

# Mining on Cuyuna Range, past brings future benefits

## Part IV – Mining in the early days

CONNIE PETTERSEN

### Discovery and beginnings

If you walk over magnetite with a compass, it interferes with the compass pointing magnetic north, causing it to change direction. That's how Cuyler Adams discovered iron in the Deerwood area while surveying property lines with his St. Bernard, Una.

Cuyler Adams' discovery back in the 1880s was the first birth pang of the Cuyuna Range. Yet it took over 20 years of toil and trouble before mines were operational. Some shafts flooded from groundwater, and many prospectors went broke and

In the spring of 1903, Adams and several Duluth financial backers started Orelands Mining Co. Their first ore samples were not good quality but, by 1904, they hit high-grade ore near Rabbit Lake, which later became the infamous Kennedy Mine.

Once quality ore was found, prospectors and investors moved in. George H. Crosby, a Duluth financier and developer on the Mesabi Iron Range, had great enthusiasm for the new range. He secured options on land, part of which later became Main Street in Crosby, and designed the town site named after him. Crosby had financial dealings in a number

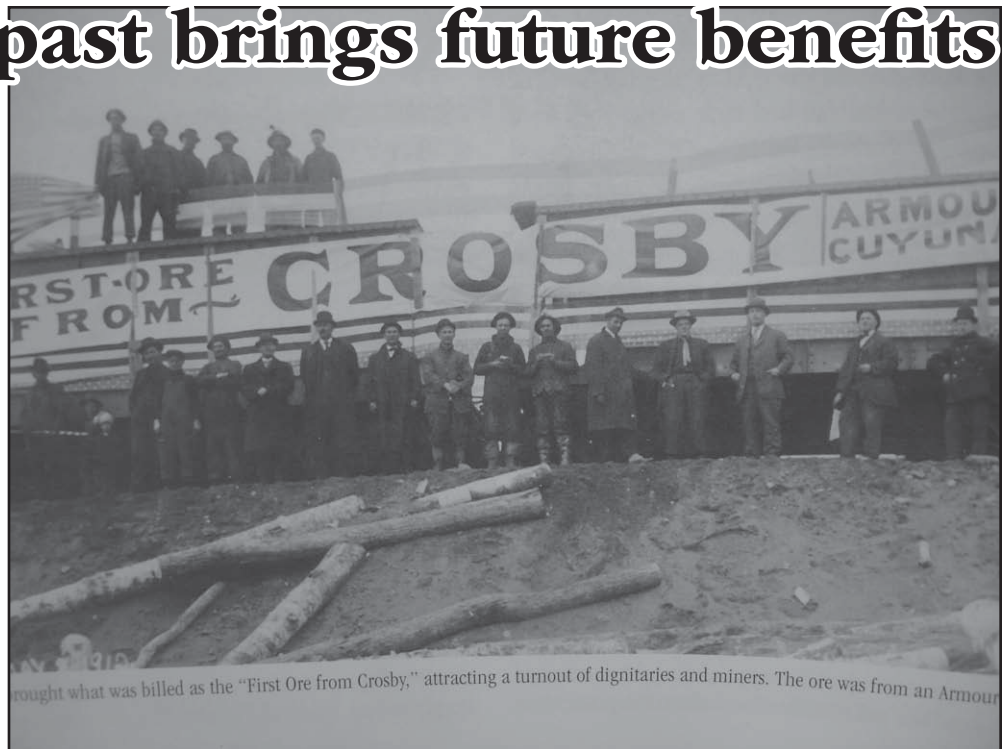
ate, but it cost as much to haul coal six miles by team from Deerwood to the Kennedy mine as it did to ship it by train from Pittsburgh to Deerwood. In September 1908, the Kennedy owners petitioned the county commissioners for a new road, agreeing to pay for it. However, a farmer objected to construction of a road across his property.

A rail line was built from Aitkin by 1910, enabling nine railroad cars of coal to reach the Kennedy. In April 1911, the Kennedy became the first mine on the Cuyuna to send ore to Superior docks. Crosby was the first town to ship ore (from Armour No. 1) to eastern steel mills. The newest Minnesota iron range had finally "come of age." By 1912, eleven mines were operating, five were shipping ore: The Kennedy, Thompson, Armour 1 and 2 and Cuyuna-Mille Lacs. Additional mines were developing.

Sixteen mines were open by 1914, including the new Croft shaft sunk by Merrimac Mining Company. Rich manganese ore from Cuyuna Range was to become so valuable to American war efforts in WWI and later wars, that men who worked those mines were exempted from the draft. At the end of WWI, 40 mines were open, employing nearly 3,000 men. The Depression in the 30s closed many mines, but the beginnings of WWII again created a demand for ore from the Cuyuna Range.

