

# IRON RANGE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



WHERE HISTORY COMES ALIVE

September 2023

Collect ~ Preserve ~ Share

Vol. 48, No. 3

50  
~years~

You are cordially invited to  
join us for an  
*Anniversary celebration*  
&  
*Annual meeting*

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 7 -- 11 AM**  
**AURORA COMMUNITY CENTER**

**RESERVATIONS ARE REQUIRED**

See details in IRHS Happenings

## **[More Than] A Hundred Years Ago . . .**

By Barbara E. Simons

From the mid-1600s the wealth of the Great Lakes region had been noted. Continued disputes over the northern border led to the Barclay Survey in 1825. David and Samuel Thompson completely mapped Lake Vermilion, indicated copper and iron finds, and conducted the first scientific survey in what is now St. Louis County. The border dispute was finally settled through the Webster-Ashburton Treaty in 1842. The Treaty of Lapointe in 1854 ceded the area east of the St. Louis, Embarrass, Vermilion river systems to the United States government and opened the door to white exploitation of the mineral districts of the Vermilion and Mesabi iron ranges.

James Norwood, with the Owens Survey of 1854, reported discovering rich deposits of iron ore near Gunflint Lake on the Mesabi range, and also indicated gold-bearing quartz on Lake Vermilion. George R. Stuntz saw samples of Vermilion ore in 1863, when N. A. Posey, trader and blacksmith among the Indians, brought the specimens to him at Fond du Lac.

A preliminary state geological survey in 1864, conducted by Augustus Hanchett and Thomas Clark, determined that there were, indeed, copper deposits on the north shore of Lake Superior and heavy iron deposits on Lake Vermilion. Based on this promising report, Governor Stephen H. Miller ordered that an extensive survey of the entire region be conducted under newly appointed state geologist Henry H. Eames.

In spring of 1865 Richard and Henry Eames established headquarters in Duluth, portaged north from Fond du Lac, and spent over a month in the Lake Vermilion region. They returned in the fall with a wooden keg filled with ore samples – iron like that of the Marquette range, and quartz, which might contain – gold and silver.

And so began the first rush to exploit the mineral wealth of the ranges. Several gold companies were hastily formed with stockholders investing hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The Mutual Protection Gold Mining Company was formed in December, and by January, 1866, 1500 men, mostly veterans from the Civil War, under the direction of Major Thomas M. Newson, began cutting a road north along a former Indian trail and military road. Working at a rate of two miles a day, through winter temperatures that fell to -40 degrees, they reached Lake Vermilion on March 5. The first town on the Iron Range, Winston City, was born, and was every bit as much a boom town as any resulting from the gold rush to California. A steam boiler, firebox and engine were hauled in to run a sawmill at Vermilion Falls, and soon the town consisted of tents, rough-sawn timber and tar paper shacks, saloons, gambling halls, three-story hotel, general store and offices, and numbered 300 in population.

All of this excitement – investment, avarice and aggression, road building, land clearing, legislation – all dreams of riches faded almost as spontaneously as they had begun, as assay after assay from hundreds of excavations continued to report no gold in quantities that would encourage further investment. No quartz samples even remotely suggested value comparable to the Eames samples. The sawmill stood quiet, picks and chisels lay scattered at rest, and the town of 300 was abandoned to the wilderness.

It would be 16 years before mining in earnest would begin again on the iron ranges with the excavations at the Soudan in 1882.

It was not by chance that development did not begin here until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Certain events in history and advances in technology had to occur before mining could begin. Until the invention and improvement in the 1820s of a steam engine that could pull heavy loads, huge masses of earth could not be moved economically. No cheap method of producing steel existed until Henry Bessemer developed a new method in 1860, a method that

could use the Minnesota ores. From that point on, the nation would begin to demand increased production of steel. The entire character of the labor force would be drastically changed forever.

By 1865 on the iron ranges of Minnesota a passible road had been extended into the wilderness, and regional surveys had been made. The next steps followed automatically. Christian Wieland, who with his brothers was well situated in the timber business at Beaver Bay, knew the north country from his experiences with the Eames survey team. He noted the vast expanse of iron and presented his findings to businessmen who subsequently formed that famous Ontonagon Syndicate (1869). This distinguished group included, among others, George C. Stone, Peter Mitchell, W. W. Spalding, Calvin P. Bailey and former Minnesota governor Alexander Ramsey. The Syndicate sent Peter Mitchell on an exploring expedition near Birch Lake in 1870, and his findings, after sinking several test pits by hand into the rock-hard formation, supported Wieland's claims of rich ore.

