

IRON RANGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



WHERE HISTORY COMES ALIVE

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IRHS is 50!

**Celebrate with the Iron Range Historical Society in 2023.
Watch Facebook & Instagram, the IRHS website, and local
newspapers for events and activities all year long.**

PIONEER DAYS

BY BARBARA E. LAMPPA

The saloon door opened wide, and in rode a thirsty fellow, horse and all, up to the polished oak bar. He ordered a beer, consumed it with relish, turned his horse, and rode out again, without ever having dismounted.¹ A thin whisp of a man with tired bones and dusty clothes picked his way carefully and not without effort along the high board walks on Main Street. The hour was late; empty beer barrels were rolled out the saloon doors, ready to be hauled away and replaced with fresh kegs in the morning. Dim moonlight offered little assistance as he tried to recognize the shadowy figures moving quickly toward him. Whump! Instant blackness followed by the feel of cold damp earth. His month's payroll gone, he returned to work in the morning, a wiser but still a lonely man.



Saloons catered to various nationality groups - Carlson Kolstad Swea Saloon

The "Wild West"? Deadwood or Cheyenne? No; the mining towns of the Iron Range in Northeastern Minnesota. These were typical scenes in the early days on the Range. Most every community has "old timers" who can relate just such colorful tales. When we look about us today and travel to shopping malls along super highways, viewing a vastly changed landscape now void of virgin timbers, it is difficult to picture those early years on the Range and the rugged men and women who established our present communities. In the 1880s and

¹ Wasastjerna, Hans R., "History of the Finns in Minnesota". Minnesota Finnish-American Society, 1957. p. 417

'90s the saloon was the town's social center. "There friends and strangers met, meetings were held, the latest news was reported and repeated."² On paydays the timbermen and miners looked forward to an evening of gambling, drinking and card playing. Or they simply went to socialize; the saloons sold soft drinks as well as liquor, and there was nowhere else to go after work or on Sundays or holidays. It is probably safe to say that alcohol was a main attraction, though, for in Hibbing in 1895, the residents drank over a carload of Fitcher's Beer daily. There were thirty saloons in the village, and they were increasing at the rate of one a day.³ The saloon keeper was considered to be a respectable business man and was a powerful figure in the administration of community affairs. "He controlled the politics in the city of Virginia through the 'lumber jack' vote in the early days and was to be reckoned with in every election. Early settlers tell of the streets being crowded with drunken 'lumber jacks' in the spring of every



A scene typical of the beginnings of our Iron Range Towns.

year, who had received their winter's earnings and boarded the first train to the town to get to the saloons as soon as possible. The women were there to receive them and encourage them in drinking at the bar. The 'jack' would wake up three or four days later with a splitting headache and empty pocketbook, having been 'rolled' by the bartenders or female hangers-on around the saloons . . . On election day they were treated to drinks and told how to vote.⁴ The saloon keeper was also on occasion a money lender, and often a confidant who listened to many a tale of

high hopes, broken dreams, and families in a far distant land.

Drunkenness was accepted as common place, prostitutes served the men in the community and were tolerated by most of the citizens, and gambling and vice were high on the list of "social activities". One reason for the tolerance of the saloons and "houses" was that they were a big source of income to the community. Gambling dens and houses of prostitution paid fines in advance, permitting them to operate without interference. Early Eveleth had 42 saloons, each paying \$500 license fees to the city and \$25 to the state. Hotels and inns could also serve liquor if they paid the city \$25 a year, and there were 180 of these establishments. Each week six or seven freight carloads of beer were brought into Eveleth, with additional shipments for holidays. The city's income in that period was \$30,000; \$20,000 from saloon keepers, \$5,000 in fines from gambling places, and \$5,000 from the "houses".⁵ The saloons and "houses" were hangout for sharpies and gamblers, and shootings and knifings were regular. Arguments were settled with fists, knives, and guns. Often when someone was killed, the body was dumped on the railroad tracks to await the night train. The victim was listed as having had

² Ibid, p. 414

³ Landis, Paul H., "Three Iron Mining Towns: A Study in Cultural Change". Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1938. p. 65

⁴ Ibid, p. 65

⁵ Wasastjerna, Op. Cit., p. 459

"too much whiskey and hit by train".⁶ This rugged and wild atmosphere was reflected in the names of some of the old saloons in Ely: First and Last Chance, Bucket of Blood, Pork Chop Casey's, Faro Mike's, and the U & I Bar. Evangelist Billy Sunday visiting Ely in those early days remarked that "the only difference between Ely and Hell is that Ely has a railroad into it."⁷

