

Ashland: The great iron city

In November 1873 the Ashland Weekly Press declared that the "existence of inexhaustible beds of iron ore... has been established beyond a doubt, and the first ore has been shipped." This statement was misleading at best. While iron ore had been found on the Penokee Range, the true extent of the deposits and whether the ore could be profitably mined were unknown, and only a few tons of ore had been "shipped" for testing and analysis. The probable basis of this and other statements regarding the "inexhaustible" iron ore deposits on the Penokee Range were the reports of explorations conducted over 20 years before.

In 1849 the geologist, Charles Whittlesey, traced iron ore beds through compass deflection from near Saxon to English Lake, just west of Mellen. He judged that the ore would yield "fifty to sixty per cent metal" if the high proportion of quartz could be removed through refining. In 1858, Increase A Lapham, exploring the Penokee ore beds for a mining company, concluded that "The immense quantity of one of the most valuable of iron ore existing in beds in many places so easily accessible, and at only a moderate distance from the navigable waters of Lake Superior, in a country well supplied with hard wood timber, with a climate suited to the



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healthy and vigorous efforts of man; a soil suited to the growth of most of the ordinary farm crops; at a point easily accessible by railroad, by which it will be connected with the general system of railroads in the country, must, sooner or later become the source of great wealth, and give occupation to a large population of thrifty and industrious citizens."

It was undoubtedly the selective reading of the Whittlesey and Lapham reports plus a strong dose of credulity, which gave rise to the expectation that Ashland was destined to be "The Grand Iron and Commercial City of Lake Superior." Ashland would not only be a shipping port for iron ore, it would refine the ore in charcoal furnaces using the nearby "inexhaustible forests" and limestone mineral deposits, then use the iron to manufacture finished products.

In the early 1870s there were four mining companies with extensive land holdings on the range, but only one of these, the Lapointe Iron Company, attempted actual mining operations. It began work in September 1873, digging test pits and a single shaft (on section 15, T44R3). Several tons of ore were extracted and shipped to Ashland in October (when the railroad reached Penokee gap) and then by ship to Cleveland. Analysis of ore samples supposedly showed "61 per cent pure iron." This was a much higher percentage of "pure iron" than was typical of the deposits being worked by the company, and the presence of a large proportion refractory quartz in the ore appears to have been ignored. An office and quarters for the workers were constructed, and arrangements made for the erection of a blast furnace and rolling mill at Penoka or Ashland if rich ore in sufficient quantity were found.

There were some people who did not share the optimistic view of the potential of iron ore mining on the Penokee Range. To settle the issue, Ashland joined other groups around the state to demand a geological survey. The legislature authorized a survey in March 1873 to begin in Ashland and Douglas Counties, and Increase A. Lapham was appointed Chief Geologist in April. From June to September 1873 Ro-

land D. Irwin surveyed the Penokee Range and its ore resources. His report to Lapham was not favorable. He noted that the high proportion of quartz in the ore made it difficult to smelt, and that the ore would have to occur in thick deposits of 50% to 60% metallic iron in order to compete with the rich ores coming from the mines at Marquette, Michigan, and Menomonee, Wisconsin. Irwin's report was not published but was seen by people from Ashland, who were critical of his conclusions. They claimed that the survey on which the conclusions were based was hastily done, demanding a new survey. Consequently, a second survey of the Penokee Range was conducted by Charles E. Wright, beginning in August 1876. His conclusions were essentially the same as Irwin's, namely, that despite the seeming promise of the outcrops and compass variations, rich, marketable ores would not be found in the magnetite beds, but (possible) in the beds farther north in the range. Meanwhile, in July 1874, the Lapointe Iron Company stopped its mining operations due to the depressed price of iron ore, the shaft it had excavated being reported in August to be filled with water. Ashland's hopes of becoming the great iron city of the west were dashed, at least for the time being.