

Little Crooked Lake History

The following article appeared in the Livingston County Press, Howell Michigan on approximately October 5, 1948. The yellowed and tattered article was loaned to me by Craig White who lives on Homestead Drive on Little (West) Crooked Lake. The article is in an old envelope with a three cent stamp and has a post mark that is not legible. The letter is addressed to J. Theodore Krause on Woodward in Detroit MI. Following is a reproduction of the article as true as I can duplicate it given the frayed article and my fat fingers.

Bill Wernette, Little Crooked Lake, 2/9/91

(Editor's note: E.P. Nutting, a former teacher here and summer resident at Little Crooked Lake, was asked some time ago by the Little Crooked Improvement Association to compile a history of the region. Recently Mr Nutting returned to his orange groves and winter home at Bonita Springs in southwestern Florida where he completed the manuscript. People interested in local area history will find this article intensely interesting. We are greatly indebted to Mr. Nutting for his permission to publish the manuscript.)

By E.P. Nutting

The history of Little Crooked Lake, along with that of all the southeastern section of Michigan, properly begins about 30,000 years ago when the last glacier slowly melted, or "retreated," as the geologists say, leaving in huge heaps the enormous amount of material it had scoured off the Laurentian Range in

Canada, hundreds of miles to the north, and carried down here. These heaps of sand, gravel and clay, left hit and miss over this area, penned up the water from the melted ice and formed the hundreds of lakes that dot the area of this county and those adjoining it.

The northeastward direction of the retreat of this glacier is shown by the line of "hog's backs" that form the west shore of Little Crooked Lake, and by the line of three islands, which with the shallows between, nearly cut the lake in two. President R.W. Fairchild of the Teachers College at Normal, Illinois, who visited this region at one time, said that these two "Kames", as they are called in geology, are exceptionally fine examples of their kind.

After the retreat of the glacier nature worked thousands of years to cover the raw, barren heaps of rock material with trees and other vegetation we now see here, and to make it a fit habitation for animal life. Nobody knows when the redmen moved in and claimed it for their own, but it was probably less than 1,500 years ago.

They made no written records, and their oral history, handed down from generation to generation, was very vague so far as the time element was concerned. It is pretty well established, however, that long before the first white men appeared in this section the Sauk and Onottoway tribes had joint and peaceable possession of this particular region which is now Livingston county. Their permanent villages were mostly in the forests of the Saginaw valley, but they came here in the summers to hunt and fish and plant some of their meager crops.

Ojibways Stage Blitz

But the Ojibways in the far northern part of the peninsula wanted this territory, rich in fish, deer and beaver, and carried out a successful blitz attack in winter on the Sauk's villages along the Saginaw river, which completely wiped out the tribe. Their conquerors became known as the Saginaw Chippewas, and were in possession of this region when the first white settlers came a little over a century ago. These Chippewas, too, had their permanent villages to the north, and came here only for the fishing and hunting.

So, apparently, from the earliest known human records, Little Crooked Lake was, as it is today, a summer resort. The beavers did not long outlast the coming of the white man, and for nearly a century deer were no longer in evidence here, but the descendants of the fish that brought the redmen here every summer, though sadly reduced in size and numbers still use the ancestral spawning grounds and perpetuate their species, in spite of all efforts of the angler to outwit them, and of the speed boats to wash them up onto dry land.

The Chippewas were allies of the British in the War of 1812 and their numbers were greatly reduced by the bloody battles in Ohio and Southeastern Michigan in which they participated. Those who survived the war were soon demoralized by the fire-water supplied by unscrupulous traders who came in the wake of the war. Some remnants of these once mighty warriors are now living in the northern part of this peninsula, where their ancestors lived before the attack on the Sauks.

The federal government took over title to these lands, and abstracts of title to lots on the shores of Little Crooked will show that the first federal grants of these lands were made

about 1854 to settlers who had come in as squatters some 15 years earlier to clear off the oak trees and make farm homes where for thousands of years there had been only a wilderness.

