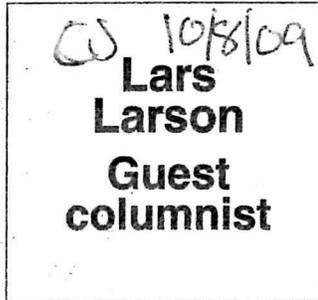


The Great Boom: Railroad Mania Part 1

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The Chequamegon Bay communities, while they were not established by railroad companies, owed their existence to railroads. By 1885, the three bay communities were served by four railroads, all of which had terminals in Ashland: the Wisconsin Central, in June 1877, connecting Ashland to Madison and Milwaukee; the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha (known as the Omaha), in June 1883, built to Washburn that same month and to Bayfield in July, connecting to La Crosse on the Mississippi River, Minneapolis and St. Paul, and the agricultural regions to the west; the Northern Pacific, in December 1884, connecting to Superior and Duluth, the wheat lands of the Dakotas and the Pacific coast; and the Milwaukee, Lake Shore and Western, in June 1885, connecting to the Gogebic Range iron ore mines and points to the east. Washburn and Ashland were rail-lake terminal ports to which these railroads brought wheat, iron and freight for shipment by lake carriers to lower lake ports, and carried away coal and freight arriving by ship, along with lumber, brownstone and agricultural products produced locally.

But convinced that more railroads would inevitably bring more prosperity to the bay region, Washburn, Ashland and Bayfield were seized with railroad mania, widespread throughout the nation after the Civil War. Bayfield



was the first to succumb to this disease. Two brothers, William and Oliver Dalrymple, who owned a large wheat farm in North Dakota, organized the Bayfield Harbor and Great Western Railroad, in October 1885. The plan was to connect Bayfield with railroads at Stillwater, Minnesota and the Twin Ports so that wheat and other grain products from Minnesota and North Dakota could be transported to grain elevators in Bayfield for shipment down the lakes. In the summer of 1897 voters in the Town of Bayfield approved a bond

subscription of \$25,000 to provide capital for the proposed railroad. The brothers were so convinced of the soundness of their project that one of them predicted that when the railroad and the docks and elevators at Bayfield were completed, Duluth and Superior would fade into obscurity. The project quickly failed when fantasy was overtaken by reality. Only about six miles of the railroad were constructed, from near Roy's Point to the Raspberry River, used for many years to haul logs to Bayfield mills. The bonds were eventually returned to the Town of Bayfield and burned.

Elsewhere on the bay, railroad mania soon infected another victim. In early 1895 investors from the Twin Cities proposed to Ashland and Bayfield Counties that they help finance the Minneapolis, St. Paul and Ashland Railroad to connect Washburn and Ashland to the Twin Cities. The Bayfield County Board, suspicious of the proposal, rejected it, but Ashland County provided \$65,000 raised through bond subscriptions. The railroad, which became known as the "Peerless," had its terminal on the bay shore near the power plant. From there

the tracks ran westward parallel to the shore, bypassing the Fish Creek slough on a long wooden trestle supported by piles driven into the lake bed, a few of which are still visible along the shore. From the trestle the line continued westward for about 16 miles, then connected to the Duluth, South Shore and Atlantic Railroad at Chequamegon Junction, a switch point between Iron River and Mason about 25 miles from Ashland. The line failed as a passenger and freight carrier, then was used as a logging railroad until the timber was exhausted. After the rails were torn up in 1906, the wooden trestle served for a few years as a highway bridge. The bonds were finally paid in 1918 at a total cost of \$120,000 to Ashland County.

Meanwhile, across the bay, the Bayfield County Board succumbed to railroad mania, approving a railroad that they were assured would make Washburn an important Great Lakes port, but the "Battle Ax," as the railroad came to be known, only burdened the county with a huge debt when it inevitably failed. That story will be told in part 2.