning in 1868 and found but little to encourage them by way of an established town. The entrance to Betsey Bay was made then by the original channel which cut through the sand where a spur of the Ann Arbor Railroad now runs out toward the Frankfort public beach. The tug tied up to a small dock on the opposite shore of the bay, right along the peninsula where later the big hotel stood. The two passengers were rowed across the channel in a small boat which was tied up to a certain oak tree that still stands just across from [the present day] Park Hotel.

No one was at hand to meet the incoming pair and they started out on foot, passing through the town and entering the heavy forest at about where the Garden Theatre now stands. From that, the size and extent of Frankfort of 1868 can be judged. The mother with her little son trudging beside her, struck out bravely along the faint trail that led up the valley across the present school grounds and up the little creek that runs down across the public park beyond. And not far up the creek they met Dad coming to town with the horse and wagon to see if there was any news of his long-looked-for little family. The new H. M. Spicer home was just a short distance on up the creek and the Spicer farm of virgin land covered by virgin timber surrounded it.

Beyond the Spicer farm there were three other established farms in the Frankfort-Crystal Lake region, and they were located far over on the north shore of Crystal Lake along the eastern edge of the now famous Crystal Downs Country Club. Oliver, Lockhart and Weston were the three neighbor homesteaders, and far down at the other end of the Crystal north shore was the Billy Wilson place. They were the only four dwellings around the lake.

Wilson's outlet was through the little post office town of Benzonia, but the other three families made their way to Frankfort over a wagon road built by Weston down to Crystal Lake at about where the Beachy [Hamp} Cottage now is, and from there along the beach end up over a winding trail through the hills to the Betsie Bay village. That was the extent of the road system in Benzie prior to 1870.

Benzonia had an outlet to Traverse City over the Telegraph Road which ran four miles east over the present Homestead road, then angled off toward the Platte River, crossed it at the Buchan's Bridge and ran on down the river, then up the Bailey hill and out past the Buchan schoolhouse to Traverse City. Just when this road was first put in, the Resort Reporter failed to learn, but it was in use when the Benzie territory was still a part of Grand Traverse county which was previous to 1865. This was then the only established road. Wagon trails led off, dodging through the trees and around the hills, to various points of human habitation back in the county. That was all.

Then, in 1870, the government finished a survey of the road between Grand Haven and Northport that was to be the "State Road" and later became M-22. Contracts were let and road building began in earnest all along the route.

Ed Bellows had the contract to build the portion between the trail that went back to Point Betsie lighthouse and the section line, which comes right at the top of the highest hill between Frankfort and the Congregational Assembly grounds which was also the boundary line of the Spicer Farm. He may have had a mile or so further to build on one end or the other, but it is certain that he had that portion.

Building a road in those days consisted largely of cutting down trees and grubbing out any stumps that happened to be directly in the road. That was the fairly easy part. The complications came in laying a substantial track across the swampy sections. This was done by laying logs crosswise of the road and as tightly together as possible over the soft places. If one layer was not sufficient, more logs were piled on and the procedure was kept up until a solid track was formed. That was the way the original corduroy roads came into being. The final result resembled nothing more than the regularly ridged surface of corduroy cloth. The sensations obtained by driving over such a surface with a springless farm wagon can well be imagined.

Coming out from Frankfort, the Slate Road followed the general route of the present M-22 until it reached the place where the Congregational Assembly grounds now stands. There the road swung out a little to the east to avoid a small lake and swamp that then covered the center of the Assembly grounds. It ran directly through the spot where the Hunt cottage now stands. Arriving at the beach, the road builders were confronted with a delicate problem of engineering, how to get around the point of the hill that jutted out to the very water's edge where M-22 now turns north. That was before Crystal Lake had been lowered and it filled its banks clear to the foot of the bluffs all about it.

To surmount this difficulty, logs were cut and rolled down the steep bank one against the other until they reached up to the desired level for the road. Shorter logs were laid straight out from the bank and supported by them. More logs were placed both ways until finally a solid log trestle or platform was constructed around the point. Dirt was then supplied to cover the structure by digging back into the bank. And the job was done.

Further along past the Three Pines Inn over the present route, the road was practically all corduroyed, due to the marshy condition of the land. About where the Vette [?] cottage now stands there was just a strip of ground of sufficient width to support the road. One side

was Crystal Lake and on the other was another little lake and marsh.

