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## Benzie County

Your hometown is where you were born and raised. It's a place that's hard to forget because you've grown up and learned so much from that particular town. In my case, my hometown has shaped me because there's a little bit of everything to see and explore in Benzie. Nineteen years has been good for me in this little town I call home.

## **HOMETOWN SPLENDOR**

The smallest county in the state of Michigan belongs to my hometown, Benzie County. Benzie lies right on the coast of Lake Michigan in the Northwestern region of the lower peninsula. I've lived my entire life in this little town and I fall in love with it over and over again. Most people I've met outside of my town have never heard of Benzie County, which is very unfortunate. Benzie is full of beauty everywhere you look. This town has several beaches, countless hiking and biking trails, and many restaurants to choose from.

## **Outdoor Beauty**

Benzie County has such a stunning location year around. During the winter, Thompsonville offers us some great downhill ski slopes at Crystal Mountain. Spring allows us to be able to walk outside and smell the fresh, cool, crisp air on the lovely Betsie Valley Trail.

Summer is the busiest time of year and in that time we like to show off our nice breezy beaches of “57 inland lakes” (“Up North Living”). Fall is a great time to float down the river to see all of the beautiful colors the trees have to offer. So much more is available on top of all of those great attractions.

You will find much of Benzie’s beauty in the summer time. Memorial day marks the first day of summer in this town. Tourists will come from all over to explore the downtowns and beaches of Beulah and Frankfort. Downtown Beulah rests right next to Crystal Lake and between the Betsie Valley trail. Downtown Frankfort is located just next to Lake Michigan and the well-known Betsie Bay. Although “Benzie County is the smallest county in Michigan at 316 square miles” (“About Benzie County”), there is so much attractiveness packed into it. I am very privileged to have grown up in this area and learned so much from it.

Hiking and kayaking is another popular activity in Benzie County. The Betsie Valley trail runs diagonally from the northwest to the southeast end of Benzie and is used for biking and running. The Betsie river runs throughout the county and opens up at the Betsie Bay. This is popular for canoeing and kayaking as well as a great location to photograph. The other river that runs through Benzie is Platte river. This river is the most used river for tourists because it runs right out to the mouth of the Platte and into Lake Michigan.

Just North of the mouth is the National Park, Sleeping Bear Dunes (See Figure 1). Sleeping Bear Dunes is well known for its extraordinary views and phenomenal sandy mounds and valleys. According to ABC’s Good Morning America with “100,000 votes, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore was named the "Most Beautiful Place in America"" (“The Official”) in August of 2011. Here you will find the famous dune climb to the top to experience the scenic

overlook. Camping is also available at the National Park and is a great opportunity to explore on your own and connect with nature.



Figure 1: Sleeping Bear Dunes Overlook (Morse)

## Dining & Lodging

Although Benzie is a small town, it's not off the grid. Benzie County has plenty of restaurants, cafés, and fine dining locations. Frankfort offers a wide variety of restaurants for tourists including pizzerias, sit in restaurants, fast food, bars, and ice cream parlors. In Downtown Frankfort there are ten restaurants of which are all different styles; the sit in restaurants include four that offer breakfast and coffee, a Thai food restaurant, a seafood restaurant, a pizzeria, and three that offer drinks and bar food. Stormcloud is the most recently built brewery in Frankfort and was voted “best new brewery in Michigan” (Sherman). Since this brewery has opened, it alone has brought a lot of business into town.

Just eight miles east in Beulah there are also several great restaurants that offer a wide variety of food. The most famous stop in Beulah has to be the Cherry Hut. This restaurant is known for its cherry products and delicious cherry dishes. The Cherry Hut is also one of the oldest restaurants in Benzie County dating back to “a roadside pie stand in 1922” (“About the

Cherry Hut”). After lunch at the Cherry Hut, down the road is Dairy King where you can get your favorite ice cream treat.

