

ALL (RAIL) ROADS LEAD TO DOUGLAS LAKE

As alluded to in earlier articles, the development of the inland communities in the Northern Michigan region owes much to the construction of the various rail lines connecting the more populous southern cities to what were to become resort areas centered on or near numerous lakes situated between Petoskey/Harbor Springs and Mackinaw City. Up until the advent of these transportation services, inland travel through the heavily forested regions was quite difficult, if not all but impossible, where direct water access was not available. Given its nature as an all but land-locked body of water, Douglas Lake could only be reached via road way or railway line.

In 1856, in the hope of fostering settlement and economic development in these unpopulated regions of Northern Michigan and elsewhere, the United States congress authorized land grants involving large tracts of what was then primarily public land to various railroad companies in order to induce them to construct rail lines into such areas. The major railway operation to petition to service our region was the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad Company, which was already operating in Michigan and Indiana as early as the mid-1850s. By acquiring lines already in existence and laying new northern track, the GR & I created an avenue by which residents of larger population centers to the south of us could begin to engage in recreational travel in theretofore inaccessible areas such as Douglas Lake. However, in its early years, these rail lines were primarily devoted to the transportation of lumber and various types of wood products resulting from massive timbering operations that preceded the development of tourism.

By late 1870, tracks extending from the southern regions reached Grand Rapids, which was to become the company's headquarters. The first train to reach Grand Rapids along this new line arrived there on October 1, 1870. By the following June, the company had extended its holdings by acquiring an existing track line connecting Cincinnati and Fort Wayne, opening up a larger economic base for both freight and passenger transportation. The new line extending northward to Petoskey was completed in November of 1873. The final leg extending between Petoskey and the terminus at Mackinaw City/the Straits of Mackinac opened on July 3, 1882, with stops along the way servicing newly-developing communities in locations such as Bay View, Alanson, Brutus, Pellston, and Levering, among others.



Prior to the construction of these newer lines, however, the GR &I had sold extensive tracts on the east and west sides of the proposed track route to individuals interested in developing the land, probably both to help finance the construction of the rail lines and to insure the continuing economic viability of these lines, once completed.

One of the entrepreneurs who acquired substantial sections of the land being made available was William Pells, founder of what became known as the village of Pellston. Between 1875 and 1885, he had acquired roughly 27,000 acres of timber land, which included holdings along the southern and eastern shorelines of Douglas Lake.

Many of the newly-minted land barons turned their early profits from the sale of timber and/or timbering rights from the largely undeveloped acreage they had acquired through the railroad. According to railroad records, its major profit had derived from the transportation of lumber and other wood products during the 1870s and 1880s. However, by the latter 1880s, the forests had been largely cleared, leading the railroad to seek other avenues to increase its revenue stream. Even prior to 1882, when the last leg of the northern route of Mackinaw City was completed, the GR&I was advertising itself as “The Fishing Line” and had even published

tourist guides to inform the general public of the fishing opportunities and of the new “resorts” being constructed along the route.

At roughly the same time as the GR&I had reached Mackinaw City, another competing railroad company, the Michigan Central Railroad, had also arrived there following a different route. These two companies, along with the Detroit and Cleveland Steamship Navigation Company, created the Mackinac Island Hotel Company, building the Grand Hotel on the island. When the Grand Hotel opened for business in 1887, it heralded the true emergence of mainstream tourism to our area.



Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad

Formed in 1854, the Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad provided passenger and freight services between Cincinnati, Ohio and the Straits of Mackinac in Michigan. Even before linking to Mackinac City, the railroad published tourist guides marketing itself as “The Fishing Line.”

Source: Clarke Historical Library

Later articles will focus on the similar emergence of hotels, rental properties, and private family vacation homes along our shores, including the original Bryant Resort/Douglas Lake Hotel Resort on Bentley point on the site of the present day Mercke cottage. The Bryant Hotel, a rather crudely built “fishing”/tourist hostel, probably dated from the latter 1880s or early 1890s before being relocated to its current location on the southern shore of Douglas Lake around 1900.