Mitchell was sent to Washington to obtain funds to survey the Babbitt area. As a result of that survey, conducted in 1872 by newly appointed Deputy Surveyor Christian Wieland, the Ontonagon Syndicate obtained 9,000 acres of land extending from the present site [in 1982] of Erie Mining Company plant to Birch Lake. The next step was to bring a railroad into the region, and in December, 1874, the Syndicate organized the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad.

Such speculation naturally aroused the curiosity of others. In 1875 Albert H. Chester, noted mineralogist from Hamilton College, New York, led an expedition to the range to see what the Ontonagon Syndicate was up to. The canoe trip to Lake Vermilion took ten days, and enroute Chester walked over the millions of rich ore that would be found on the Mesabi and failed to recognize it. In fact, his report on the Mesabi ore so discouraged the Ontonagon Syndicate and railroad investors that no further activity would occur there again for another five years. The Mesabi was passed by. Eastern financiers like Charlemagne Tower and Samuel Munson turned their eyes to the Vermilion, where Chester reported finding on Lake Vermilion, in Township 62, Range 15, a "solid cliff of pure hematite, 30 feet high and 25 feet wide."

But without a railroad, naturally mining could not begin. Chester led a second expedition in 1880, and Stone secured investment from Munson and Tower and organized the George C. Stone & Company Mining Enterprise in 1882. The Ontonagon Syndicate's loss of interest in Minnesota ore as a result of the panic of 1873 and the 1875 Chester report paved the way for Tower to pick up the charter of the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad for a very modest sum. By 1883, after a crew had worked through a winter of sub-zero weather and the mosquitoes and heat of summer, the rails extended to Mesaba Station, on the east end of the Mesabi. Work crews walked the remaining 35 miles to the mining camps.

Stone's company, through merger and investment, became the Minnesota Iron Mining Company, owned by Charlemagne Tower, Ed Breitung, Richard H. Lee, George C. Stone, George Stuntz, John Armstrong, and Sandy McMasters. Full scale mining had come to the Vermilion Range.

With the opening of the Vermilion, Elisha Morcom, whose Cornish mining reputation was well established in Michigan, was hired by Ed Breitung to assemble a crew to begin mining the Vermilion ores. He recruited the most skilled hard rock miners to be found in Michigan and brought them, with their families, to the mining location at the Soudan. Twenty-eight homes had been built in the Lee, Stone, and Breitung mining sites, using local lumber



*Capt. Elisha Morcom*

*Miner's homes, Soudan, 1884*



produced on the spot with a sawmill hauled in by John Owens. Nails were made from scrap metal left from the 1865 gold rush, as any useable materials on the site were valuable due to the expense of transporting goods to the mining camps.

Before long Soudan's inhabitants numbered 350, and on July 31, 1884, the railroad was completed to Tower's Junction, the business center that served the Soudan location. A trail of wood and rails finally

connected the mining center to the outside world. Just about everyone helped fill the five wooden cars that carried the first shipment of ore from the Vermilion Range to Agate Bay on Lake Superior. By the end of 1884 shipments from the Soudan mines totaled 62,000 tons. The mine was far richer than had been imagined, and by 1888, two thousand men made up the work force at the site.

Soudan, as the clustered mining locations collectively came to be known, remained strictly residential, all businesses that served the community were located in Tower, according to an agreement with the Minnesota Iron Mining Company.

By 1886, railroad and mining had spread to the Ely area with the opening of the Pioneer Mine, followed quickly by the Chandler. It was the Chandler that really led to Ely's rapid



*Hard labor and a skip hoist were used to remove ore at the Chandler Mine near Ely in 1895.*

development as a city. The mine paid terrific profits to her stockholders, as much as \$100,000 a month net profit for each stockholder for 19 years! Ten million tons of ore were shipped in the first 20 years of operation.