In the eyes of these early settlers any lake in the sections taken up from the government was just so much worthless, acreage. It could grow no wheat and could pasture no cattle or sheep. Its fish were appreciated for a change of diet, but there was little time for fishing, and anyhow one could fish anywhere without having to own the waters. A lake was pretty to look at, but almost none of the early settlers built a home on the shore of a lake. Fever and ague were rife all through the newly settled regions, and the early settlers believed this sickness came from the miasma and vapor of the lakes and marshes, so early homes were built usually on high ground.

First Settlers in Area

Among the first settlers to take up land bordering on Crooked Lake was Alexander Carpenter from New York state, who took up all the land along the west shore of Little Crooked and built a house on the high ground on the jog in the present Chilson Road. William Suhr from Hamburg, Germany, took the land along the east shore of Big Crooked, and his descendants still own the property. These two settlers made land entries in 1854, but actually settled on their claims 10 or 15 years before. The high ground bordering the little mud lake to the northwest of Little Crooked was taken by H. Steinmetz who built a log house there which commanded a fine view of the lake.

A few old fruit trees still struggle for existence there and are mute evidence of human life in pioneer days. A now deserted dead-end road led to this site from the highway to the west.

The east and north shores of Little Crooked, the land surrounding Round Lake, and the land to the east were taken up from the federal government by Philip Conrad in 1856, and the southeast and south shore, by Edward N. H. Bode in 1856 and 1857. Mr. Bode had a house near the lake, and some maple trees that he set out are still to be seen there. The location is now that of the Burroughs Company bathing beach. Both these men were from Germany, which furnished so many of Genoa townships early settlers, particularly the German city of Hamburg.

The north shore of Big Crooked was taken up by Freeman Fishbeck in 1836. The high wooded west shore of Big Crooked was a part of the holdings of William Suhr whose frame home was built near the east shore of that lake in 1842 and is still standing.

Those were busy days, full of hardship and heavy labor for those early settlers. The land had to be cleared not only of the oak trees that covered it, but of the stones that the glacier had left thickly strewn over the piles of sand, clay and gravel. The numerous stone piles to be found even today along the edges of the cultivated fields bear witness to those early days of clearing the land. Roads were put through along section lines and along old indian trails, of which present Grand River Road, U.S.-16, was one of the most important in the state, since it led to Detroit which was the pay-off station for the Indians after the treaties that followed the early Indian wars.

Waterpower Valuable Asset

Waterpower was a valuable asset in those days when gristmills and sawmills were so necessary a part of the economic life of the early pioneers. Any small stream that could be dammed to advantage was put to work. The waters from the Crooked Lake area did not

escape. About 1871 a dam was built near the present railroad water tank, where the Chilson road now crosses the small stream that is the outlet of this lake basin, and this created a pond east of the present road, and raised the level of the lake water enough to make a single large and truly Crooked Lake out of the nearly separate bodies of Big and Little Crooked as we know them today.

The higher lake level covered the marsh now crossed by Lakeview Drive, and the marsh lying at the north end of Little Crooked and extending around into Big Crooked, so that a broad but shallow neck of water connected the two lakes where now the canal is the only water link between the two bodies of water. The new banks of the lake thus formed by the new water level can be clearly seen still at many points along the shores. Early maps drawn after the dam was built show Crooked Lake as a single continuous body of water, outlined as described above with the present marshes included as part of the lake.

The sawmill, operated by a man named Trowbridge, with this water power and located near the present water tank of the Ann Arbor railroad did a thriving business in the early days, and continued active under his successor, a Mr. Joslyn, as a gristmill run by steam power until about the turn of the century, when the farmers whose lands adjoined the lake secured permission to take out the dam so that their stock could have the benefit of the grazing afforded by the marshes thus uncovered. As only a trickle of water now connected the two bodies of water in the summer, they became virtually two separate lakes, and the names Big and Little Crooked came into almost universal use.

It is interesting to know that the name Crooked Lake was applied officially to this body of water as early as 1837, the year

Michigan attained statehood. The lake is to be found in a legislative act of that period which provided for a system of canals to cross southern Michigan and do for this region what the famous Erie Canal was doing so successfully for New York state.

