



The “Tragedy” and the “Comedy” of Crystal Lake, and the Role of Archibald Jones (Part I)¹

(Benzonia Academy Lecture Series, Mills House, Benzonia, MI, Thursday, August 12, 2010)

The “Tragedy of Crystal Lake is a well-known story of the artificial lowering of Crystal Lake in Benzie County, and how it came to be an unique event among large inland lakes in northwest Lower Michigan.

William L. Case, a local businessman and former state representative, masterfully told what was believed to be the authentic story based upon his recollections made some fifty years after witnessing the event as a 17-year old boy. His account, first serialized in the Benzie Record, was then printed as a small pamphlet in 1922 which has undergone numerous reprintings².

He described Archibald Jones, as “an enterprising fruit grower and business man of Marengo, Illinois”, who “conceived the notion that by opening a channel between Crystal Lake and Betsie River, a channel might be made following the course of the outlet, that would permit the passage of small sized craft from Lake Michigan into Crystal Lake.” and “who returned to his Illinois home disappointed if not a bit wiser for his effort to put Benzonia and Benzie County more prominently on the map of Michigan,” commenting that, “He builded better than he knew.” -- William L. Case, The Tragedy of Crystal Lake, 1922.

Dr. Stacy L. Daniels, a Frankfort native and long-time resident of Crystal Lake, read the story of the “Tragedy” as a young boy. After becoming a professional environmental engineer, he came to wonder more about the uniqueness of Crystal Lake: How was it formed in glacial times? When was it first called Crystal Lake? What were the particulars as to the cause and extent of the “Tragedy”?

Who was Archibald Jones? Should he be credited, or blamed, for the lowering of Crystal Lake? Was he unfairly cast as a scapegoat for a seemingly disastrous, ill-conceived project, or should he be celebrated as an unsung hero for precipitating an event of unforeseen consequences and benefits in the future?

¹ Originally published in the Benzie County Record Patriot, July 21, 2010, and August 4, 2010.

² William Case, The Tragedy of Crystal Lake, with Some Sidelights, By a Survivor, sponsored by the Benzie Area Historical Society; reprinted, Platte River Printing, Honor, MI, 2007, 23pp.

The ancient Greek “Tragedy” is a form of art drama in which the protagonist is overcome by some superior force or circumstance. A “Comedy”, by contrast, is a separate genre, that depicts laughable people involved in some kind of blunder which does not cause pain or disaster. The lowering of Crystal Lake has elements of both.

Having been involved in water quality studies of Crystal Lake since the 1960’s, Dr. Daniels has accumulated resource materials and annotated an extensive bibliography of articles, books, and maps for a book he is writing on the environmental history of the Crystal Lake Watershed. Since the “Tragedy” of Crystal Lake figures so prominently in Benzie County history, he concluded that there must be more to the story of Archibald Jones.

Reviewing contemporary accounts, recorded legend, and scientific evidence, he has reconstructed the Tragedy/Comedy, pinpointing the actual date and circumstances of the historic event. For the first time, a complete biographical sketch of Archibald Jones and his family has been constructed. He has retraced the footsteps of Archibald Jones and his family from NY, to OH, MI, IL, back to MI and IL, to KS, and IA. He has located the great-great- and great-great-great-granddaughter of Archibald Jones, who engineered the “Tragedy”, and the great-grandson of John Torrans, the builder of the paddleboat commissioned by Jones to navigate the Betsie River.

To summarize this historic event: On or about³ August 23-27, 1873, in an ill-fated attempt to create a navigable channel between Crystal Lake and Lake Michigan, the Betsie River Improvement Company caused the level of Crystal Lake to be lowered by 20 feet in a few weeks. This tumultuous event resulted in Crystal Lake losing 25% of its water volume (76,000,000,000 gallons), and reducing its surface area by 25% (3,093 Acres) (*). The Company’s boat made only one trip downriver backwards.

(*) Crystal Lake is still the 9th largest inland lake in Michigan with a surface area of 9,854 A and a volume of 242,000,000,000 gallons of water!

The drawdown was unsuccessful from a navigational standpoint, but created a 21-mile perimeter of sandy beach and prime recreational area around Crystal Lake where ~ 1,100 cottages and the Village of Beulah are now located. The “Tragedy” of Crystal Lake is forever preserved in the exposed terrace of sandy beach, the perimeter roads and trails, the deep water sediments, and the outwash plain along the outlet.

“The event was so epochal in its nature and has such a permanent bearing on the subsequent development of Benzie County that it is rightly considered as one of the major incidents of the county’s early history.” – Leonard Case, Benzie County, A Bicentennial Reader, 1976.

Three permanent markers commemorating the “Tragedy” were located near Crystal Lake in downtown Beulah, at Warren Road, and in Bellows Park. They were unveiled in ceremonies on August 27, 1978, a date which coincidentally fell within the anniversary of the recently rediscovered period of the actual event.

