

Because of the availability of land grant acreage in the mid-1870s, the establishment of regular ports of call for Great Lakes steamships along the shoreline of northern Michigan, and the arrival of the first major north/south railroad in the early 1880s, the area around Douglas Lake became accessible to tourism for the first time. To promote this tourism, all the while bolstering its own revenues, the transportation industry, and in particular the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad, began advertising the recreational possibilities for would-be visitors. Not surprisingly, local entrepreneurs began to purchase land and to build accommodations to house those visitors who were beginning to arrive.

On Douglas Lake, two locations in particular were the most favorable logistically: the south shore of the lake, given its closeness to the Pellston railroad station and the availability of a relatively level, sandy roadway; and the northwest corner, which was similarly accessible from the Levering train station.

The GR & I railroad, whose revenues from the transportation of lumber and lumber products were declining as the northern forests were being depleted, began to market itself as “The Fishing Line” in the hope of developing a new, more dependable income stream for the future. Tourist guides touting fishing camps, inns and small hotels began to be published. One of the very earliest references to a hotel on Douglas Lake appeared in an 1898 travel booklet, which stated:

Five miles east of Pellston – stage meets every train—lies Douglas Lake, an exceptionally beautiful body of water and famous for fishing (bass and pickerel). Bryant’s is a pleasant fishing Inn on the shore of this lake with daily stage connections with Pellston. A telephone line is also in the course of construction.

This earliest resort was actually situated on the promontory known as Bentley Point, located directly across the lake from the current Douglas Lake Bar and Steakhouse (formerly named the Douglas Lake Hotel). At the time, there was no road access to Bryant’s Hotel, nor would there be for more than 20 years. The only way to reach it was via a 25-passenger steam launch owned and operated by the Bryant family. The launch would ferry travelers and fishermen from a dock located at the end of Douglas Lake road at or near the boat ramp located next to the DLB.

There are few eye-witness accounts of the first Bryant’s Hotel. However, there was a series of taped interviews conducted in the mid-1960s by Mrs. French, who made recordings of interviews of selected “old timers.” The interviews provide information about life at Douglas Lake between 1900 and 1965. One of the interviewees was Emma Brill Wilson, herself a life-long resident of the area and the widow of Lambert Wilson, the second owner of the Ingleside Inn. When asked about the Bryant’s Hotel, Mrs. Wilson stated:

Mr. Bryant built the first hotel and we always called it Bryant Hotel. It wasn't anything wonderful but it was all right for the summer time. There wasn't much of a way to get in and out. His guests would come to Pellston and Mr. Bryant would bring them across the lake. When they got there, there wasn't much for them to do except walk around and ride around the lake on the steam launch.¹



Given the state of the land records, where hand-shake agreements and transactions often preceded the recorded paperwork by a year or more, it would be difficult to state exactly when this first hotel was actually constructed. The reference to it in the 1898 travel booklet suggests that it would have opened for business either that year or the year following. The plat map for the 27-acre parcel containing the hotel, the 60-some adjacent building sites, and the boathouse was prepared in 1899, as was the contract of conveyance between James Bryant and the then-owner Willard Potter. Unfortunately for all concerned, Mr. Potter died before the deed could be signed and recorded, leading to a circuit court action involving Mr. Bryant and the administrator of Mr. Potter's estate. Title was ultimately transferred to Bryant in 1890. Under the circumstances, the best that can be said is that Bryant's Hotel probably opened for business sometime between 1898 and 1900. In 1900, the Bryant family also began selling some of the lake front lots on both sides of the hotel along the Bentley Point shoreline. Among the early purchasers at that time was James Gale Inglis, who would later build the Ingleside Inn.

Within the following two years, plans were being made to construct and open a more ambitious hotel and resort complex across the lake adjacent to the boat dock at the end of the Douglas Lake Road. Nevertheless, the Bryant family continued simultaneously operate that first Bryant Hotel and resort for an additional eight years.

¹ *Memories of Douglas Lake*, published August, 1992, p.196.

Only a few photographs of this earliest hotel have survived. They clearly demonstrate the truly rustic nature of that first Bryant Hotel. These pictures were provided by Allen and Laurie Mercke, whose cottage was constructed on the site of the first Bryant Hotel and was reportedly erected on top of the hotel's original foundation.

The first picture shows "Bryant's Hotel" as viewed from the water when approaching the landing. The steam launch, with its gaily striped awning, is moored at the dock. It is unknown when this picture was taken. The remaining four pictures came from Claire Graham's album and were dated "1907." Since she first came to Douglas Lake that same year, it is likely that they were taken then. The pictures show the beach area at Bryant's Point, a close-up view of the launch, the stairway leading down to the beach from the hotel, and a view of the lake taken from the hotel. Newer details in these latter pictures (the covered bench at the head of the steps and the hand rail) would tend to indicate that they dated from a later period than the first photograph.

In the summer of 1908, the various members of the Bryant family deeded the hotel property and the remaining unsold lots to John C. Farnsworth, who continued to run it until it was destroyed by fire in 1911. Thereafter, John Farnsworth sold the property to Lillian G. Farnsworth, who, in turn, sold it to Clarence C. Mercke in June of 1926. The cottage built by the Mercke family still stands today overlooking the bluff on Bentley Point.

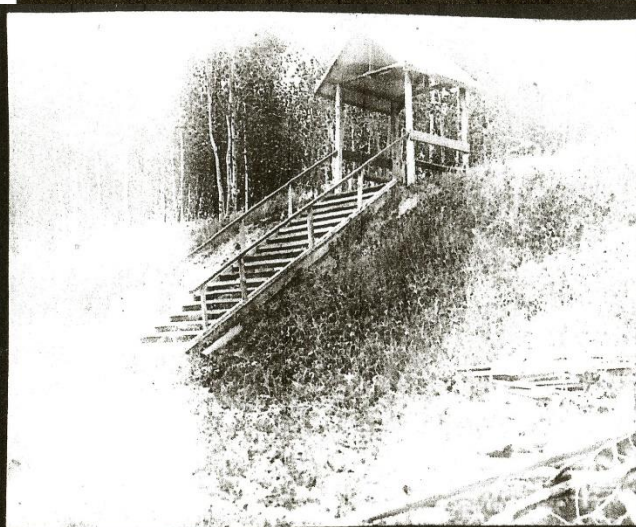
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Bryant's Launch



Bryant's Point



Hotel
Landing

LAKE
From Hotel.



From Claire Graham's
album - 1907
Laurie Mocke has them.