Accompanying dining, Benzie offers many lodging options, everything from bed and breakfasts to chain hotels. Best Western is the largest hotel Benzie has but if you’re looking for a unique experience there are several small, locally owned inns, motels, and resorts. A majority of the Inns in Benzie County are located on beach front property offering you a lakeside view. The largest resort in my hometown is Crystal Mountain. As mentioned before, this resort offers year around activities such as downhill skiing, spa facilities, golf, an outdoor high rope course, and many lodging selections.

Overall Benzie County is such a beautiful place to live or just to visit and get away for a couple days. New findings and experiences happen here every day no matter what town you’re in in Benzie County. Everything you could want to get away from the city life is here with an outdoor escape and cultured dining.

## **FAMILY HISTORY**

Benzie County was well established for quite some time before any of my family had moved to town. However, Benzie was not necessarily complete. They were privileged enough to help start and be a part of some of Benzie’s early history. My mother’s side of the family moved to Benzie from Corpus Christi, Texas in the early 1980’s. The Cutler family has been around since my great grandparents in the 1940’s. Together these two families came together in 1994 and remain in Benzie County.

## The Fall Family

The Fall family, which is my mother's maiden name, is originally from the Northwestern region of Michigan but decided to move down South to raise their family. My mother, along with six other kids, lived in Corpus Christi for fourteen years until my grandparents had decided to move back up north to reconnect with family. My grandfather had coincidentally found a great job building houses around the lakes of Benzonia while my grandmother stayed home to finish raising the kids. Today, although my grandmother has passed, my grandfather remains in the house he had built in the early 1980's (Cutler).

## Cutler Family

My father's side of the family has more connections with Benzie County. The Cutler Family has been around Benzie County since 1940 when my great grandparents were married in Beulah. Not long after they were married they had two kids, Roger and Joyce. Roger, my grandfather, married in the early 1970's and had two boys, Jeremy and Michael. Later on in 1994 my father, Michael, married my mother in the same church as my great grandparents. Including myself, that's four generations of the Cutler family in Benzie County.

My great grandmother has quite the history with Benzie County. Gertie Bell was involved with Benzie's education program for a long time. She graduated from Petoskey's Normal College of Business in 1936 and started teaching as soon as she possibly could. Following graduation, she taught in a one room school house in Emmet County, Michigan for two years. After those two years she found a job as a kindergarten teacher in Copemish at Copemish Elementary in Benzie County (See Figure 2). According to numerous residents of Benzie, "they still remember her as their kindergarten teacher back in the day" (Cutler). When she moved to Copemish in 1938, that's where she met my great grandfather, Chester.

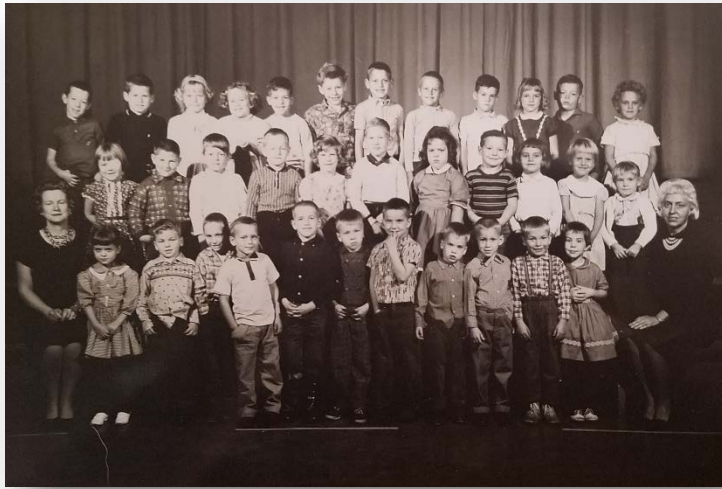


Figure 2: Copemish Elementary Class Picture

Around the 1940's, Chester Cutler owned his own used cars business. Cutler Auto Sales was the only repair shop at the time in Benzonia (See Figure 3). According to my mother, "He fixed up cars and bikes and motors and all sorts of stuff for super cheap" (Cutler). The town was quite familiar with the Cutler family for my great grandfather's skills and my great grandmothers teaching abilities. Cutler Auto Sales was opened until his retirement in the 1970's due to ill age and his son serving in the Navy. Gertie Bell also retired in the 1970's after serving as a principal at Betsie Valley Elementary, also located in the Copemish area.