Early Canals Planned

The canal was to be known as the Clinton and Kalamazoo, and was to start at Mt. Clemens, where the Clinton river empties into Lake St. Clair, come west to Crooked Lake, then on over this watershed, which is the source of streams eventually emptying into Lakes Michigan, Huron and Erie; then it was to cross the Cedar and Shiawassee rivers and join the Kalamazoo river as the last link into Lake Michigan. A branch, or feeder canal was to come up to Crooked Lake from Dexter, some 25 miles to the South. Construction was actually started at Mt. Clemens, but the rapidly growing railways doomed most of the ambitious canal systems projected in this and neighboring states at that time, and the Clinton and Kalamazoo canal was never built.

The railroads that took over the work that the canal and its branch were designed to perform, were the Detroit and Howell, projected in the late Sixties (now the Pere Marquette), which crossed the peninsula from east to west, and the Toledo, Ann Arbor and Northern (now the Ann Arbor Railroad) built about 1885, which did what the canal branch from Dexter was intended to do. The latter railroad came closest to Crooked Lake, and brought to this area the advantage of a station (Chilson), and an enormous shipping business with its huge gravel pits southeast of the station, which were active until about 1930.

The old cemetery on the hill just east of the Ann Arbor's water tank dates back to 1870, and is the resting place of many of the old

settlers who reclaimed this region from the wilderness.

Of the three islands in Little Crooked Lake the northern one lies in the northeast quarter of section 28, while the other two lie in the northwest quarter of that section. All of these islands and the farm land at the south and southwest of the lake had been acquired by K. Truhn from the original owners in 1867. The Truhn family played an important part in the early life of this region and should be considered as pioneers.

First Cottages Built

About 1897 Laughlin and Henderson, who operated a thriving store at Chilson in a large double structure, bought the north island and built a cottage on it, probably one of the earliest lake cottages (or "camps" as they were then called) to be built in this county. It was sold in 1903 to Carl Weimeister, a blacksmith of Howell, who acquired it along with all the farm land at the south end of the lake. It was a frame structure, barn-like, with few windows and no interior finish, and with hand-forged bolts and bars designed to frustrate attempts by any vandals to break into it. On the shingle roof was painted in large letters the name "Nordica", named for Lillian Nordica, who was at the peak of her fame as a singer at that time. For many years this was rented to parties of young people from Howell, Brighton, Fowlerville, and other nearby towns, who came in horse-drawn vehicles and spent a week or so of "camping" as it was called, duly chaperoned, of course, by their elders.

The Ann Arbor Railroad maintained a station at Chilson, which was a thriving business center, so Toledo and Ann Arbor people found the lake a convenient and delightful place for an outing during the hot weather, and many families from those cities

rented the "Nordica" cottage. Mr. Weimeister sold the cottage in 1914 to Mr. Slear, the station agent at Chilson, and he soon sold it to one of the Toledo families, the Bauers, who had been renting it. Mr. Bauer later transformed the old frame Nordica cottage into the present fine field stone summer home equipped with all modern facilities.

Many Popular Camping Sites

While "camping" was the term applied to the use of lake cottages in the "Gay Nineties" and earlier, a great many people actually did camp on the shores of the lakes in those days, living in tents and cooking in the open. The favorite spot on Little Crooked was the "Swimming Hole", on the west shore, at about the center of the present Homestead Beach development. The writer spent his vacations camping there from 1909 to 1918. At that time the Nordica cottage was seldom occupied, so his family were often the only humans at the lake for weeks at a time, except on rare occasions when fishermen, usually from Ann Arbor or Toledo, would appear in a boat out on the lake, and sometimes would stop at the camp for a drink of water in lieu of anything stronger to drink. Their strings of bass and pike were always the center of our interest.

Another camping site occasionally used was on the east shore of Little Crooked near the fine, large spring on the hillside south of Round Lake. A campfire there high up on the bluff was always a cheering sight to those camping on the west shore near the swimming hole.

