

LOCAL VOICES

CS 3/21/13
Prospects of iron
in Penokee Range
drew a crowd like
a candle flame

The prospect of rich deposits of iron ore in the Penokee Range was like a candle flame, attracting prospectors, speculators and mining companies, most of whom eventually fell into the flame and were consumed.

The percentage of iron in the ore — up to 60 percent — was high enough to make exploitation economically feasible, but there were three problems. The ore was buried under a thick overburden of glacial drift, the ore vein was discontinuous, and the ore contained a high proportion of refractory silica.

In December 1859, the Superior Chronicle reported that the immense deposit of iron ore in the Iron Range, extending from the Montreal River in the east to the English Lake in the west, had not attracted "the attention which its important character demands."

That was not quite true, for earlier in 1859 the La Pointe Iron Company was incorporated and began to mine iron ore on its extensive properties on the range. The company failed in 1874, however.

In 1876, Charles E. Wright explored the Penokee Range to identify and map the ore deposits. He noted that the ore-bearing strata were covered by deep glacial drift and

that further exploration was needed to determine the extent of the buried ore beds. Wright was optimistic about the future development of the range, declaring "if it can be shown ... that the true iron belt is there the subsequent development must naturally follow."

In 1883 interest in the possibility of developing the ore deposits on the range was revived, and exploratory drilling was resumed on the property of the La Pointe Iron Company. The Ashland Press, skeptical of another promise of an iron-ore bonanza on the range, expressed hope that the search for ore would continue until it was demonstrated "that the range is either rich in minerals or worthless."

A report from the range in October 1884, indicating an iron-ore content of 67 percent with low silica content, appeared to meet the Press criterion. No further reports about the iron-ore deposits on the Penokee Range appeared in the newspaper, however.

In 1856 the Wisconsin and Lake Superior Mining and Smelting Company established its operating headquarters at the site of an Indian settlement near the mouth of the Montreal River, platting a village, which it named Ironton.

An advertisement in the Bayfield Mercury in September 1857 described the site as "beautiful," close to the copper mines on the Montreal and the iron range farther south, and to farming lands "unequaled on Lake Superior."

A pier 400 feet long, a two-story hotel and a steam sawmill were constructed with the assistance of merchants from Ashland, who anticipated a large demand for supplies. Two other villages were planned, but only one, Springdale, located on the Tyler's Fork River, was established and it soon disappeared. From Ironton, Indian trails between Ironton and Odanah, and Odanah and Ashland were improved to accommodate heavy traffic. The company later moved its headquarters to Ashland.

Plans were made to extend the railroad line being constructed northward from Stevens Point to Ironton and then west to Ashland. But the financial panic of 1857 brought an end to mining and railroad construction, causing workers and settlers to leave the area. The abandoned buildings were used as shelters for fishermen and hunters, or small logging operations, until the buildings fell apart, eventually disappearing.

The Ironton site is now part of the Saxon County Park.



Lars Larson

■ has been a guest columnist for The County Journal for many years.