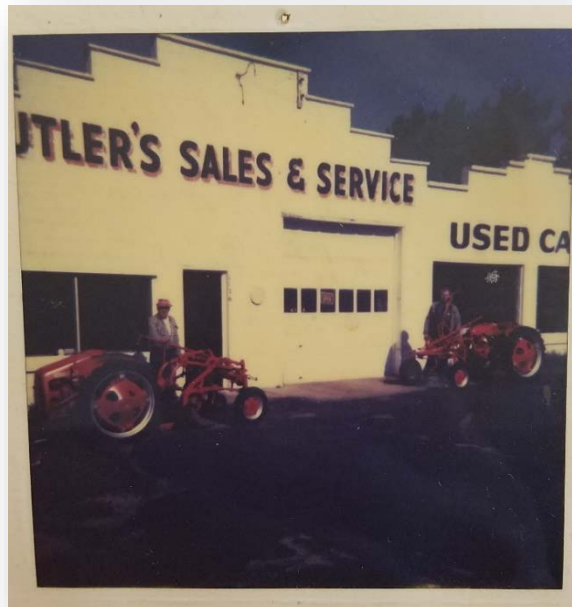


Figure 3: Cutler's Auto Sales & Service Storefront

My great grandparents were happily married for 49 years until his death in 1989. Up until my great grandmother's death in 2008 she had the privilege to volunteer at the local schools, the church, and the local museum to leave her mark on the town. Their son, Butch, followed his father's footsteps in auto repair at another locally owned dealer after returning from the Navy.

## **Current Generations**

My parents both attended Benzie Central High School, as did my sister and I, but never met in high school due to a five-year age difference. They met while working at Crystal Mountain in the early 1990's. My father was currently working as an outdoor maintenance man while my mother worked in the resorts accounting department. From there they were married and a few years later they had my sister and I.

Family history is significant because without it, connections may never be made. It's important to see how your relatives might have shaped your hometown for what it is today. The Cutler family revolutionized the auto industry in Benzie county and my great grandmother was able to influence so many children by helping them grow and learn.

## **History of Benzie**

The first records of Benzie County suggest pioneers had arrived around the 1860's. These pioneers surveyed the land and broke grounds for the means of a new colony. Charles E. Bailey was a part of a group of organizers from New York that had decided to search for new land where they could "organize a colony and institutions of learning and religion [were] the principals of temperance and anti-slavery" (Sinclair 3). With success, three years later in 1863, Benzie County was officially established.

## Education in Benzie

Mr. Bailey established the first congregational church in Benzie and became the pastor. With the combination of the Grand Traverse College and his church, together they unite “in erecting a building suitable for the purpose of both” (Sinclair 4). This soon developed into the College Chapel until it had burned down in 1874. The institution was moved to what was known as East Hall, just around the block. Barber Hall and the Mills Community House were built a year later and together continued as the Grand Traverse College. The college was a success until the standards were no longer met and was diminished in the 1880’s.

Grade school was taught in a one room school house until 1891. The population of Benzie started to grow rapidly, so it was decided that East Hall would be used for the new grade school, Benzonia High School. In the years between 1898 and 1915, the graduating classes were as little as two to four graduates each year and there was some “serious consideration of eliminating the eleventh and twelve grades” (Sinclair 24). However, since 1915 the class numbers have been steadily rising due to tourism throughout the town. Additions were soon built onto east hall to obtain more classrooms. Evidently, the class sizes were still rising in numbers so a new elementary building was built across the street for the lower level grades.