Next followed the Savoy in 1898, the Sibley, Zenith, Section 30, Lucky Boy and so on. Ely's population grew from 177 in 1887 to 3717 by 1900. Miners, lumberjacks, and businessmen poured in. The underground mines demanded timber for shoring in the drifts, and housing couldn't be built fast enough.

These early mining towns were wild and reckless, with all the fervor attributed to any frontier. Drinking, gambling, fighting and prostitution were commonplace, and the saloon was the center of social activity. When the men from the mines and lumber camps spent a payday on the town, brawls, fist fights and even murder were commonplace. Oldtimers recount tales of men losing an entire payroll to gambling or thieves who attacked and robbed under cover of darkness. Many a victim was dumped on the railroad tracks, to be reported in the morning as a casualty of the night train. Law and order depended upon the courage and ability of the town marshal. It is no wonder that many men wished to return home after a few months of this lifestyle, or hesitated to bring their families until more stable conditions existed.

With the boom on the Vermilion, speculators naturally turned to the ores of the Mesabi, and the pattern of exploitation began to repeat itself. Only the Mesabi offered riches far greater than anyone had yet dreamed of.



*David T. Adams*

Prospectors traveled by rail from Duluth to Mesaba Station on the Eastern Mesabi, and then packed westward on foot over Indian trails and deer runways in search of ore. Among them were all the men whose names we are familiar with when recounting Mesabi history: David T. Adams, E. J. Longyear, Frank Hibbing, A. J. Trimble, the Merritt brothers, Archibald Chisholm, John C. Greenway – and uncounted others with equally high hopes of success. But to only a handful did the riches to be found here mean realizing great personal fortune. And several who built empires partly through speculation in ore never even saw the region.

Most who came simply “made a living”, and settled the wilderness. Entrepreneurs, speculators, developers came and went; they are necessary through the various stages of development. But the working men and women, those who stayed and made this their home, were the real developers. It was their task to continue with the day to day settling and stabilizing, to keep the mines and mills running, and to mold the region into what we see as the Iron Range today.

**Mining Notes.** The sinking of No. 5 shaft at the Chandler is progressing. No. 2 shaft will also be sunk from the 500 to the 600 foot level. Work in this shaft has been discontinued all winter but hoisting ore will be resumed May 1. No. 3 shaft will also be sunk beginning May 1, from the 500 to 600 foot level. The usual amount of water is being encountered at the Pioneer and the pumps are throwing out about 400 gallons a minute. A new shaft will be begun as soon as a suitable location can be found which the management informs is rather a difficult task. *The Ely Miner*, 3/1/1899.

**W. T. Vickers Honored. Band Members Present Their Director With Silver Mounted Baton.** As a mark of appreciation on the anniversary of his twelve years of faithful service as director of the Biwabik City band, W. T. Vickers was presented with a beautiful ebony and silver engraved baton by the members of the organization at the regular practice Monday evening. H. H. Salmon who has been a member and worked with him in the organization all during this time, appropriately made the presentation and so moved was Mr. Vickers by the act of remembrance that he was unable to express himself for a few moments. What Biwabik has in its band – and that is a great deal – is due almost entirely to the efforts of Mr. Vickers. With but one or two exceptions the musical talent of each individual member has been developed through him, starting them off in their early teens and continuing to work with them as long as they remained in the community. Many former members upon leaving Biwabik to attend schools and colleges and to enter upon other pursuits of life have found themselves creditably equipped to become members of big and notable bands and other musical organizations because of the patient tutelage so generously given at home by Director Vickers. Rehearsals are held twice each week end it isn't within the memory of many where Mr. Vickers has missed one in his twelve years' service. *Biwabik Times*, 7/6/1923.

