

EXPLORATIONS FOR IRON ORE IN FLORENCE COUNTY BY HIRAM D. FISHER

Heritage of Iron & Timber 1880-1980, pages 6-9

H.D. FISHER RECALLS EXPLORATIONS FOR IRON ORE IN FLORENCE COUNTY

By
H.D. Fisher

I have been requested repeatedly by numerous friends to write up an account of my exploration for iron in Florence County, Wisconsin. It had seemed to me that the iron range, apparently ending at Iron Mountain in Michigan[,] must jump into and find lodgment in Wisconsin. Recognizing the soundness of this theory, I made my arrangements and proceeded to work accordingly. The great rush in those days was for pine. The woods were ransacked for that material. The possibility of iron did not seem to be interesting. Many woodsmen, hunting through that portion of the state for pine timber, had reported that it was a hard country to follow section lines through on account of magnetic attractions which caused the point of the compass to point in any direction. The running of section lines had to be done in clear weather.

The queer acting of the compass led me to suspect that deposits of iron were the causes for the action, and I was encouraged to look for such deposits in paying quantities in that section of the state. I secured valuable information on the subject from J.A. Smith, a woodsman of Oshkosh, who spent some time there looking for lands for parties in his city. I requested him to bring me samples of small pieces of the rocks and materials which affected the compass on his next trip into that section. On one of his return trips he brought me samples of rocks, iron ore, slate diorite, and granite, all being the associated rocks of iron ore. These samples gave me great encouragement.

Organization of the Expedition.

On March 1, 1871, while residing in Menasha, I organized a party of explorers for the purpose of testing the question as to whether there really was iron in Florence County. We proceeded to Marinette by railroad. Leaving there, we started up country on foot, with packs on our backs. We traveled on foot about eighty miles, crossed the Menominee River at Bad Water Indian settlement, in town 40, range 18 east, in Wisconsin, then traveled west about fifteen miles. No lumbering or cutting of pine timber had been done above what was known as Pembina farm, thirty miles above Menominee and Marinette. There were no trails or roads above Pembina except those made by trappers and Indians. At that time there was an Indian village at Bad Water, composed mainly of Chippewas, who were generally a "tired lot," lived on game and fish by trapping for animals, such as black bear, deer, otter, beaver, mink, marten, fisher and muskrats, which were quite plentiful in those days. At a trading post about a mile north of Quinnisec [*sic* – *Quinnesecc*], kept by William and James Dickey, large amounts of furs were bought from the Indians and trappers.

Iron ore had been discovered near what is now known as Waucedah by the Breen brothers and Judge Ingalls. Ore had been opened up just north of what is now known as Quinnebec by the Hon. John L. Buel [*sic* – *Buell*]. The strike of the range being northeast and southwest would cross the Menominee River into Wisconsin about a mile west of what is now known as the city of Iron Mountain, Michigan. No iron at that time had been discovered in this part of Wisconsin, and no explorations had been made for the discovery of mines. Nearly one-half of the country was government land. Only the best white pine timbered lands had been purchased. I devoted the

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summer months of eight years in traveling the wilds and woods of the northeastern part of Wisconsin.

Gray Wolves for Companions.

On one of my trips while in camp on the bank of what is now known as Keyes lake, I told my men I am going northwest about nine miles to look over lands reported as having great magnetic attraction, and would be out three days and two nights and for them to examine the lands west and near the camp, and I would be back in due time. I left camp in the morning with my blanket and a week's grub, and failed to find the section lines and locate my work until the close of the second day. It took me four days instead of one to do the work. I was all by myself on this trip except in the evening and during the night. My companions were gray wolves and porcupines. Many was the time after I had gone into camp for the night, [*sic*] that the gray wolves could be heard howling in all directions. They kept it up, and used to sing me to sleep, and when I awoke in the morning the first thing I heard was a poor, lonely wolf howl. I never considered the wolves of northern Wisconsin dangerous. In the solitude of the woods I was more annoyed by the familiar nosing about of the harmless porcupines than by the howling and yelping of the gray wolves that followed our tracks during the day, and kept up their music about the camp from night until morning. Being away several days longer than I agreed, my men became uneasy and after waiting nearly two days for me to return, they started northwest after me, thinking that perhaps some accident had befallen me. The accident of this trip was the fact that on my way back to camp I met the boys about half way, right in the dense forest, there being no lines to follow. It was a strange circumstance, and could not be done the second time in many days. An explanation of the circumstances of our

work, and their anxiety for my return, was all that was said.