Can you imagine 2,000 loggers and 1,500 miners coming into town on paydays? An old logger is quoted as saying, ". . . the days when we came down from the woods were glorious ones. For the first week we always owned the town. The constable and sheriff either had business about that time in some neighboring town or locked themselves up in their houses. The wild dissipation we indulged in and the amount of villainous whiskey that we consumed would kill anyone except one possessed with a constitution such as a winter's campaign in the woods insures. The boisterous laughter and the maddening yells must have been anything but reassuring to the peaceful citizens. To their credit be it said, however, those rough loggers were as a rule a good-natured gang, and did not molest anyone unless some overzealous officer attempted to interfere. Then there was trouble."⁸

Women were scarce in the camps and locations; husbands and sweethearts preferred not to send for them until the communities were fairly well established. Most of the women who did live in the town could be labeled "demimonde". In Mt. Iron in 1899 the ratio of men to women was 6:1, and it is said that when a woman would appear to apply for work in one of the boarding houses, remarks and attentions paid her were so crude that often wages of up to \$5.00 a day were refused.

Wild and reckless men; it would appear that they were a rowdy and immoral lot. No; they were our fathers, grandfathers, great grandfathers. They came from the east where their forefathers had emigrated generations before, they came from Scandinavia and Finland, Slovenia, Germany, France, England, Cornwall, Wales, Russia – all of the countries of northern, central, and southern Europe – even from China. There were the poor and disenchanting, those escaping conscription in some foreign army, the landless and disinherited, the idealists and dreamers, the fortune seekers and the adventurers. They came from any number of backgrounds. Mothers had nursed them and kissed them, fathers had taught them the various skills needed in manhood, the church in their home community had guided them. They came with hopes and ideas of a new and better life. And they found the wilderness and the mine, hard winters and isolation; fellow workers who spoke several different languages but not their own native tongue, long work hours, often good pay but high prices, and isolation. The separate locations and camps established their own form of law and order. A man made do with what he had, and took things pretty much as he found them. Keep in mind the fact that though the Vermilion Range mines were fairly well established, the Mesabi west of Old Mesaba in 1890 was virtually wilderness. Explorers like E. J. Longyear coming to the area in 1890 could take the train from Duluth to Mesaba but then had to walk to their destination. There were no roads, no townsites, no means of public transportation. Trails through the wilderness followed established Indian pathways. The trip from Mesaba to the Mt. Iron region in 1890 took three days, with an overnight stop on the way near what is now Biwabik.⁹ There was no Virginia until 1892. Until 1895, when the Duluth, Missabe, and Northern Railroad was extended to Eveleth, the mail was delivered to Eveleth by dog cart and sled.¹⁰ And so we see men away from an established home, with little evidence of permanency anywhere around them.

⁶ Somrock, John W., "Incredible Ely", reprinted from "American Forests", September, 1974

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Landis, Op. Cit., p. 69

⁹ Wasastjerna, Op. Cit., p. 481

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 457

The very nature of the mining camps and locations was unsettled and impermanent. Mines opened and closed without notice; the small mining companies often folded overnight. Hastily constructed housing was assembled and dismantled with the moving of a location or closing of a mine.



Early miners' living quarters - boards & tar paper to keep out the winter winds.

The larger companies offered better housing, but many men lived in the barracks or tar paper shacks where it was not uncommon to wake on a winter morning with hair frozen to the wall.

Advertisements in the newspapers back home and the agents at the docks in New York told the immigrant that in Minnesota's iron field there was work for all, high wages, streets paved with gold, where a man could make his fortune easily in a few years. And many did come with intentions of returning to the fatherland in a few years. There was work, hard work, and in some of the mines cave-ins were frequent and life was cheap; wages were good, but prices were high making saving impossible; the fortune was never accumulated by most, and often the immigrant miner had to abandon all hopes of ever being able to return to the homeland again, or of bringing his family to join him. Despondency ran high, and the suicide rate was phenomenal. A report from the Virginia "Enterprise" of April 29, 1904, reads, "There have been 160 accidental deaths on the Range during the past year. Of this number, thirty-five lost their lives in mine disasters, twenty-two died of alcoholism and nine met death by gunshot wounds. The remainder represents suicides, victims of skull fractures, men who were crushed in the woods and those who died of exposure to the cold or were drowned or cremated."¹¹

Natural disasters also took their toll on testing a man's endurance. Albert E. Bickford, a pioneer of early Virginia, recalled the Virginia fire of June 18, 1893.

