

“The “Comedy” of Crystal Lake” – Writing of the Book

What then is the proper literary blend to author the contents of the “Comedy”? “*Lake*” books are variously formatted to visionally tell interesting stories of people, their environment, and related events. A few tell all in prose with no illustrations; others use mostly pictures with limited captions; while still others are anthologies of short stories, but not histories. Impressions must be left in the minds of readers, who process content related to their personal experiences. Hopefully, the “Comedy” strikes a proper balance between entertainment value and detailed archival research of an event to make an interesting read for both the casual and serious reader. The book is directed toward young adults and mature audiences, who have surmised that a special and unique “spirit of place” exists for Crystal Lake and its Watershed.

The Rev. Harlow Spencer Mills (1846 - 1931), an astute observer of the Benzie community, and author of “The Making of a Country Parish” (1914), wrote a thoughtful introduction to the original “Tragedy”, and also suggested a repository of “*Crystalana*” to preserve the history, literature, and traditions of Crystal Lake.

“I suppose that every community has an interesting history, if only it were fully known and truly told—a history that would be well worth recording because the community is composed of human beings, and every human life is fraught with intense interest. But it would seem that for some reason this Crystal Lake region has more than its share of charming scenes and attractive localities, and that in its early settlement and its succeeding history there has been an unusual number of stirring events. Perhaps it seems so only because we know about them, but be that as it may, they are well worth describing and recording.” - Rev. H.S. Mills, “The Benzie Book”. Benzie Banner 28(12), 1 (16 Nov 1922); Ibid, “Crystalana”, BB 29(36), 1-2 (04 Aug 1927).

The present author had no intention of creating a “*Benzie Book*”, i.e. a repository of “*Crystalana*”, to preserve the history, literature, and traditions of Crystal Lake. There are many other authors who have contributed with flowing text and colorful illustration toward that goal. But in the end, the “Comedy” inevitably evolved to include some “*Crystalana*”.

Why write about a singular esoteric event like the “Tragedy” / “Comedy” of Crystal Lake? All northern Michigan lakes share commonalities of geological histories, physiological features, hydrological behaviors; climatic influences, visual beauties, and recreational pursuits. Our visions are of clear waters and bright sunshine glittering from gentle waves lapping against pristine beaches ringed by wooded hillsides, scented of pine, exuding a spirit of place. We escape the congestion and “hustle-bustle” pace of our cities by vacationing at our special lake to experience carefree living, roughing it, returning to the simple life, and communing with nature.

Peculiar to Michigan were needs to improve the land-locked entrances of drowned river mouths along the eastern shoreline of Lake Michigan (the West Coast of MI) by creating “harbors of refuge” for shipping, and inland waterways to access the interior of the State. Other “improvement projects” included canals, dams, locks, docks, and/or other appurtenances for transporting timber, powering saw and grist mills, and irrigating newly cleared fields. Many natural river outlets were straightened and new channels dredged to navigable depths to connect nearby inland lakes by “slack-water” canals to Lake Michigan. These included: Saugatuck, Holland, Grand Haven, Muskegon, White Lake, Pentwater, Ludington, Manistee, Portage, Frankfort, Charlevoix, and Petoskey. The attempt to connect a canal from Frankfort Harbor to Crystal Lake proved to be the most ambitious of all *sui generis*.

One lake’s uniqueness is an object lesson to be extrapolated to other lakes. Uniqueness of opportunity brought Archibald Jones to Crystal Lake. The Benzie County River Improvement Co. improved upon Nature, and increased both uniqueness and commonality for Crystal Lake. In 1873, the level of Crystal Lake was dramatically lowered in an attempt to construct a slack-water canal between it and Lake Michigan. Most other canals had differences in level of only a few feet, the original level of Crystal Lake was 38 feet above Lake Michigan which made it especially attractive for a canal. Unfortunately, the whitecap waves of Crystal Lake washed out a temporary dam before a permanent canal could be completed. The level of the Lake dropped precipitously by 20 feet and 76 billion gallons of water poured down its outlet.

Although a canal system was never realized, the lowering of the Lake exposed a 21-mile perimeter of sandy beach where none had previously existed. This made possible: the founding of the Village of Beulah, the coming of the railroad, installation of telegraph and telephone lines, development of lakeside resorts, construction of 1,100 cottages, all connected by an infrastructure of perimeter roads and trails. This epochal event is unsurpassed compared to all other large inland lakes in Michigan history. Its unintended consequences make this story worthy of telling to a wider audience.

Back in the Middle Ages people who went on pilgrimages “*A la sainte terre*” (To the Holy Land) became known as sainte-terre-ers or saunterers. For a watershed to be truly meaningful, and not just a neutral landscape through which water and humankind merely trickle, the saunterer must “*Walkabout*”: experience, and interpret it according to personal and cultural factors. Your humble saunterer would posit that the “Tragedy” and the “Comedy” have perpetuated a mixed generational conundrum. Each has created traditions and dramas with unique roles in their respective histories. It is now the responsibilities of present and future generations to preserve the heritages of both “Tragedy” and “Comedy” redux.