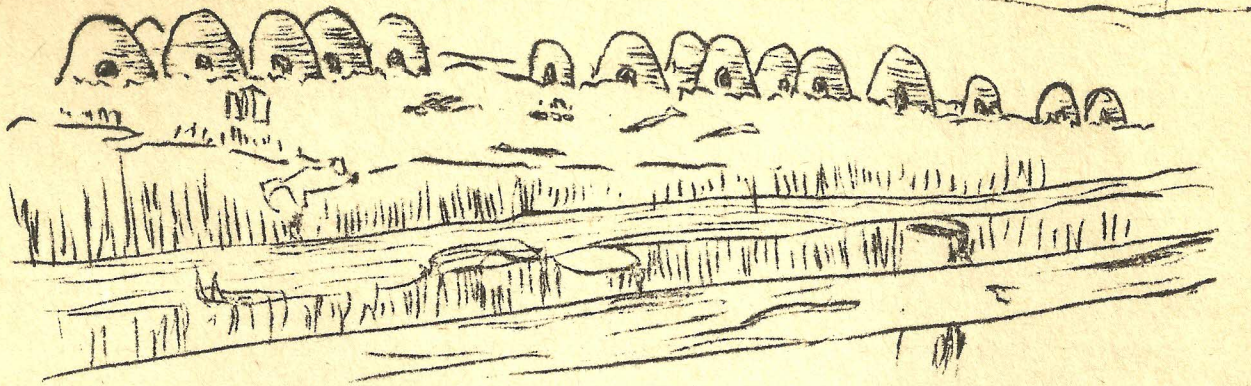


IRONTON: a story about its IRON WORKS



Some thousand of years ago the last and rather massive Wisconsin glacier slowly but stubbornly bulldozed its course over our area. When the weather warmed, the glacier receded. The ice field dropped its load forming our hilly landscape, and the melted ice filled the depressions. In due time native Americans certainly must have guided their canoes past the picturesque Ironton area, but settlers did not permanently enjoy the natural beauty of Ironton until after the Civil War.

Initially, Ironton was settled by a few woodcutters and some scattered homesteaders. It grew slowly as a settlers' community until the arrival of R.N. Cherrie who came from Chicago in the late 1870's. Mr. Cherrie quickly recognized that the stands of hardwood on Holy Island and along the shores of Pine Lake (now Lake Charlevoix) would produce an abundance of charcoal necessary to manufacture cast iron. Cherrie purchased the acreage, and by 1879 hired woodcutters who began felling and cutting trees into cordwood.

Woodsmen hauled the cordwood to the shores of Pine Lake and piled the wood upon scows. A tug, captained by "one-eyed Dick Williams" pulled the loaded scows to Ironton. The cordwood was removed from the scows and piled on flat cars which were pulled over a tram to the woodyard. The woodyard was situated in a field just south of the Congregational Church.

The cordwood had to dry for a year before being burnt to charcoal. While the cordwood was being stacked and cured, Cherrie built a series of twenty-two kilns which were arranged in two rows and resembled bee-hives. The kilns burned the wood into charcoal and the charcoal produced the intense heat needed to melt the iron ore.

The operation of the kilns was rather simple. A tram ran from the dock between the two rows of kilns up to the woodyard. When the kilns were ready to be fired in 1881, cordwood filled flat cars were pushed over the tram from the woodyard to the kilns. Workmen dropped anywhere from fifteen to twenty cords of wood into each kiln from an opening near the top. After the kiln was charged, a fire was started on the floor of the kiln with wood shavings and softwood. Around the bottom of the kiln were removal bricks. Workmen pulled bricks out to gain more draft or a hotter fire. If the wood began to burn too fast, kiln operators replaced the bricks in order to choke down, or smother the fire. It took seven days to burn the wood and cool the charcoal, before they could open the sheet iron door and shovel it out. The kilns consumed thirty-six thousand cords of wood yearly while producing one and one-quarter million bushels of charcoal. Manufactured charcoal was shoveled into buggies and wheeled to the Pine Lake Iron Company's furnace near the lake.

Along the shore of the lake and close to the dock was a massive pile of iron ore. The iron ore was brought in by schooners from Escanaba. Approximately thirty-thousand tons were delivered every year to the Iron Furnace. The charcoal and iron ore were poured down the throat of the furnace stack by means of a conveyer system. The stack was charged with alternate layers of charcoal and iron ore up to the top. When the furnace was charged, the bottom layer of charcoal was ignited. As the fire burned its way up to the other layers of charcoal, the iron ore was melted. When the iron ore liquified, the door at the mouth of the furnace was opened. The molten iron ran out of the

furnace and into the casting room. In the smoky casting room, the steaming iron flowed down a network of sand-made channels into beds, or molds, formed out of sand to cool. As the iron cooled, workmen, called "sandhogs", went into the casting room with sledge hammers and fractured the solidified pig iron into manageable bars weighing approximately one-hundred pounds each.

After the pigs, as they were called, cooled, they were loaded upon four wheel buggies and pushed to the pig yard to await shipment. In 1884 dock workers strained to lift thirty-thousand pigs (fifteen-thousand tons) aboard waiting vessels. The destination of the pigs is not known. It is known that high grade cast iron manufactured at the Pine Lake Iron Company was especially good for making stoves and ranges.

Cherrie brought in a few experts versed in his operation, but most of the workers were local people. Occasionally Cherrie employed drifters who worked only long enough to get a pay check and then depart. Consequently, Cherrie, who had built a general store north of the Iron Works, decided to pay his workers in scrip. In the store he stocked all the goods needed by his employees and required them to trade at the "Company Store." The result was that many a drifter stayed longer than he anticipated.

The provisions for the store came by way of schooner and were delivered to a dock in front of the store. There was no road between Charlevoix and Ironton except a sandy trail. The Cherrie Iron Works apparently prospered for a decade because Cherrie decided to construct a railroad from Charlevoix to Ironton. The railroad was completed in 1892, but, oddly enough, only one train ever arrived in Ironton. Subsequently Cherrie tore up the tracks and now only the railroad bed remains for posterity.

The rational for this incredible event occurred as result of the national election of 1892. Cherrie, who was a devout Republican, vowed that if Grover Cleveland was elected he'd shut down his company. Perhaps, Cherrie echoed the

popular cry of "Grover, Grover, all is over". Unfortunately for Cherrie and Ironton, the Democratic slogan of "Grover, Grover! Four more years of Grover, Out they go, in we go, Then we'll be in clover", prevailed. Upon hearing of Harrison's defeat and terrified of Democratic administration, Cherrie promptly closed the Iron Company, dynamited the machinery, and left the town which still bears the name of his Iron Works

Between 1881 and 1892 the Kilns and furnace smoked and the iron ore glowed. During this time Ironton sprouted from a small settlement to a thriving community of about twelve-hundred people. Naturally when Cherrie pulled stakes others left in search of brighter horizons.

Today down-state tourists and even area residents come to Ironton to ride across the nationally famed Ironton Ferry. While being propelled across the narrows of the South Arm of Lake Charlevoix few of the passengers are aware that on the little peninsula several hundred yards north of the ferry was the location of the Cherrie Iron Works. On this peninsula, where the construction company of Hodgkiss and Douma pile their stone, is the decaying foundation that supported the furnace stack. A little closer to the Ferry's Landings and in the Public Parking Site is the place where the two rows of kilns stood. Finally, in a casual stroll along the waters edge, one can still see the weather beaten spillings on which rested the docks where busy workmen unloaded the cordwood and iron ore and also loaded the schooners and steamers that once plied the Great Lakes delivering the pigs.

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