The old Carpenter farm had been bought by Henry Schoenhals in 1878 and "Uncle Henry" as he was called, was always willing to permit responsible parties to use the camp site, on their assurance that gates would be carefully closed so the stock wouldn't get loose and damage the crops. The route to the campsite

began at the barn and followed a long fenced lane that led north, then east to a field overlooking the lake and situated just south of the present gravel pit. There were four or five gates to open and close in getting to the campsite, and the road through the field at the end of the lane was so rough that the wagons hauling camp equipment sometimes had difficulty in following it.

The store at Chilson, then operated by Brogan and Brady, was the nearest source of groceries. Milk was obtained at the farmhouse each evening. Ice was out of the question, so a large keg sunk in the ground had to supply refrigeration. A pitcher pump across the marsh to the west was the source of drinking water at first, but Uncle Henry soon put in a force pump at the campsite, which was greatly appreciated. The marsh to the west of the campsite had once been a tamarack swamp and many of the fallen trees and the exposed roots were still there, so fuel for cooking was no problem. In fact we often made huge beach fires of this material, that turned night into day all along the shore.

The Ann Arbor Railroad at that time maintained a schedule of cars with gasoline motors, that stopped for passengers at all crossings, a great convenience when we wanted to go to Howell, or when relatives and friends from Howell and Ann Arbor came to visit us. These "gas cars" were destined soon to be put out of business a result of the activities of a young mechanic in Detroit named Henry Ford.

Schoenals Reunions

In late August each year occurred the Schoenals family reunion, when old and young members of the clan assembled from all quarters to eat on long tables set up under the trees by the old swimming hole, and renew old acquaintances and become acquainted with

additions to the clan. Miss Kate Schoenals, who later built the northernmost cottage of Homestead Beach, was always a very active and efficient member of the committee on arrangements. A small, prefabricated canvas cabin which she set up one summer at the campsite, during our stay there, might be called the second cottage on the lake.

However, the second permanent cottage was built in 1914 by Mr. Gimison of Ann Arbor on the large south island. He bought this island for \$100.00 from Frank King, who had acquired the Carl Weimeister property and lived in the farmhouse on the Chilson Road next south of the Schoenals farmhouse. He owned the south shore of the lake as far as the present bathing beach of the Burroughs Co. and also the middle and south islands.

The third cottage was built in 1917 by Mr. and Mrs. William Culver on a tract of some two acres at the southwest corner of the lake near the outlet. The cottage, at first a frame structure, was later faced with field stone and modernized a few years later. They rented boats to fishing parties and set out the present fine grove of trees there.

On Big Crooked the earliest cottage appeared about 1900, built by the Suhrs, the family that originally took up that land from the federal government. C.A. Goodnow, a Howell merchant, soon after that built another at that location.

On Round Lake the first cottage appeared about 1912 on the southeast shore. It was a small affair built by a Brighton banker, Mr. Baetke, and is now gone.

Auto Travel Brings Changes

World War I was now raging in Europe, and the changing economic conditions in this country were about to alter completely the

sleepy rusticity and quiet of the two Crooked lakes. Detroit's auto industries had more than doubled its population, roads that had been only ruts in the sand were being graveled to meet the demands of the thousands of new auto owners who wanted to get out of the cities and go places at the hitherto unknown speed of 25 to 30 miles per hour.

The improved roads and the autos created a tremendous interest in the lakes as sites for summer homes, and all lake property in driving distance of Detroit was sought out by individuals and real estate promoters. In 1917 Charles and Otto Lasher of Redford bought the Conrad farm which included most of the east shore of Little Crooked and the southwest and south shore of Big Crooked. It also embraced small Round Lake which lies between the two larger bodies of water. All this lake frontage was lotted off and an active sales campaign soon disposed of most of this property at good prices. The first building to appear on the east shore of Little Crooked was a small cottage built on a lot of very little depth about 1,000 feet northeast of the north island. Others quickly followed all along the shore.

Uncle Henry Schoenals was forced to quit farming because of failing sight so he offered his property on the west shore of Little Crooked for sale. This meant the end of camping at the old swimming hole, so the writer looked for some permanent location on the lake. The middle island was small and nearly treeless, but it seemed to have possibilities. Inquiry showed Frank King to be the owner, so in August, 1917 it was bought for \$100.00, the same sum that had been paid a few years before for the large south island.