"The fire was caused by just the kind of weather we have recently had. It was extremely dry and everything was just like a tinderbox – ready to be started by a spark.

¹¹ Queen City Sun, May 21, 1926

“Different sections of the town were being cleared of brush which was thrown in huge piles on the outskirts of the town. It was a Sunday afternoon when somebody carelessly set fire to one of the piles which rapidly spread until it got beyond control of the hastily organized volunteer fire-fighters.

“After the fire there was nothing left – everything was razed. Deprived of shelter and food, the residents slept on lumber piles and rude tents made out of blankets.

“Aid did not come until Monday afternoon when a train loaded with provisions contributed by the Duluth charities arrived in the city. Fortunately, nobody was killed but the loss to property must have been about a million dollars. Most of the women and children were taken to Iron Junction but the men stayed on and began, with the hardiness of the pioneer, to reconstruct their home and places of business on the charred ruins.”¹²

The fire had taken less than an hour to destroy Virginia. Those who stayed on to rebuild also had to face severe economic depression in 1893. Unemployment ran high and those who did work were paid a mere \$1.10 a day.¹³ But rebuild they did, and by April 1, 1895, Virginia became a city, with board sidewalks, new buildings, a large sawmill, and new mines and small businesses developing. In five months the populations grew to 5,000. And then again, July 7, 1900, a fire that began in one of the sawmills again leveled Virginia. Imagine the task of continually beginning again – from nothing, virtually in the middle of nowhere.

But gradually, as the steel mills of the east increased their need for Minnesota iron ore, the roots of permanency took hold. Lumber camps began turning out the hundreds of board feet of lumber needed to construct the new towns, and test pitting and diamond drilling determined that there was indeed ore on the ranges to be mined for generations. Families moved in, and the numerous needs of community life began to be filled. Pastor E. N. Raymond presented the first religious service held in Virginia in a barroom on Sunday, April 23, 1893.¹⁴

Boarding houses sprang up, offering good food, with moose and deer meat provided by professional hunters at 1 ½ cents per pound – room, board and laundry at \$16.00 per month. Temperance societies sprang up across the ranges in an attempt to curb alcoholism and redeem the young men. They featured entertainment programs, lectures, chorus groups, sponsored brass bands, provided sickness and burial benefits, and promoted reading and lending libraries.

The first ordinance passed by the council in Nashwauk in 1902 regulated the sale and consumption of intoxicating beverages. Water was provided to homes at a rate of 50 cents a month, and by 1903 Main Street was flanked by board sidewalks.

The Finns held midsummer festivals with athletic events, prizes and trophies, and the Virginia Workers' Society built the three-story Socialist Opera House on Walnut Street (now First Street North). It became a cultural center for the entire mining region. Frontier mores began, indeed, to fade. Solid government, education, religion and culture had come to the Range. But that is another story . . .

Credits: “Pioneer Days” originally ran in *Range History* the Society’s newsletter dated September 1976. **Photo Credits:** All photos in the Iron Range Historical Society photo collection. Three men in front of Carlson, Kolstad, Swea Saloon, Biwabik & Merritt, date unknown; first mining camp in Mountain Iron circa 1889; miners’ accommodations, place and date unknown.

¹² Landis, Op. Cit., p. 416

¹³ Wasastjerna, Op. Cit., p. 416

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 415

Iron Range Historical Society Happenings

To collect, preserve and share the history of Minnesota's Iron Ranges for the benefit of future generations

The Board of Directors held its reorganizational meeting in January. The Directors elected officers for 2023: Michele Lammi, President; Robert Kivela, Vice President; Steve Bottila, Secretary; Rich Soderberg, Treasurer. Directors Melissa Gulan, Janet Eichholz, Jim Paul, Pam Matson, and Kim Sampson round out the Board. Meetings will continue to be held in the library at the Society's offices in McKinley City Hall on the third Monday of each month at 10 am. All are welcome to attend. The Board is currently working on a three-year strategic plan. When it is complete and approved it will be available on the IRHS website for viewing.

- ~ **1857 hours** were donated to the Society by volunteers in 2022.
- ~ **85 books** were sold in 2022 earning IRHS \$813.
- ~ **\$4000.00 in monetary funds** were donated by supporters of IRHS in 2022.