**Miller Mine Has Quit Operating. New Development Is Being Undertaken. New Shaft and Equipment Being Installed.** Mining operations at the Miller mine came to an end this week when the underground workings were closed preparatory to further development of the property. The present shaft and machinery will be abandoned and a new shaft and complete modern machinery equipment will be installed. The present location of the shaft and machinery will be stripped and added to the present open pit. The location of the new power plant and shaft have not yet been definitely decided upon. Before underground mining operations are again resumed, the new shaft must be sunk, new engine house built and new machinery installed, as well as new drifts being opened. This, it is expected, will take from 18 months to two years, after which the Miller will again become one of our leading underground mines. Shipping from the open pit will be continued at intervals during the development of the new underground workings. The operating company, The Pitt Iron Mining company, secured a new lease this spring for a twenty year period. In addition to the two forties included in the original lease, three more are included in the new lease. One of these is located to the west of the Mohawk mine and its development will require a separate shaft and machinery. However, the ore body is considered to be small and the new mine will not be of long duration. The Miller mine has been the mainstay of the village since it was opened. Other mines have been closed for various periods of time, but the Miller has operated continuously, except for brief periods when machinery was being repaired. The Miller has employed as many as 400 men and the Miller pay days have been the heaviest in the village. *Aurora News*, 8/9/1923.



# Iron Range Historical Society Happenings

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

## ANNUAL MEETING AND ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

The Board of Directors invites you to the Society's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration and annual meeting. It will take place at the Aurora Community Center, Main Street and First Avenue North. Festivities begin at 11 am with a social, followed by the business meeting and luncheon. At 1 pm, keynote speaker Mary Palcich Keyes, historian and columnist for the *Mesabi Tribune*, will present "Schools That Did It All".

It has been several years since the Society hosted a meal with the annual meeting but in celebrating 50 years of Iron Range history preservation, the Board opted to go large. Megan's Restaurant will cater the event. The luncheon will include; ham salad & egg salad sandwiches, chips, walnut cranberry salad and pumpkin bars. Punch, coffee, and water will also be available.

***Please note:*** To be served at the luncheon portion of the event **you must RSVP and pay for your meal by 2 pm September 26<sup>th</sup>**. Cost of the meal is \$15. You may call, 218.749.3150, email [ironrangehistsoc@gmail.com](mailto:ironrangehistsoc@gmail.com) or stop by 5454 Grand Ave. McKinley. Cash or checks made payable to IRHS will be accepted.

There is no charge if you would like to attend the meeting and presentation. This event is open to members and the public.

IRHS books, t-shirts, and mugs will be for sale and there are several great door prizes that will be given away to attendees.

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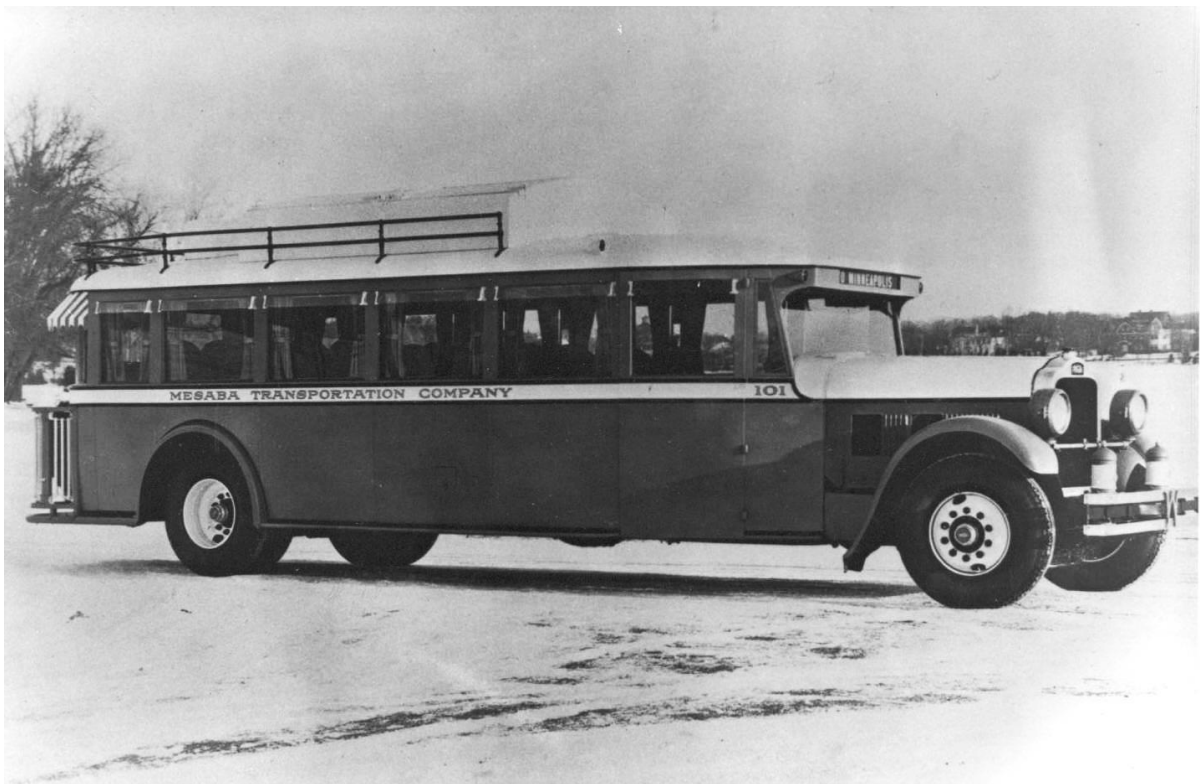
At the business meeting on October 7<sup>th</sup> members will be electing directors to the IRHS for 3-year terms. Rich Soderberg is stepping down as he has served two terms which is the maximum according to IRHS by-laws. Kim Sampson has resigned her position. Bob Kivela is up for re-election and has decided to run for a second term. Which means the Board is looking for two volunteers to sit on the Board. ***PLEASE consider volunteering your time to the IRHS as a board member.*** Meetings are held monthly. You must attend at least three-quarters of the meetings per year to stay in good standing. The Board is open to tele- or video-conferencing with anyone willing to be on the Board who lives out of the area. Terms are 3 years in length, will begin January 2024, and end December 2026. Email: [ironrangehistsoc@gmail.com](mailto:ironrangehistsoc@gmail.com) or call 218.749.3150 by September 26<sup>th</sup> to get your name on the ballot.