In our work of conducting examinations and explorations of lands through the woods for over two years, not yet having found a mine, our party was following the section line between sections 20 and 21, township 40 north, range 18 east, late one afternoon, when we came out in a nice lot of pine and hemlock timber, with considerable hard woods [*sic – hardwoods*], the old camp grounds of Indians and trappers, with relics of old wigwams. I knew there must be water near by [*sic – nearby*], or it would not be the camping grounds of Indians. We were feeling tired, so I ordered the boys to set up tent and we would camp there on the ground that night.

While the boys were putting up the tent, getting up wood, and looking for water, I went further up the hill for a smoke and rest. I struck my exploring pick into a little hillock – chuck down with a thud it went, and on examination of the point of the pick, I found it was red and covered with soft hematite ore. A few minutes later I had uncovered a solid ledge of red ore. I went to camp, got one of the men, and another pick and ax, and we uncovered more solid ore, and in a short time found the slate outcrop west, and our enthusiasm was beyond bounds.

Hurried Trip to Land Office.

I then said to the boys, "Let's find out where we are," and on [*sic – upon*] going north on the section line about 300 feet we found the quarter post between sections 20 and 21. Comparing our location with our government plats, I found all of section 20 to be government land, except one forty, also all of section 21, vacant.

After we had supper and camp ready I told my men to continue examinations and find any outcrop, if possible, and remain there in camp – that I would go ahead to the land office at Menasha and enter this

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land. About seven o'clock in the evening I started out for an all night's walk in the woods. At 12 o'clock at night I reached Bad Water Indian settlement and managed to get up a couple of old Indians. They made cedar torches and we went through to Dickey's trading camp, rested a couple of hours and started for Powers on the railroad line to Menasha about 11 p.m., and the next morning entered at the government land office the land which included within its limits the Florence mine, which up to date has shipped a million and a half ton of high grade nonbessemer [*sic – non-bessemer*] ore, and which probably contains triple the amount waiting the miner's pick.

In 1875 I made a map of the Menominee range of Michigan and Wisconsin, showing all the iron outcrops known at that time, printing the word "iron" on the sections where I had reasons to believe that iron existed in paying quantities. Examinations of these maps and the present locations of the mines on the Menominee range will show how near correct I was in my calculations.

In 1876 parties of Cleveland, Ohio, wished me to examine their lands in sections 31, 32, 33, and 34 in township 40, range 18 east, Florence County. I had camped on their lands in many places during my travels in the woods, and on section 34, near the center of the section, I recollected finding red slates. This fact being known, I made arrangements for the exploration of their lands. In 1876, in section 34, I found the ore body in what seemed to be a very large deposit, afterward known as the Commonwealth mine. It was duly organized as such by H.B. Tuttle and others of Cleveland, Ohio. This mining property has produced nearly two and a half million tons of good nonbessemer [*sic – non-bessemer*] ore.

In 1877 Hon. Angus Smith of Milwaukee wished me to take charge of an exploring

camp east of Crystal Falls. The result was the opening up and discovery of the Armenia iron mine, which has shipped considerable good iron ore.

Lacked Railroad Accommodations.

An iron mine without railroad facilities is about as valuable as a rail fence would be to keep out mosquitoes. The Menominee range had to show up a good many iron properties before any railroad was built to the mines. The Breen, Quinnisec [*sic – Quinnesec*], Vulcan and Norway mines were carefully explored and opened out before the railroad was built into the iron range. After a careful investigation by the Chicago & Northwestern railway in 1876, the work was commenced and completed by 1877, to that the Breen and Vulcan shipped the first ore from the range. In 1878 the road was completed to Quinnisec [*sic – Quinnesec*] and six more iron mines were added to the list of shipping mines. The Chapin, Hewitt, Commonwealth, and Florence mines were still beyond the west end of the first section of the railroad that was built by the Northwestern.

To show how well the stockholders of the company were guarded from building unproductive lines, their general manager, Marvin Hughitt, now president of the great Northwestern lines, came from Quinnisec [*sic – Quinnesec*] to Florence over as rough a road as you may find in any country. He made a careful examination of Florence and other iron properties. He camped out on the bank of Fisher lake, and slept on a balsam bough bed, with his boots and overcoat on, which was strictly violating all rules of explorers and woodsmen. However, Mr. Hughitt got up in the morning, ate his breakfast, and started out to work, as willing and readily as an experienced woodsman. On his return to Chicago, it was not long before the contract was let for constructing and extending the railroad from Quinnisec [*sic – Quinnesec*] to

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Florence, passing by the Chapin, Hewitt, and Commonwealth mines, thereby adding three or four more shipping mines from this iron range.