

The History Corner
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Mace Road History

I like gravel roads. I always have. I think it goes back all the way to the time when I was a kid growing up in the cities waiting for Sunday afternoons to come around. Sunday afternoon was when our family would often go for rides out in the country. Back then the country didn't seem that far away and it didn't take too long before the highways that led us out, away from our home in the city, became crisscrossed with roads of dirt and gravel.

I would love it when we would turn off onto those roads. I would look out the open window of our family car and watch the passing rows of corn go by. The fields seemed so endless, walls of them on both sides, sliced open on occasion by rutted dirt roads that led to the patches of trees where farm families lived. Farmhouses and barns that were not placed neatly like the homes on city blocks but thrown together, here and there, almost haphazardly, in and amongst the rolling sea of green. If I were lucky, at some point along those gravel roads dad would slowly brake the car and pull over to the side. I would look to him and if he patted his lap I would slide over onto it, grab the wheel and "drive". The feeling of freedom and joy that those moments gave, have never left me.

I think that is why the country has always had such appeal to me. In part it may be that the gravel roads of my memory remind me of simpler times, periods of our history when the vision of why something needed to be undertaken was as important as the speed at which it was completed. Of a time when hope and optimism and dreams were mixed in with the newly turned soil and planted in the ground to grow right along with the corn and beans and grain. Country roads speak of those days and those dreams.

Look at the names of gravel roads that make up our community and one thing almost immediately becomes clear. They are named after the families who first settled here, the families who first turned this ground and planted those seeds, Englund, Shilhon, Korkki, Laine, Alseth, Nappa, and the road I live on, the Mace.

Robert and Clara Mace came to Duluth via Canada, Michigan and Wisconsin. Prior to 1901 the Mace's resided in Milwaukee but in that year Robert, who was purchasing agent for the Oliver Mining Company, bought a home at 1631 East Third St. in Duluth. At the time his three daughters Edith, Callie, Bel and a son Harry (also referred to in some accounts as having the name Henry) were already in their early twenties but unmarried and still living with them in Milwaukee. All the children accompanied Clara and Robert to Duluth and the entire family took up residence at the Third Street address.

Within a few years of their move Robert located a quarter section of land along the French River that was to his liking and acquired it as well. The property was located about a mile inland from Lake Superior in an area that the French River Mining Company had extensively explored, with little success, for possible copper deposits beginning a half-century earlier. More recently the land had belonged to a man named Jim Erickson. Erickson operated a large water powered shingle mill on the river but was subsequently killed and the mill fell into disuse. Robert Mace's interest in the property focused not on the mill, nor on mining, but on the picturesque qualities of the land seeing it as a perfect place to build a retreat and trout fishing hideaway. By the spring of 1910 a large log cabin, complete with front porch overlooking the river, was under construction. On August 7th of that year, according to records listed in

the Mace family guest book, a get together that included all the Mace's, plus several prominent Duluth families, was held at the property marking the cabin's completion.

Unlike many of their neighbors who were struggling to make a living fishing or farming, the Mace's were clearly fairly well off. In the early years they would travel by train from their Duluth home to the French River rail stop, then walk up the west side of the river until they reached a foot bridge that allowed them to safely cross to their cabin along the east bank. In later years a road was constructed that provided them more direct access by car off the Ryan. Over the years outbuildings and a barn were added and the sisters would quite regularly travel out to check on the property.

In 1917 Robert donated land for the construction of a new school and a year later, School 90, also known as the Mace School, opened on their property a few hundred feet north of the present day Ryan and Mace Road intersection. The Mace son, Harry, eventually moved to Texas but the three daughters stayed in Duluth splitting their time between their Third St residence and the cabin. In 1920 their mother Clara died. Four years later Robert followed her in death. With their parents now gone the sisters, who by now were all in their forties, decided to put a significant addition onto the cabin and in 1927 after it's completion moved out to French River permanently. They converted their homestead into a farming operation and with the help of hired hands, raised ducks and chickens, as well as horses, cows and other farm animals, some of which they would occasionally sell to neighbors or in town. Their lifestyle in some ways was not unlike others who had farms in the area though few probably had the resources for a chauffeured driver, as did the sisters.

Though of a different background and social strata than most, Edith, Callie, and Bel were in no way reclusive and didn't set themselves apart from the rest of their less well off neighbors. They actively participated in the community, hosted the French River Pleasure Club as well as the Women's Auxiliary at their home, and supported local arts and music through their involvement with the Community Glee Club.

Though they remained active for all their lives, none of the sisters ever married. Edith died in 1935 at age 57. Callie lived to 82, passing away in 1959. Bel, the youngest of the sisters, was the last of the Mace family to survive, dying just short of her 93rd birthday on August 3, 1973.

Years ago, when I first moved to the area, an old wood sign was still evident hanging on a tree at the southeast corner of their property. The letters were nearly faded and the sign hard to read but if you looked closely you could just barely make out the words "Mace Farm". That old wood sign like the Mace's are long gone from this land. But because of their lives and their work, the gravel road I walk each morning still bears their name and I would like to believe, along with it, some of their hopes and dreams as well.