*A very busy summer.* The Board and volunteers have had a very busy summer indeed!

- Saturday at the Society for June, July, and August saw a great turnout of family researchers. Volunteers were able to assist quite a few people looking for their family histories. For all three events just under 30 people came to McKinley. One particularly cool thing that happened was in July when a woman from Michigan flew to the Twin Cities, then drove up to research her family from Biwabik. She had just recently found a family member in the Cities who told her the family donated photos and family trees to IRHS. The visitor found out 3 days before we held our event and she decided she had to come! She got family photos but, she also identified many of the people in the photos that had limited information. It was a win for her and a win for IRHS!
- We had a rummage sale during the all-city rummage sale in July. We earned \$275 and sold six older Range books of which we had multiple copies.

- The 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration brought 48 people into Society offices and there were 10 kids who entered the coloring contest. Many thanks to Canelake's Candies for their donation of prizes for the kids.
- Also in July, Board Director and founding member Bob Kivela presented a historic tour of Eveleth via power point at the Eveleth Public Library. He presented the material on two different days and a total of 142 people attended. Thank you to the Eveleth Public Library for the use of their meeting space, the Friends of the Eveleth Public Library for providing treats, and co-sponsors Eveleth Heritage Society. Bob has a wealth of knowledge about the Range and he shined during these two presentations.
- Board Director Janet Eichholz submitted a wonderfully written article and photos that were recently donated to IRHS to the *Hometown Focus* for its mining edition. The article was on Syracuse Lake and the Embarrass Pit near Biwabik.
- Rich Soderberg, Treasurer and Board Director, worked with Linda Tyssen on an article for the *Mesabi Tribune* regarding this summer's Saturday at the Society events and specifically the genealogical event held on August 19<sup>th</sup>. The article appeared on the front page *above* the fold. In the newspaper world an article position such as that is truly a big deal!

The Board has been discussing scanning the bound newspaper books for quite a few years. At August's meeting it was decided to spend up to \$1000 to scan all the loose newspapers currently stored in boxes and the three years of the Hoyt Lakes newspaper. A company in Eagen has been contacted and the cost is 8 to 12 cents per page depending on the size and condition of the pages. The scans will be pdf and accessible on the computer with a pdf reader app. Volunteers will begin getting the papers ready to be delivered to the Cities in the near future. At this time, the digital copies will only be accessible at the Society.



*Mesaba Transportation Company, bus #101, in Minneapolis.*

Lee Brownell Collection, which is on permanent loan to the Ely-Winton Historical Society from the Iron Range Historical Society.