

# iron river

Serious exploration for iron ore along the Maple River (soon known as the Iron River) was begun in March of 1880 by R.L. Selden and his son, William H. Selden, who had first come to the area in 1878 and who were following up on a surveyor's report of an ore outcrop in the Iron River valley. After a period of about nine months, sufficient ore was discovered on property owned by the Seldens in Section 36, T43n, R35W, to warrant the opening of the Iron River Mine, later known as the Riverton Mine. William Selden soon persuaded the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad to extend its line from Stager to Iron River, a distance of approximately 15 miles. Anticipating an influx of miners to the area, the brothers Donald C. and Alexander MacKinnon platted a village on the west bank of the Iron River, on land they had purchased three years earlier. This village, taking the name of the river, was the first settlement platted on the west side of what later became Iron County.

The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad line to Iron River was completed in the fall of 1882; after its completion settlers and prospectors flocked to the new village. Many of the early houses and stores in the settlement were built on logs, as cut lumber had to be transported from Florence, Wisconsin. However, after the railroad arrived, the MacKinnon brothers erected a sawmill on the banks of the river.



Initial growth in the settlement was rapid. Iron River was incorporated as a village in 1885. In the same year, Marquette County consented to the seces-

sion of her western lands to form a new county and Iron County was established: Iron River, the only incorporated village in the county was designated as the county seat, a designation that was eventually lost, after a bitter dispute, to the Village of Crystal Falls on the eastern side of the county.

Although initial growth in the platted village itself was rapid, a land dispute temporarily slowed mining and settlement in areas surrounding Iron River. Growth was additionally retarded in the Iron River area in the late nineteenth century by the Panic of 1893. The effects of the Panic are reflected in the census figures of 1900, which indicate a population increase of only 243 in Iron River since 1890. From 1889 to 1900, no ore was mined on the entire west side of Iron County. During this eleven-year period of stagnation, residents turned to logging as a means of employment, and to agriculture, which resulted in a greater development of farms in the west of the county than in the east.

Commercial logging first began in western Iron County in August of 1883, when William A. Holmes, Jr., of Menominee arrived in Iron River, established a logging camp nearby and began the harvesting of pine timber adjacent to the Iron River. Pine logs were floated down the Iron River, a tributary of the Menominee River, by way of the Brule River, to the Menominee sawmills. By the time the pine stands had been depleted, small logging railroads had penetrated parts of western Iron County, allowing for the continued harvesting of the abundant hardwood stands. The lumber industry, not as susceptible to economic slumps as the mining industry, played a key role in the development of Iron River in the late nineteenth century.

The importance of Iron River as the agricultural center of Iron County is reflected in the fact that, from its inception, the county fair has been held in Iron River, instead of in Crystal Falls, the county seat. Farming was promoted on the west side of the county by the Iron County Agricul-

tural Society and the Upper Peninsula Grange Association, with Iron River citizen Isaac W. Byers serving as its president for several years. Byers, a leader in agricultural development, encouraged the growth of agricultural extension programs in Iron County; these programs were especially strong in the west, or in the Iron River area, the first Grange Hall being built in the Nash District.

With the arrival of the twentieth century, Iron River and the surrounding vicinity entered its greatest period of growth. The turn of the century saw a steady increase in the consumption of pig iron by industry, which boosted the demand for the soft, phosphoric ores found around Iron River. Development of new mines took place at a rapid pace after ore was discovered outside of the Iron River valley in 1905 at the James Mine, which later became Mineral Hills. In the years 1905 to 1912, the number of productive mines in the area increased from six to 16. Mining activity was reflected in the village of Iron River by the rapid expansion of housing and business establishments. The village responded to such growth by installing a sewer system in 1905 and electric light facilities in 1908. The greatest demand for laborers in the rapidly developing mines during the first decade of the twentieth century is evidenced in the census figures of 1910, which show a population increase of 5,436 on the west side of the county, for a total of 7,816.

While Iron River developed, other towns in the immediate vicinity also grew, as each mine had its own "location" or settlement, which often became a distinct village. For example, Iron River encompassed the Beta and Nanaimo mines, and Stambaugh developed around the Iron River (Riverton) and Isabella mines. Also clustered about Iron River were the smaller mining towns of Caspian and Gaastra to the southeast and Mineral Hills to the north. This cluster of towns was united by public transportation in 1913, when a street railway franchise was granted to the Iron River and Crystal Falls Street Railway Company. The installation

of a four-and-one-half-mile long line, which operated until 1921, indicates the prosperity of the area, and confidence in the future growth of mining.

Iron River was incorporated as a city, with a commission and manager form of government, in January of 1926. However, this was the tail end of the boom years. The Great Depression forced the closing of most mines and, although some reopened at the beginning of World War II, the mining industry never again regained its earlier high level of production. With the general decline of mining after World War II, Iron River settled down to become a quiet commercial and business center for western Iron County. The city has changed little over the past 50 years. Redevelopment has not occurred in Iron River, and thus the small town character and appearance of the city has been, for the most part, retained.

-Marica Bernhart