Two related events are planned for this summer to recognize the Tragedy/Comedy of Crystal Lake:

“The Tragedy” and the “Comedy” of Crystal Lake, and the Role of Archibald Jones”
Benzonia Academy Lecture Series, Dr. Stacy L. Daniels
(A review of the “Tragedy” and a biosketch of Archibald Jones.)
Mills Community House, Thursday, August 12, 2010, 7 P.M.

ARCHIBALD JONES DAY – A celebration for “The Man Who Pulled the Plug at Crystal Lake”
Downtown Beulah, Saturday, August 28, 2010, 11 A.M. to 3 P.M.
Activities: “The Story of Archibald Jones”; Re-enactment of the “Tragedy”; Fun & games from the 1870’s;
Entertainment, music & food. Come celebrate our local heritage!

(Co-sponsored by the Crystal Lake & Watershed Association, Crystal Lake Community Business Association, Benzie Area Historical Society, Beulah Boosters, & Benzie County Chamber of Commerce)

³ The actual event most probably occurred early in the morning of Saturday, August 23, 1873, when the whitecaps of Crystal Lake washed out a temporary dam intended to be part of a slack-water channel with locks.

The “Tragedy” and the “Comedy” of Crystal Lake, and the Role of Archibald Jones (Part II)

[The following abridged biography was written by Dr. Stacy L. Daniels, a local resident, as part of a forthcoming book on the environmental history of the Crystal Lake Watershed. It was derived from a combination of eyewitness accounts, old newspaper articles; local historical summaries; Internet sources, census and genealogical records; and contemporary writings.]

Western expansion by settlers from the Eastern States to the Great Lakes region occurred during the 1830's – 1890's. Particular to Michigan were the unlimited opportunities to create harbors of refuge for shipping along the eastern shoreline of Lake Michigan, and the creation of accessible waterways to inland regions of the State for logging and farming. The saga of Archibald Jones is both typical and unique.

Early Years – New York

Archibald Jones “Jr.” was born near the hamlet of Petersburg, Rensselaer Co., NY, on 14 Sep 1811, the 4th of 8 children of Archibald Jones “Sr.”, a local farmer and land owner, and wife Prudence. This locale, in eastern NY near Troy, was settled about the middle of the 18th Century. It was close to the Hudson River and the eastern terminus of the Erie Canal, which was the first rapid transportation system between the eastern seaboard and the Great Lakes that did not require portage or arduous overland travel through wilderness on primitive roads. Archibald is reported as having worked on the Canal as a young man. He appears to have come by his interest in water transportation naturally as his great(5) grandfather, Christopher Jones Jr., was owner and captain of the Mayflower.

Marriage and Family – New York

Archibald married Sophia Needham, b. 23 Jan 1817, in Brattleboro, Windham Co., VT, on 15 Apr 1835, with the first five of their eight children, Ai, George W., Anna, Olive C., and Frank A., being born in several small towns in upper middle New York State straddling the Erie Canal. Archibald was a “carriage maker” in Urbana, Steuben Co., NY, in 1850, before embarking on his adventures to the west.

Migration to the Mid-West – Ohio

The lure of new lands and opportunities on the Mid-western frontier was hard to resist. The growing Jones family followed the wave of immigrants west to Ohio. In 1851, Archibald and his oldest son, Ai, drove teams of horses from Whitesville, Jefferson Co., NY, to Sandusky, OH, a distance of 310 miles through wilderness and along the shores of Lake Erie. The family first lived on a farm east of Sandusky, then on Put-in-Bay Island, the scene of William Hazard Perry's epic naval victory during the War of 1812. Archibald was the overseer of the estate of Judge Ogden Edwards and supervised the clearing of the island while son Ai became its first school teacher. Archibald was the foreman of the property until 1854. Archibald learned about fruit culturing as the island was subdivided, grapes were cultured, and the wine industry began.

Opportunity on the Frontier – Michigan

During their time in OH, the Jones' family grew by the addition of Archibald (III), Charles H., and Sophia. The Jones family moved back to Sandusky City and registered for the 1860 U.S. Census. Some of the family also made a temporary jaunt further west to Sanilac Co. in Michigan's Thumb. Archibald also registered in the 1860 U.S. Census, along with six of his eight children, as a “lumberman” in Sanilac Co., MI. His oldest son, Ai, registered as a “bookkeeper”, and subsequently married, Sarah Coy, in Sanilac Co., in 1861. Archibald was befriended by Truman Moss, a prominent businessman in timber enterprises in Crosswell, MI and a banker in Sandusky, OH, and may have been a caretaker of Moss's estate and extensive land holdings during which time he learned much about the lumbering industry in Michigan.