Monetary supporters of the Iron Range Historical Society in 2022

THANK YOU!

Axelsen, Pat	Bayer, Jaqueline	Bombich, Tony
Braaten, David	Burnoski, Adam	Case, John & Patricia
Caucci, Greg	Cleveland-Cliffs, Inc & Employees	Francel, Margaret
Froemming, James	Garmaker, Michael	Granovsky, Nancy Lammi
Jordahl, Sara	Karish, John & Mary	Kelly, Linda
Kulaszewicz, Alan	Lammi, Michele & Richard	Lamppa, Harry
Malmberg, Judith	Novak, Tom	Nyrhinen, Steve
Palen, Roberta	Paulisich, Paul	Rosandich, George
Shaffer Family	Shain, Eva	Sojka, Jon
Wauzynski, David	Woodworth, Melanie	

Haenke, Phil in memory of Bill & Irma Haenke
Juola, James & Jean in memory of Signe Skoog & Toivo Juola, Tami Niemi & Vern Stanaway
LaVoie, Sheila & Andy in memory of Cleo LaVoie
Miller, Marcia in memory of Dana H Miller
Nelson, Lauren in memory of Isak Maki
Nollet, Judith in memory of Minnie Martinson
Santelli, Joanne in memory of Robert Hall

via GiveMN.org

Anderson, Pamela	Axelsen, Pat	Gulan, Melissa & Jeff
Gulbranson, Debbie	Ocepek, Marilyn in memory of John & Irene Ocepek	

Dr. James & Jean Juola had this to say about donating, "Making a donation to IRHS in recognition of family members and friends is a great way to not only support IRHS, but also to honor those who made a significant contribution in your life and to the continuing history of the Iron Range and northeastern Minnesota. Please consider honoring those who are important to you when donating to the IRHS." If not for all of you and your generosity IRHS would not be able to continue to fulfill its mission.

NEW MEMBERS ~~ WELCOME!

Anderson, Chris
Bretoi, Janet
Durbohn, Patrick
Garmaker, Michael
Jokanovuc, Ogi
Laun, Cindy
Paulisich, Paul
Sampson, Kim
Zupin, Tracy

Bottila, Stephen
Butala, Okhui Kim
Dzwonkowski, Jan
Granovsky, Nancy Lammi
Kamnikar, Mike
Lehtinen, Teresa
Peterson, Dave
Vanderhorck, Carol

Bovitz, John & Kathy
Cleveland, Chris. & Mary
Essling, Ann
Gray, Margo
Keyes, Mary & Joe
Lerol, Gail
Samich, Abraham
Wissota Jewelry

If you have a membership form with your newsletter, it is time for you to renew. Please remit your check payment to IRHS at the address on the form or renew through PayPal via the membership page on our website. Please note that renewing online is a subscription and will automatically renew yearly until you cancel through PayPal. Thank you to all who have renewed for 2023.

** CELEBRATING 50 YEARS **

As the Iron Range Historical Society celebrates 50 years of preserving Iron Range history the Board of Directors has many entertaining and informative activities planned throughout 2023. Our biggest presence will be on Facebook where we have over 7,400 followers. Some of the things we have already started posting on Facebook and Instagram are photos of past IRHS Boards of Directors and volunteers, recipes that feature Iron Range culture, activities and games for the whole family to enjoy, and a thing we are calling "Experience the Range". Experience the Range encourages followers to come to the Iron Range and experience the Range with a different activity each month. If you haven't seen these posts, we encourage you to look at Facebook to see what the monthly challenge is and to see what followers are commenting on regarding the posts. And people are commenting! (Are they sarmas or cabbage rolls?) You do not have to be a member of Facebook to look at the posts; just type Iron Range Historical Society Facebook into your browser search bar and click on the link. If you belong to Facebook, and you don't already, please consider becoming a follower of IRHS.

We also have in the works, onsite activities planned to allow for members and the public to visit IRHS to see what we are all about. The Board will be hosting Saturday at the Society on the third Saturday in June, July, and August. Additionally, IRHS will again celebrate with the City of McKinley on the Fourth of July. More details will be in the June newsletter, on Facebook, and on our website.

The Board encourages you to come along with IRHS and help us celebrate 50 years of collecting, preserving, and sharing Iron Range history. You are sure to have a blast!

SAVE THE DATE: Saturday, October 7. Annual meeting and luncheon. Details to be announced in the September newsletter.