Since the new elementary building was built, additions were built onto that as well as several other elementary schools throughout the county. The Benzonia High School was used until 1952 when the enrollment rate grew too high and was moved to the present day high school, Benzie Central. Benzie Central has had several additions as well; the gymnasium was attached in 1960 after the old high school was torn down and an auditorium was built in 2005.

All of the buildings but one that were originally built for the college have been torn down. The one left standing is the Mills Community House (See Figure 4). Mills is now used for



a public library and meeting hall. A section of the library is dedicated to all of the documents, books, and papers that were left behind from the college. This building stands as a historical site in Benzonia today.



Figure 4: Mills Community House 2016

## The Industry

1839 marks the year a railroad was built from Ann Arbor to reach Frankfort. It wasn't long until Benzie started becoming a tourist town for the beautiful waters and amazing landscapes. With that railroad, it was made possible to receive goods and merchandise from bigger cities like Detroit and Chicago. In return, Benzie would ship lumber and fruits downstate.

Benzie county had a mining and logging industry in its early stages. The logging was used specifically for mining iron. In order to melt the iron, they needed to make coals because coals are much hotter than the fire itself. Once the iron was hot enough, "The impurities deposits would rise to the top and they would just scrape off the top and dump it into the lake" (Woods). All those impurities turned out to later become a very unique type of rock called Leland Blue and

Frankfort Green for its brilliant blue and green colors. Today, Benzie is now mainly known for its fertile fruit lands and tourism.

Another significant event that happened in Benzie had to do with a man named Archibald Jones. He was an entrepreneur and the founder of Benzie County River Improvements in the 1870s. Jones had every intention to make ease of the rivers and lakes in Benzie County for the uprising resort destination, however, Jones is now known for the flooding into the Betsie River from Crystal Lake. Today this incident is now known as the tragedy of Crystal Lake. Jones lowered Crystal Lake by “20 feet and [made] the creation of a 21-mile perimeter” (Daniels). His big mistake was not correctly checking the water levels between Lake Michigan and Crystal Lake before opening the dams (See Figure 5). Although Beulah lost a lot of lake water a long time ago, today we have the beautiful sandy beaches and the downtown area of Beulah.

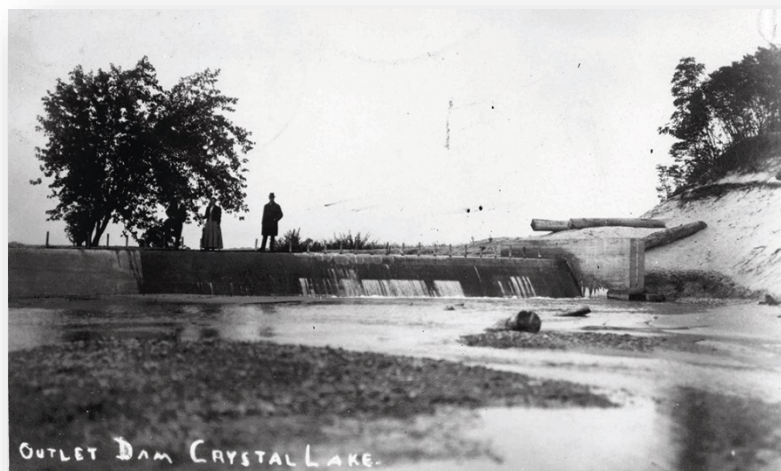


Figure 5: Outlet Dam of Crystal Lake (History Center of Traverse City)

Benzie County has had immense improvements since 1863. Charles E. Bailey was the start of the church and college. Although the college was not a huge success, it guided the path to a great education program in Benzie County today. In the year 1870, Crystal Lake gave Beulah a

significant landscape transformation which allowed for the fertile fruit lands to grow apples and cherries.

I have been to plenty of other cities and towns but there's nothing that calls home like Benzie County. My teachers and family have taught me everything about my hometown. They have given me the opportunity to see how important it can be to maintain a tradition and learn why things are the way they are today. Overall Benzie County has become such a beautiful place to experience whether you live in the town year around or plan a vacation getaway.

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