

MENOMINEE RANGE MEMORIES 20: BUILDING THE RAILROAD FROM FLORENCE TO IRON RIVER

By William J. Cummings, Menominee Range Historical Foundation Historian



This real photo postcard view of Iron River's Chicago & Northwestern Railway Depot probably dates between 1910 and 1915. The June 2, 1883 edition of The Florence Mining News reported that "Work on the new depot at the foot of Adams Street is being pushed, and it will be completed in short order. The structure is to be 100 feet in length and quite commodious." Note the bandstand at the far left. [William John Cummings]

[NOTE: Dates, placed chronologically, are highlighted in boldface red letters for easier reading, and names of individuals and places are highlighted in boldface black letters to facilitate finding information.]

The earliest mention of extending the **Chicago & Northwestern Railway** Company's tracks from Florence, Wisconsin, to the iron fields in what is now Iron County, Michigan, in a contemporary newspaper was copied from *The Menominee Range*, Quinnesec's newspaper, in the **March 5, 1881** edition of Escanaba's *The Iron Port*, as follows:

Range Items.

–We have it from quite a reliable source that the **C. & N.W. railway company** is making preparations to **extend their line to the Iron river country, and a branch from there to Ontonagon, and from that place to Houghton**, while the main line will be run to connect with the Northern Pacific. The course has already been mapped out.
–Men. Range.

The **March 5, 1881** edition of Florence's new newspaper, *The Florence Mining News*, included the following item regarding extending the railroad to the west:

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We have credible information, that the survey for the extension of the railroad from Florence, further west, will be commenced in a very short time. The survey will probably follow a westerly course to section 24, 40-17, and then deflect northward.

A month later, the **April 9, 1881** edition of *The Florence Mining News* reported the **Chicago & Northwestern Railway's completed preliminary survey** of the area, as follows:

*THE C. & N.W. Ry., [sic] have [sic – has] concluded to begin a preliminary survey from this place immediately. It was contemplated to commence surveying after the snow has disappeared, but orders have been received this week to begin right off. It will probably take all summer to establish the most feasible route to **Crystal Falls** and also to **Iron River**. Operations may be commenced on the road bed as early as next spring. The country is a rough one to run through, and a great deal of care will have to be exercised in the selection of the most economical route.*

Two weeks later, in the **April 30, 1881** edition of *The Florence Mining News*, two items appeared regarding the extension, as follows:

*TWO engineering parties are engaged in running preliminary railway lines under the charge of **S.H. Selden, Esq.**, between this point [**Florence**] and **Crystal Falls** on the **Paint River**. One corps of 12 men will work from the north end of the line, and another corps will work from this end. **Crystal Falls** is about 15 miles a little west of north from Florence.*

*“THE surveying force of the extension of the C. & N.W. Ry is being largely augmented by the arrival of men on the force. The intention of the management now is to run two preliminary lines. One to **Iron River** and one up the **Paint**.*

Owing to the nature of the country through which it is proposed, by this company to build roads, it is presumable that the surveys will occupy the entire season.

In its **July 9, 1881** edition, *The Florence Mining News* noted a **stage line had been established from Florence to Iron River**, as follows:

***JOHN B. WEIMER**, who has been running a **stage line from here to Iron River**, has had a three seated buck-board made on which to carry his passengers. It is just the vehicle for the business and combines lightness with strength. It is something that has been very much needed, and will be a great convenience to our **Iron River** neighbors, both as regards a means of conveyance and also for better facilities for carrying the mail.*

The **September 24, 1881** edition of *The Florence Mining News* reported the following:

*–**R.L. Selden, Esq.**, one of the proprietors of the **Sharon mine**, at **Iron River**, arrived from Connecticut on Saturday last.*

An item regarding “the new village of **Iron River**” appeared in the **December 24, 1881** edition of *The Florence Mining News* as follows:

*–**James Innes**, of the **new village of Iron River**, called on us Thursday evening, and informs us that he is building a **hotel** at the enterprising place. He intends to keep a first-class house and **THE MINING NEWS** wishes his success.*

In its **January 7, 1882** edition, *The Florence Mining News* reported on progress of the **Iron River branch railroad** as follows:

***L. Carmichael**, the contractor of the **Iron River branch railroad**[,] is rushing the work from the junction. He wants to employ*

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at least 800 men so as to complete the contract as early as possible. **J.K. Crooks**[,] the **superintendent of construction**, has a big force cutting out the right of way and the graders are following. The route of the original railway has been changed somewhat to avoid several heavy cuts which existed on the route as surveyed.