Moving On – Illinois

Sometime in the early 1860's Archibald left his position in Sanilac Co., MI and moved some of his family from OH to Irving Park, IL, north of Chicago, where son George W. and wife Rosa M, began raising their family. His daughter, Olive, and son-in-law George C. Barcalow, also followed for a brief time until purchasing a farm back in OH. Archibald, Sophia, and the younger children may have moved on to settle in Marengo, IL. Following the Great Chicago Fire of Oct 10, 1871, Archibald and Sophia, and the family of son George W., moved to Benzonia, MI, to fulfill their destiny in the “Tragedy” of Crystal Lake.

The "Tragedy" of Crystal Lake – Michigan

With his knowledge of horticulture and lumbering, and his inherited and accrued experiences in water transportation, Archibald came to Crystal Lake about 1871. He continued his entrepreneurial adventures by forming the Betsie River Improvement Company, with the intent of creating a navigable waterway between Crystal Lake and nearby Lake Michigan by dredging a channel up the Betsie River to transport timber to the sawmills and cordwood to the iron foundry downriver in Frankfort, and other finished goods upriver to Benzonia and points inland. Archibald was 62 years of age at the time he became justly famous as "the man who pulled the plug at Crystal Lake", on or about August 25-27, thereby initiating the dramatic lowering of Crystal Lake through an impromptu channel unfit for boat traffic. Although an engineered slack-water canal (with locks) never materialized, a 21-mile sandy beach was created that is now a prime recreational area containing ~1.100 cottages and the Village of Beulah. It is uncertain whether Archibald, being a shrewd business man with bootstrap engineering experience, intentionally and unwittingly "pulled the plug". Perhaps the famous whitecaps of Crystal Lake (*ne'* 'Cap Lake), seeing the opportunity, burst their bonds, and washed out a temporary dam before permanent facilities could be constructed. The following year the Company went bankrupt and the venture failed.

Archibald Jones - "He Buildec Better Than He Knew."

The lowering of Crystal Lake was relatively unique in the histories of Michigan inland lakes. Certainly it was one of the most spectacular and long-lasting of river improvement projects anywhere in the U.S. at the time. The event was epochal and significantly affected the future of Benzie County. Following the "Tragedy" and the failure of the Company, Archibald Jones was sued by John Torrans, the builder of a paddleboat commissioned to ply the Betsie River. In the ensuing court testimony, Archibald, when asked why the boat failed to perform replied with a famous anecdote, "Well, the real reason was because the bottom of the river was too close to the top of the water."

Further Adventure – Illinois & Kansas

Perhaps a little more sad than wise, Archibald moved back to Marengo, IL, in late 1877, where he had a part ownership in a livery and became a dealer in horses. He was the President of the Marengo Agricultural & Stock Breeders Association in 1877 and 1878. He and Sophia were listed in the 1880 U.S. Census in Marengo, where he had now become a "miller". Sometime before 1885 he and Sophia moved onward establishing themselves as most esteemed citizens of Emporia, KS, and engaging in "raising cattle" on a 900-acre ranch near Ivy, KS. They celebrated 50 years of happily married life at a gala party in 1885. After the death of Sophia in 1887, Archibald moved to Davenport, IA, spending his remaining years with daughter, Olive Barcalow, a widow with two daughters. Archibald Jones departed this life at 12 ½ o'clock midnight on 15 May 1890, at the age of 79 years. His remains were transported by rail to Emporia and buried next to his beloved Sophia. He was predeceased by his son, George W., but was survived by his widow and second wife, Julia F. Jones, whom he married in 1889.

Descendents

Some of the older Jones' children married and settled in Ohio, but they, and younger members of the family, on occasion shared in joint ventures. Archibald was ably assisted in the Betsie River Improvement Co. by his son-in-law John Osterhout (Anna Jones' husband) and other family members. Son Frank, and wife Jennie, also followed Archibald, eventually moving back to Ohio. Archibald's descendents caught the fever of living in northern Michigan. Son George W. assisted in his father's Company, and eventually remained in Benzonia to run a livery stable and stage stop hotel. Archibald's grandson, Irving Park Jones was a cashier in the Central State Bank in Benzonia and resided there for some 70 years. Archibald's great grandson, Milton Irving Jones, was an osteopathic physician in Chicago before retiring to Benzonia. Archibald's great granddaughter, Mildred M. (Jones) Huppert was also a long-time resident of Benzonia, living in the "Archibald Jones House which still exists. Many of the Jones family were confirmed in the Benzonia Congregational Church and are buried in Benzonia Twp. Cemetery.

Postscript

The following, written by a namesake Jones, is aptly applied to Archibald Jones:

"The smallest bark on life's tumultuous ocean
Will leave a track behind for evermore;
The lightest waves of influence set in motion,
Extend and widen to the eternal shore:
We should be wary, then, who go before

A myriad yet to be; and we should take
Our bearing carefully, where breakers roar
And fearful tempests gather; one mistake
May wreck unnumbered barks that follow in our wake."

-- "Incidents in the Life and Labors of Burton Rensselaer Jones, 1909.

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