

## THE ELUSIVE MR. BENTLEY OF BENTLEY POINT

The first anecdotal reference to a “Mr. Bentley” in Douglas Lake lore was the description given by Georganna [spelling taken from 1880 U.S. Census] Judson when telling of her first rather harrowing night at Douglas Lake in 1878. According to the account, Georganna and her husband Clark, described as the SECOND settlers on Douglas Lake, had just made their way from Grapevine Point by dugout canoe to their new home, a shanty built on Judson’s Point by the husband. Once there, it was soon discovered that Clark Judson had left the stove pipe back in Petoskey, from whence they had taken the stage coach that had brought them to the lake. Leaving his young wife and toddler daughter in the shanty, he had paddled back across the lake to begin the return journey to Petoskey to retrieve the missing pipe.

As night fell Georganna noticed a distant light shining from a cabin on the other side of the bay. Bundling up her daughter, she walked to the cabin, where she found a Mr. Bentley, purportedly the FIRST new settler then residing on the Lake. According to that account, the two Judsons spent their first night at the lake in the Bentley cabin. Unfortunately, this account gives no first name for the mysterious Mr. Bentley and is lacking in other identifying information, as well.

A review of the U.S. Census rolls for Cheboygan County in 1870 and 1880, however, does fill in some of the gaps. The first mention of a resident with that last name was in the 1870 census, which listed a Thomas Bentley, then residing in Inverness Township, a township located to the south and west of downtown Cheboygan. Identified as an immigrant from Canada who had been born “abt. 1837”, he appears to have been single and residing with other single gentlemen in a boarding house run by a family named McKay.

Records of land transactions in the region of “Bentley Point” prior to 1878, when Munro Township was established, have proven difficult to trace. The new township was established in October of that year, bringing with it the legal designation by which Bentley Point land could be readily identified and which continues to be utilized to this day [Section 20, Township 37, Range 3W].

According to the Munro Township History, the first supervisor of the township was George Heilman. The population of the township, which included Douglas Lake and the surrounding land, Lancaster Lake, Vincent Lake and Munro Lake, only totaled 140 individuals according to the U.S. Census data compiled only two years

later in 1880. Accordingly, there were relatively few households in the entire township in the latter 1870s up through 1880.

The data clearly establishes that the Thomas Bentley noted in the census ten years earlier is OUR Mr. Bentley. According to the entries found in the 1880 census, a Thomas Bentley, age 41 and printer by trade, who had been born in Canada in approximately 1839, was living on the north shore of Douglas Lake with his wife Eliza E. Bentley, age 33, born in Pennsylvania in roughly 1847. An additional individual living with them was a John Wilson, then age 60, who had been born in England.

What clearly ties this Mr. Bentley to the area of Bentley Point are the names of his neighbors. They included George and Caroline Heilman[n], the first Munro Township Supervisor; George V. Brill and his wife Margaret, living on land adjacent to the Bentley property; Clark Judson, his wife Georganna and their two children, situated across the bay; and W.M and Mary Schemerhorne, whose land was further east along the shoreline.

What became of Mr. and Mrs. Bentley in the years following the 1880 census is more difficult to determine. Since the U.S. Census records for 1890 were all but totally destroyed by fire, that data is not available to us. However, when searching the census records 10 years later, in 1900, there is no mention of either a Thomas or an Eliza Bentley living in either Emmet or Cheboygan County. The fact that neither name appears in the "Index of Deaths in Cheboygan County 1867-1933" would tend to suggest that the couple had left the area after vacating their land on what is now known as "Bentley Point."

The Bentley cottage was of log construction and was reportedly built on a stone foundation. Oral history suggests that its lights were visible from Judson Point, which means that it was probably located towards the west side of Bentley Point. The fact that the Bentleys would bring their cattle down to the lake in the evenings to drink would further indicate that the slope between the cottage and the lake shore was most likely a gradual one, as opposed to the steeper descent directly in front of the Mercke cottage, again pointing to the west side as its probable location.

Several additional clues help to narrow down the search. Bill Fangman told of an earlier discussion with Wendell Judson, a descendant of the same Georganna Judson who had spent her first night at the lake in that cabin. While walking with Bill, Mr. Judson had pointed out a rock-rimmed depression in the woods near an interior

“roadway” across Bentley Point. When describing the location of that depression, Bill recalled that it had been between Chip Hiles’ home and the Mercke cottage, somewhere near the Mercke driveway. The rocks in and around that depression were thought to be part of the original foundation of the Bentleys’ log farmhouse. It was Bill’s impression that the depression was roughly 30 ft. by 30 ft. Allen Mercke could not find any such site when he walked the property. However, Chip Hiles later told me that there was a place that seemed to match that description behind his barn, across the road from his lake front home. We may never know exactly where the Bentley cottage was situated. However, the above factors would tend to support the conclusion that it was most likely positioned on the western side of Bentley Point within a few hundred yards of the water’s edge.

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