From there the road went up on top of the ridge back from the lake. It is still there, cutting through the woods, back of the row of cottages which sits atop the bluff and among which is the Spicer cottage. About where the side road now runs back to Point Betsie the State Road dropped back down to the lowlands, only to take to the hills again across the Crystal Downs Country Club and came out where the sharp turn now is in M-22 at Long Lake. From there on it zig-zagged along the present route the remainder of the distance to Empire. Much of it was corduroy and the remainder was fine, loose sand, hub deep.

Of all this, Mr. Spicer can recall but little. He remembers seeing the big trees dropped near his home to make way for the new road and can dimly recall going with his father to cut marsh grass hay from the spot where the Congregational Assembly dining room now is. Another event that Prof. Spicer can remember from his childhood on the Old State Road was a trip that he made one time with his parents to the Platte Plains in search of huckleberries which were the only fruit available in the country at that time.

The little family arose early, milked their cows so as to have the milk to take along, and started out at daylight. They drove one horse to a light wagon. They dragged through the sand, and bounced over the corduroy stretches, and at noon arrived at the Platte River, their horse all but worn out and themselves in but little better condition. Immediately they set about preparing dinner. The milk can was brought out and opened. Mother Spicer started to dip out a cup full, but stopped horrified at the sight of something floating about on the white surface. Tentatively she investigated, and was astonished to discover a lump of fresh butter in the milk that had just come from the cows that morning. The corduroy road had done an excellent job of churning.

The little party took three days for the trip and returned with their wagon box, which was larger than the average, loaded full across with blueberries.

On another morning, Mr. and Mrs. Spicer set forth on a trip to the county fair at Benzonia, leaving young Master Spicer home with his grandmother. They went by way of the road that had been recently opened across the outlet creek and over the hills behind Van Demans. Night came and they failed to return. Rumors came that something disastrous had happened over on Crystal Lake. Midnight came and still no signs of the parents. Grandmother was distracted with worry. Then, just before daybreak, the missing couple walked drearily into the little home.

That was the memorable day when Crystal Lake was lowered some 30 feet by a group of citizens who dug a channel through the outlet in an attempt to form a canal for floating logs down to the Betsie River and from there to Frankfort. When Mr. and Mrs. Spicer crossed the outlet in the morning there was but a faint ditch running down through the swamp. Men were working then enlarging it. When they were ready to return home, they were confronted with a roaring torrent, rods wide, and totally impassible to either man or beast. To get home they crossed the Betsie River south of Benzonia and worked their way out around through Joyfield and Gilmore from one farmhouse to another, many of them miles apart, until they reached South Frankfort (Elberta). Here they planned upon crossing the river again over the bridge that had been about where the present one stands, but again they were stopped. The Betsie River, swollen

to four times its normal size by the waters from the lake, had jumped its banks and completely washed away a large section of the road leading to the bridge. That was far after midnight but after some delay the tired pair found a place to leave their rig and obtained a rowboat to take them across the bay to Frankfort from where they trudged home afoot.

Another interesting incident took place on that same afternoon and night. It concerned one Pete Raymond who had recently established a home on the Crystal north shore somewhere west of the present Crystal Lake Orchards. He made communications with Frankfort by walking around the beach to the State Road at the Assembly Grounds. Little Round Lake was then separated from Crystal by only a narrow strip of beach sand so low and so narrow that a heavy wind whipped the water from one lake into the other. It was along this strip that Raymond passed on his walk.

Going in the morning all was well, but returning in the afternoon, he found the waters of Crystal steadily receding as he walked along. Somewhat alarmed he continued on his way as rapidly as possible, only to the last lap of his journey blocked off by a rushing stream of water that had broken through the narrow sand strip between Crystal and Round Lakes. The lowering of Crystal having taken its support from the thin ridge, the water of the smaller lake had broken through and was fast emptying into the big lake. Confronted with this barrier, there was nothing for Raymond to do but take to the brush. For long hours in the darkness he fought his way through the almost impassable swamps that then surrounded the vicinity and still do in some places. He too arrived home to an exceedingly anxious wife at an hour far into the morning.

There is more to be said on the State Road subject and upon Prof. Spicer's experiences in connection with it. Especially must be mentioned is a very unique bear story, but further accounts must necessarily be taken up in a future chapter.