### If you build it, they will come . . .influx of immigrants

By the turn of the 20th century, poor economic conditions overseas, plus increasing tensions before WWI, resulted in massive emigrations. Thousands of men of military age left homelands to avoid being drafted into



First iron ore shipped from the City of Crosby. The ore came from an Armour mine.

Russian, German or other armies.

America promised new opportunity and was growing rapidly. Iron, essential for building cities, bridges, and railroads, was also needed for farming and logging equipment. Iron made the very freighters that shipped ore across the Great Lakes and the ocean-going vessels that brought more immigrants.

As new mines opened on Cuyuna Range, many workers were needed. Mining companies advertised in newspapers in America and abroad, touting year-round jobs. They needed strong men willing to work for lower wages so the new range could become competitive on world markets.

Tiny settlements, first called "locations," opened close to the mines, some with mining related names like Orelands, Klondike, Steelton, Ironton and Iron Mountain. Larger boomtowns became Crosby, Cuyuna, Ironton, Manganese and Trommald, that swelled with immigrants from countries like the British Isles, Croatia, the Ukraine, Hungary and Italy, as well as Finland, Scandinavia, Austria and Germany.

Some workers came under contract with travel de-

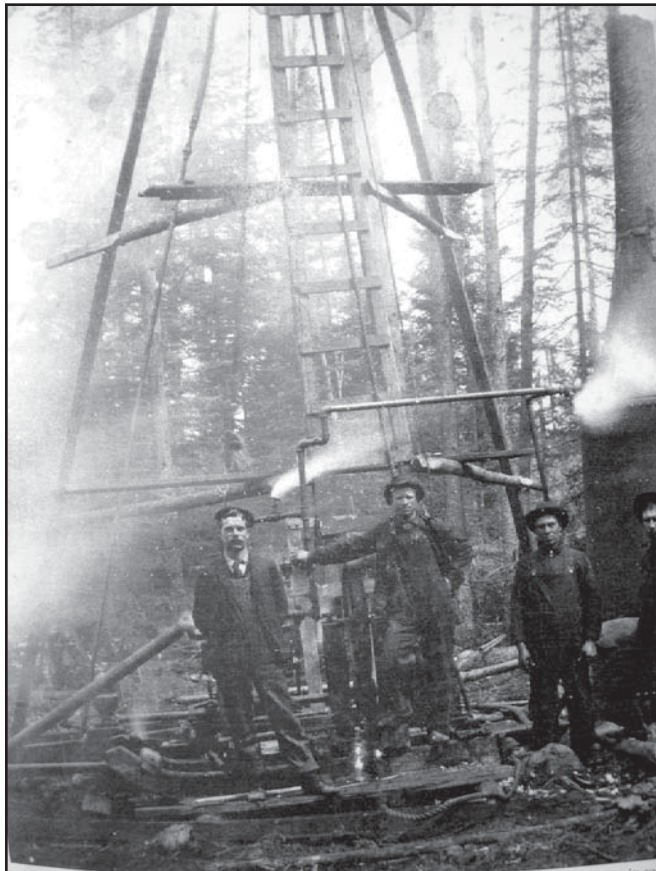
ductions subtracted. Others pooled money or borrowed from relatives. Most immigrants could speak little, if any, English and had limited education. A lot of men came alone or with male relatives, later sending for wives and children.

According to *The Guide to the Croft Mine Historical Park*, compiled by the Croft Mine Joint Powers Board: "... immigrants who didn't speak English were often given menial jobs. If they wanted to get ahead, they took 'Americanization' classes at night to learn English and become citizens. Improving their status gave immigrants a resolve to be successful and a thirst for education passed down to their children and grandchildren."

Some miners homesteaded farms and worked for "grub-stakes." Others stayed in boarding houses or rows of wooden houses provided by mining companies like "Honeymoon Row," aptly named since many young couples were just starting out. Housing was affordable, but miners became more dependent upon employers for their livelihood. If they lost their job, they also lost their home.

A garden plot, a source of pride for immigrants, was essential for a family's survival. Some households boarded single miners to earn extra income, adding a tremendous amount of work for the wives with additional meals and laundry.

(continued page 10)



These miners are drilling for iron ore in core samples using a diamond drill in the early history of the Cuyuna Range.

abandoned their projects. It took over a decade, into the 20th century, before ore was shipped and investors made a profit.

At first Cuyler Adams was ridiculed for fanciful dreams. But his persistence to explore and continue drilling paid off. Eventually, he became a wealthy iron baron, naming his discovery "Cuyuna" from a combination of his name "Cuy" and his dog "Una."

of mines on the range, including Whitmarsh Mining Company's ill-fated Milford.

By 1908, the Kennedy became the first mine to stockpile ore above ground. But it was six miles from a railroad connection. The only access road was hilly and narrow. A railroad was needed to get ore to Lake Superior docks, but it took years of politics and hard work to get it.