Ferry Materials for Cottage

During the following year materials for a cottage were ferried across from the camp at

the swimming hole, and by the end of August the building was enclosed, ready for use the next summer, thus becoming the fourth cottage to be built on Little Crooked. It is probably unique in having been built entirely by one person, the writer, with no helper.

The next cottage to appear on the lake was built by George (last name unreadable) ton, a contractor from Detroit, who had bought from Frank King the hilltop that rises at the south end of the lake just across from the south island. This was built in 1920.

The owner of the south island had been called into military service at Vancouver Barracks, and sold his island to the writer, whose chief motive in buying it was to keep it as a sort of bird refuge, which it had been for centuries, owing to the heavy cover of trees and brushes. The south island was sold to John and Eleanor Tabb in 1946.

The middle and south islands, free from foxes and other marauders, and seldom visited by human intruders in the early spring, have long been favorite nesting grounds for waterfowl. Green herons, rails, woodcocks, sand pipers and black mallards regularly used these safe nesting sites, and for the past four years wild geese have nested on the middle island, bringing off a brood of goslings in early spring, an interesting sight to those cottagers who were at the lakes at that time.

The Schoenals farm was bought in 1919 by Charles and Irene Gautherat, of Detroit. Mr. Gautherat, a former Ford employee, proceeded at once to develop the lake frontage, which was named Homestead Beach. A drive entering from Chilson Road was put in along the south boundary of the farm, leading down to the lake and following the west side of the "Kame", thus giving access to all the lots along the west shore. In 1926 a dredge was employed to dig a canal that would give water

frontage to all the high ground across the marsh to the west, and that would continue on into Big Crooked, making that lake accessible to residents on the smaller lake.

All through the summer of 1926 the chatter of the dredge engine could be heard at its task of opening up more than a mile of canal, 30 feet wide and five feet deep. Its present weed-grown channel and the three small weedy ponds that it taps provide a natural breeding place and refuge for fish which had been a very important factor in keeping the two lakes stocked with fish in nature's own way. This might be called the only functioning link of the old Clinton and Kalamazoo Canal, projected nearly a hundred years earlier.

The first Homestead Beach cottage was built in 1922 by the Gautherats for sale. It is now the fifth on Lakeview Drive. The square cottage, the eighth on the Drive, was built by the Gautherats also in 1922 and soon sold.

Value High on Cottages

At present writing (1948) some 28 cottages occupy the islands and west shore of Little Crooked Lake. Its north and east shore has about 170, and in the wooded Burroughs Company tract there are more than 100. Small Round Lake boasts some 60, and around the shores of Big Crooked are to be counted about 70. Detroit and its suburbs have furnished practically all the present summer residents of the Little Crooked Lake region. An investment of well over two million dollars is represented in these summer houses and their equipment.

The Burroughs Adding Machine Company was a late arrival at Little Crooked Lake, acquiring in 1927 the only remaining available land along the south shore, and the farm lands between the lake and the Brighton Road, on which was built the present fine golf course. Their development provides an unusually fine

recreation center, which is fully used by the company employees throughout the season. Nearly 600 acres are included in the company's holdings, which extend beyond the railroad track west of Chilson.

If the early summer resorter of this region, the redman, could return to live and revisit his old haunts he would easily recognize the natural features of the place except where fields cleared by the early white pioneers have replaced the oak forests. For the lake itself is unchanged and the recent intruders have been careful, for the most part, to preserve the wooded shores and such wild life as survived the past century of ruthless slaughter. Even the long vanished deer, though not yet seen about the lake itself, have returned to this county to the reported number of some 2,000, and no doubt some of these venture to the borders of the lake during the winter.

But the drone of the airplane overhead, the autos speeding over the drives, and (if the visit happened on a week-end) the deafening racket of speeding motor boats would send the visitor from an earlier, more restful era back to the quit of his grave, glad, no doubt, to get away from it all.

End.