

## THE CORDUROY ROAD TO DOUGLAS LAKE

The sand roadways built through the years to access our shoreline cottages, resorts, and businesses were relatively crudely constructed, at least during the periods of early settlement. One of the earlier roads was The Douglas Lake Road, which connected the village of Pellston (and the GR & I train line) to the southern shoreline of the lake near the site of the Douglas Lake Bar and Steakhouse. The date(s) of its initial construction are unclear. However, it is likely that the first version of that road was built sometime between 1890, when Edgar Pells acquired Lot #2, Section 30 (roughly 29 acres that included the shoreline on both sides of the access point to Pells Island), and the latter 1890s, when the Bryant family brought tourists by horse-drawn wagon from the Pellston train station to the boat dock used to ferry these guests across the lake to the “resort”/fishing hostel located on the site of the present Allen and Laurie Mercke cottage. Also traveling along that roadway were wagons bringing guests and supplies to two prominent vacationing families (the Fitzgeralds and the Stimsons), who had constructed summer cottages on Pells Island in 1898 and 1899, respectively. Early photographs of the southern shore of the lake, east of the island, taken in approximately 1900, also demonstrate the presence of multiple early cabins/camp sites along that stretch of beach.

In the 1940s, old-timers referred to the Douglas Lake Road as “a corduroy road.” Traditional corduroy roads were earthen or sand roadways constructed atop hewn logs placed side-by-side in parallel lines across the proposed route. They were most commonly associated with geographical areas that featured bogs or swamps or other characteristics that made prolonged use unpractical or even dangerous. In extremely marshy areas, the road base would begin with brush atop which the parallel lines of logs would be placed. Once the larger logs were in place, smaller “chinking” logs/branches would be wedged between the larger logs and the entire wooden structure would be covered over with sand or earth to create a more level surface. Roads such as these were constructed in both Cheboygan and Emmet counties during the logging era, when a ready supply of trees was then available. After the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, as areas became “logged out,” other materials, such as crushed stone, were used to stabilize roadways under construction.

The descriptive term “corduroy” was applied to these roads because of their similarity to a fabric of that name. The textile known as “corduroy” consisted of twisted fibers which, when woven, would line up parallel to one another to form a unique ridged visual pattern not unlike the pattern seen in the surface of what were designated as “corduroy” roads.

As one might well imagine, traveling by car over an old-fashioned corduroy road, particularly when moving at an otherwise reasonable rate of speed, tended to produce the sensation of a rapidly occurring “bump-bump-bump-bump-bump” as each log made its presence known to the vehicle’s passengers.

Just because a particular road has been described by the old-timers as a “corduroy” road doesn’t necessarily mean that it was actually constructed on a foundation of parallel logs lined up across that roadway. Indeed, a similar physical and visual effect can be produced on unpaved roads that have also developed regularized “bumps” with short spacing, similar in appearance to an old washboard. Because of their appearance, these latter roadways came to be called “washboard” roads and were sometimes also described as “corduroy” roads.

It is unclear whether or not the Douglas Lake Road was a true corduroy road. Although the old-timers described its log base as the reason for its patterned bumpiness, it may just be that they were assuming its origin based upon its physical appearance. That it was constructed at a time when logs were readily available, when similar roads were being built elsewhere in the county, and where there were portions of the roadway that might be subject to boggy or swampy conditions might support the conclusion that it was a real corduroy road. However, the jury is still out on that proposition. In any event, this road and other similar roadways around the lake have presented challenges to visiting drivers through the years and more than a few of them continue to do so.

The accompanying photograph of the Douglas Lake Road was taken in the mid-1930s, after both the logging and the subsequent brush/forest fires had taken their toll. At that time, the new growth was just beginning to fill in along the edges of the roadway.



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