

The Great Boom: Railroad Mania Part 2 ²⁰

In fall of 1895 a few well known men in Washburn and Iron River organized the Washburn, Bayfield and Iron River Railroad. This road would extend from Washburn to Iron River, where it would connect to the Northern Pacific and the Duluth, South Shore and Atlantic, and from there to Sandstone, Minnesota, where it would connect to the Great Northern Railroad. The idea—or perhaps fantasy—was that the proposed railroad would funnel traffic from these three railroads to Washburn, forever insuring its primacy as a Great Lakes port. The road was promoted by Dwight M. Sabin, a former United States Senator and a successful businessman from Minnesota, who speculated in railroads in northern Wisconsin and Minnesota. The Bayfield County Board, which in early 1895 with cool-headed skepticism had rejected one

proposal for a speculative railroad, having apparently been infected with railroad mania since then, responded with enthusiasm to a second speculative scheme. It authorized a special election in which the voters approved the company's petition for

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Guest columnist

financial assistance from the county, and in November 1895 the board authorized the issue of \$240,000 in bonds.

Construction of the road began from Iron River and from Washburn. By December 1897 ten miles of track had been laid from Washburn, a roundhouse and repair shop erected near what is now known as Fertile Valley, with a depot built at the foot of Washington Avenue. The road was completed between Washburn and Iron River in the summer of 1898, with scheduled service beginning in September. The lines to Bayfield and to Sandstone, Minnesota were never built. In addition to passengers and freight the railroad transported logs from the heavily timbered region along its route for delivery to the mills in Washburn. The road soon became known as the "Battle Ax" after the brand of chewing tobacco favored by the construction workers. But the company was taken over by Sabin and his associates, who carried out an investment fraud common across the nation during the railroad boom after the Civil War. Occupying key positions in management, they neglected to pay workers their wages and local businesses for supplies, diverting money from revenues and the bonds to

themselves. Then with the road teetering in bankruptcy they divested themselves and withdrew from the company.

In February 1900 the railroad went into receivership, beginning the second chapter of the "Battle Ax" saga. The railroad continued to operate until July 1901, when the receiver obtained an order from the federal court in Madison that it be sold. Then in December the Bayfield County Circuit Court, acting on a petition from the county board, ordered that the railroad was to continue to operate, placing it in direct conflict with the order of the federal court. The receiver chose to obey the order of the federal court, running the last train on December 17 1901. But when in early January 1902 he attempted to have the tracks torn up, a posse led by the sheriff, acting under instructions from the county district attorney to enforce the order of the county circuit court, arrested the men who were engaged in removing the tracks. The state supreme court ruled in favor of the county circuit court, and the receiver made no further effort to close down the road.

In the spring of 1902 the Northern Pacific Railroad purchased the "Battle Ax"

from the receiver, temporarily rescuing it from liquidation. Work to bring the road up to standard began immediately, but the anticipated depot, docks and other facilities were never constructed. Indeed, as it had to the previous owners, the railroad quickly proved to be unprofitable, and the Northern Pacific began what was to be a long process of liquidation. With reduced passenger service, it served primarily as a freight and logging railroad. The line continued to operate until 1922 when the Interstate Commerce Commission granted the Northern Pacific's petition to abandon it and tear up the tracks. In October 1925 the last payment on the bonds was made, bringing to an end an enterprise in which the people of Bayfield County had invested so much hope and money. In 1928 a movement was started to convert the abandoned roadbed to a highway to serve the farmers stranded without transportation along the line, but nothing came of this pathetic attempt to save something from the corpse of the "Battle Ax."

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