

NOW AND THEN

Early Travel in the Great Lakes Region

It should come as no surprise that Native Americans living in the Great Lakes Region utilized the Great Lakes themselves as well as some inland lakes and rivers as avenues of travel when trading or when traveling longer distances. In addition, various tribes had engineered an extended series of trails and pathways for foot travel in search of food and game or as a means of traveling from place to place. It is said that extensive trail systems connected some eastern seaboard communities with other communities as far away as the Great Plains. Similar trail systems could be found here in Michigan, utilizing foot paths from the Straits area to bays and harbors along the coasts of the Great Lakes as well as down the middle of the state. Although not elaborate by today's standards, these well-worn trails were typically quite narrow, roughly 18 inches across, just sufficient to permit the native travelers to pass along them one at a time "Indian file." Because of their intimate knowledge of the terrain features, the indigenous peoples had laid out some of the most advantageous routes, avoiding swamps and other potential land and water barriers along the way. It is said that these early trail systems were later utilized by French fur traders and, still later, were adapted by early settlers making their way to eventual homesteads in northern Michigan. As the trails were cleared and widened to accommodate wagons, they often became the beginnings of established routes that, in time, gave rise to our modern highway system. Some sources identify portions of US 31, US 131, and I-75 as having been part of early trail systems, referred to in places as The Mackinaw Trail.

Another avenue for Native American movement to the interior regions of Cheboygan and Emmet counties was through the Inland Water Route, which connected Lake Huron to Mullet Lake via the Cheboygan River, with further travel possible down through Burt Lake to Crooked Lake, utilizing the Indian River and the Crooked River, respectively. The inland route was later adopted by the fur traders, seeking access to the rich native resources for beaver skins and other pelts. In time, this passage was adapted through means of more modern technology, including the construction of locks and the use of dredging, to create one of the earlier sources of access to inland lakes, using steamboat travel to stimulate the emerging tourist trade around the turn of the twentieth century.

Early access to Douglas Lake was more difficult, however, because it lacked a direct water linkage to either the Great Lakes or to other navigable bodies of water in the region. For that reason, its development had to await the combined availability of the early Grand Rapids and Indiana Railroad line (ultimately connecting the Ohio River Valley, from its origin in Cincinnati, to its terminus in northern Michigan in Mackinaw City -- with local stops in Petoskey, Brutus, Pellston, and Levering); the establishment of steamship routes with ports of call in Petoskey, Harbor Springs, Mackinaw City and Cheboygan for ships traveling from Great Lakes population centers such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Toronto; and the continuing availability of the stagecoach line connecting Cheboygan to Harbor Springs, with stops near the Biological Station in South

Fishtail Bay, in Brutus and in other communities along the way. Indeed, most of our earlier summer travelers used these methods of transportation when finding their way to Douglas Lake during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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