Mines needed coal to oper-

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# Mining on Cuyuna Range, past brings future benefits (continued from page 9)

## Early mining working conditions

Mines, a cool 50° all year, were damp and humid. Miners developed respiratory illnesses, pneumonia, bronchitis, and sinus infections. Cave-ins, electrocutions, falls, and other accidents maimed and killed miners. At least 200 men lost their lives in the Cuyuna Range, probably more died early from lung-related illnesses. Communities became self-reliant to help not only themselves, but also the less fortunate.

Mining equipment and clothing improved over the years. Carbide lamp hard hats replaced soft hats and candles. To stay warm and dry, underground miners wore many pounds of clothing – hats, bib overalls, rubber boots and a range slicker, gloves and a handkerchief worn to keep from breathing in too much iron dust. It was dirty work. Men came off shift almost unrecognizable.

Blasting occurred twice a day, between shifts. If necessary, they would get everyone out of the mine and blast in the middle of a shift. Men worked two concurrent 10-hour stints. The last four hours the mines were empty so pumps could keep ahead of groundwater.

Explosives were kept in a

powder room, encased in wood to keep dynamite dry. If dynamite got wet, it could bleed nitroglycerine and be unsafe. Miners bought their own dynamite and tools. The mine did not provide them. A company store sold everything at a discounted price.

When they got their dynamite, miners had to put it together by taking a fuse and inserting it into the blasting cap. They used a cap-crimping tool to attach the cap onto the fuse, applying a little pressure to seal it. They had to be extremely careful not to apply too much pressure or it would explode. Many preferred to use their teeth because their hands were callused and they could not tell how much pressure to apply.

The engineer's office was the highest rank a worker could achieve. Sometimes miners began working above ground at age 14 by shoveling coal into the engine. They worked their way through every rank of a miner, an average of 20 years to go through the ranks. If a mining company thought a man might be a good engineer, they shipped him off to college and paid his schooling. One of the best colleges was the Denver School of Mining.

Those in the engineer's of-

fice were multi-talented. They designed and blueprinted all buildings and mine workings, kept track of how much iron ore was produced, and paid miners based on how much they brought up in a 2-week period. The harder they worked, the more they got paid.

On April 8, 1913, there was an unexpected strike by nearly a thousand Cuyuna Range miners. *Cuyuna Country, A People's History* reported the strike "shocked residents, businessmen and mining company officials." Miners demanded an eight-hour day, time and a half for overtime, abolition of contract work, the hospital fee be borne exclusively by the mine operators, plus a number of other things.

The companies and striking miners came to an agreement on April 26. This first attempt by miners gained some improvements, but not many. The companies threatened to shut down, saying they could not afford to honor all demands and keep prices competitive.

## Historical, cultural value

Mining on the Cuyuna Range continued until competition from taconite production and rising cost factors proved too great to con-



Horse and mules were an integral part of early mining efforts. A hopper wagon at Armour I Mine, used for collecting and hauling dirt.

tinue in the late 1960s. Today the area has a new wealth in unique pit mine lakes filled with game fish. Area trails are ideal for tourism and there is a rich historical and cultural heritage.

According to *The Guide to the Croft Mine Historical Park*, published by the Croft Mine Joint Powers Board: "The Croft exemplified the mining era at its height and because still standing structures made it ideal for restoration, the State of Minnesota purchased the property in 1978.

"... The last underground iron mine to produce ore in Minnesota came to a rattling halt at one o'clock a.m. June 1, 1967. Last to close was Inland Steel Company's Armour No.2. It ended an era that arose in the early

1900s, saw millions of tons of ore funnel into the nation's economy, employment in the thousands, and flourishing communities rise – some to die – as the industry foundered.

"Along the dimly-lit tunnel maze, ore cars bumped and rumbled on steel rails past ghostlike human forms with lamps alight... in cavernous depths, fortunes were made with plunder that rolled from mine to dock to mill to make the steel on which industrial giants fed... The last helmet lamp has flickered out, the last producing shaft has been capped and the last ore train long ago whistled its departure for the Lake Superior docks. But the mining days of yesterday go on as always at the Croft Mine Historical Park where you can take a

step back in time and live the colorful and unique history of the Cuyuna Iron Range."

*Next in the series on Cuyuna Range mining are upcoming features of "Miners' Memories." If you have information to share about your (or a family member's) mining experiences on the Cuyuna Range, contact the NewsHopper, 218-927-6990, or e-mail: bopper@emily.net.*

Pictures and histories used with permission of Cuyuna County Heritage Preservation Society & Croft Mine Historical Museum. Iron mining displays and guided tours through a realistic simulated iron mine are at Croft Mine Museum, open Memorial Day through Labor Day. Recommended reading: *Cuyuna Country, A People's History* available at: [www.cuyunaheritage.org](http://www.cuyunaheritage.org).

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