The location of the **railroad depot at Iron River** was noted in the **February 11, 1882** edition of *The Florence Mining News* as follows:

THE depot at the terminus of the Iron River railroad extension, is to be located on section 36, 43-35 – this side of the river. The village of Iron River is laid out on the other side of the stream on section 26, whibh [sic – which] will make it about a mile from the depot. We understand that a new town will be laid out on this side, which will undoubtedly take the lead and be the coming city.

Progress on the Iron River railroad was again noted in the **February 18, 1882** edition of *The Florence Mining News* as follows:

THE work on the Iron River railroad is being pushed forward as fast as possible. J.K. Crooks, superintendent of the work[,] *informs us that he has a large force of men already at work and that the force will be increased and doubled as soon as the frost is out of the ground. He expects to have the whole work ready for the track layers by the first of August.*

News of the **Seldens** was reported in the **February 25, 1882** edition of *The Florence Mining News* as follows:

–Stephen Selden returned, last Monday, from his home in Connecticut, looking well and hearty, although his eyes are a little weak yet. He tells us that his brother Richard, who submitted to the amputation of one of his legs, is getting along finely and is now able to be out on crutches, and will probably return here in the spring, with the addition of an artificial leg.

In its **May 27, 1882** edition, *The Florence Mining News* contained the following:

The first death which we have had in our midst occurred on the 12th. The deceased was a Swede miner of the name of Nelson, and while going to work at the mine fell dead in the street. It is supposed that he died from heart disease. A procession of sixty men followed his remains to their resting place in the quiet woods west of town. The Rev. Mr. McGarvey, a preacher of the gospel from New Jersey, has come among us. He held his first religious service at the company's office, last Sunday.

Work commenced upon the wagon road, between here and the Junction last week, and we hope soon to have a good road over which we can travel with some kind of comfort.

Work is progressing upon the Iron River branch of the C. & N.W. R'y, and indications are that the locomotive will enter Iron River at an early day.

The chief engineer of the Ontonagon and Brule River R.R. was in town last week, having come from Rockland, the present terminus of the Northwest division of the road. The final line is located and the road will be built as rapidly as possible. It will run along the western border of the village and the C. & N.W. will come in on

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the east, running parallel with the river, and they will meet at the **Nanaimo mine** north of town.

The **June 2, 1883** edition of *The Florence Mining News* announced train service, the new depot and other newsworthy items as follows:

THE trains commenced running through to Crystal Falls and Iron River, on Monday last, which is a great accommodation to the citizens of those places.

The new plant of machinery received by the **Nanaimo** from the **Florence Iron Works** is doing good work and giving excellent satisfaction. The Florence institution will get all the work that is to be had from this section.

Steller Bros. are fitting up their store in the **bank building** in a fine manner. A new

counter has been put in the bank, and when all is completed it will be a model business room. We have just the cutest little **post-office** for miles around.

Work on the **new depot at the foot of Adams Street** is being pushed, and it will be completed in short order. The structure is to be 100 feet in length and quite commodious. Sanguine property owners on Adams street vehemently aver that this street is to be the future business thoroughfare of the town.

George Innes is rapidly fitting up his **new hotel on Adams Street** and will have everything complete in the course of two weeks. The hotel will be conducted on first-class principles, is near the new depot and also convenient to the business quarters. It is bound to do well.



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Postmarked April 22, 1915, this real photo postcard view shows the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Depot which was built by the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad (otherwise known as the Milwaukee Road) in 1913, when the railroad extended a branch line into Iron River. The brick depot has a modified Neoclassical design and is rectangular in shape. The depot has a covered porch on one end that connected to the waiting room. The station agent's office was located in the middle of the building, and a freight room was on the other end. Passenger service continued at the station until 1945. The railroad ceased bus service in 1956. The depot was sold to a local produce company for use as a warehouse. The depot was subsequently sold to an equipment company. In 1993, the depot was sold again. The new owners rehabilitated the depot and turned it into a restaurant and bakery. The new owners also bought two old ex-Long Island Railroad passenger coaches and added them to the depot as part of a railroad-themed restaurant. [William John Cummings]