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Life on the Vermilion Range before 1900

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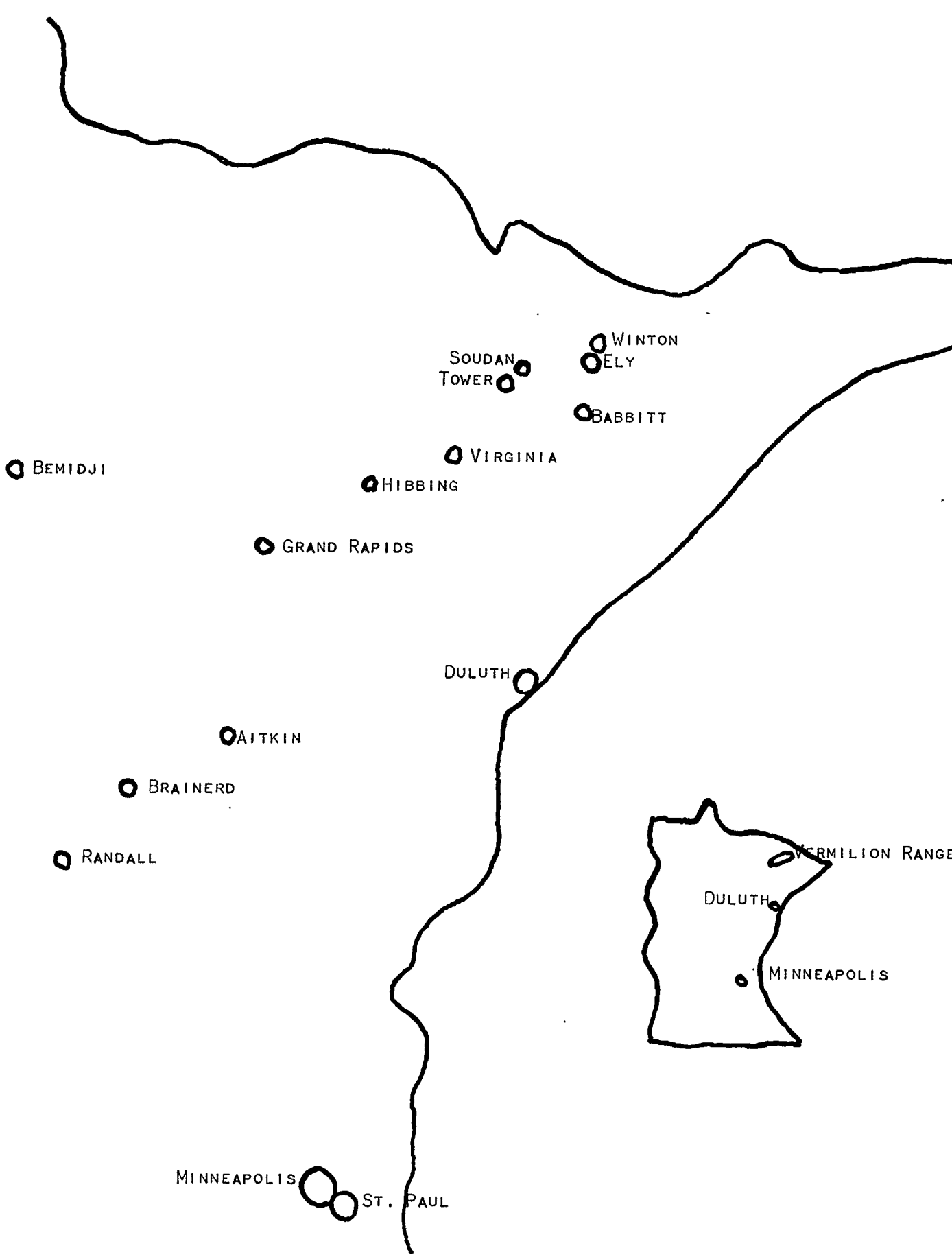


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LIFE ON THE VERMILION RANGE BEFORE 1900

A Project Report
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
St. Cloud State College

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science in Education

by
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=
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Much has been said and written about the westward movement in United States history, and much emphasis has been placed upon the hardships and tribulations of the hardy pioneer farmers and cattlemen who opened up the Great Plains area, generally considered to be America's last frontier. The activities in this area and the magnitude of the area itself have overshadowed the development during the same period of time of a small section of Minnesota known as the Iron Range. In that region people braved not only the elements and terrain of the rugged wilderness country, but also the isolation, the language difficulties of a real melting pot, and the generally poor working conditions of the early Iron Range.

As Charles E. Ellis indicated in his special Virginia Enterprise publication, the history of the Iron Range proceeded at such breakneck speed that few attempts have been made to record the events and conditions as they happened or existed, and whatever records have been published from time to time are more or less fragmentary, and future ones will undoubtedly continue to be so.¹ Some omissions may also exist in the present work, but it is hoped that it will serve as a start in preserving some of the heritage that deserves to become a part of the

¹Charles E. Ellis, Iron Ranges of Minnesota (Virginia, Minnesota: Virginia Enterprise, 1909), no page numbers.

annals of the region.

The history of the people of the Iron Range, oftentimes told and re-told orally, needs to be put into writing. Much of what has been recorded here comes to us from the second generation and thus certainly needs to be taken with some discretion. Much, however, has been verified through findings in periodicals and reports, and certainly all of the related items are basically true although the passage of time may have caused some distortion of the basic facts because of man's failing memory.

Hardship has almost always been a part of the exploration and settlement of any area, and the hardships endured by the settlers of the Iron Range were in many ways no different from those experienced in other areas of a like nature. It is not the intent of this writer to show that the people of the Iron Range suffered any more or any less than the pioneers in other areas; it is only an attempt to set down for posterity some factual evidence to show that we do owe a great amount of respect and admiration to the pioneers of the Iron Range, and that what we have today did not come about without the usual amount of sweat, blood, and tears.

The study was concerned primarily with those years which saw the development of several thriving communities from a complete wilderness. Although the problems confronting the people in their effort to develop good communities had not all been overcome by the turn of the century, life had progressed to the point where new difficulties ceased to be so great, and these years do then represent an era of transition from

a frontier society to an advanced degree of civilization. It is also a representative era showing what hardship and perils faced the pioneers in the development of a mining industry, how the people lived on a frontier, and under what conditions they worked. The study, then, was limited to those years immediately preceding the turn of the century, with some mention of pertinent items and instances from the years immediately following the turn of the century.

Generally, the study covered two major topics, working conditions and living conditions. The working conditions studied were confined to three major areas; namely, working conditions in the mines, working conditions in the construction of the railroads, and working conditions in the lumbering industry. The primary emphasis, however, was placed upon working conditions in the mines since this involved the greatest number of people.

The Iron Range encompasses a large area of Minnesota, extending as far south as Randall, as far west as Grand Rapids, and as far north as the Gun Flint area which extends into Canada. There are three distinct iron ore ranges in this area--the Cuyuna, the Mesabi, and the Vermilion. The Vermilion was the first to be developed, the Mesabi, the second, and the Cuyuna, the last.

The Vermilion was chosen as the area of concentration. To cover the entire Iron Range would be a work of great magnitude, and not in the interests of the writer or of the people who would be concerned. Just as the period of time covered was representative of the development of the iron industry in Minnesota, so also the Vermilion can be

considered as being representative of development of the Iron Range as a whole. Since the Vermilion was the first of the ranges to be developed, it represented the real frontier of the iron mining industry, and as such it was almost imperative that this be the area of concentration. Then too, since the writer has been a resident of the Vermilion for the past number of years, the study had the greatest significance to him and to the people for whom he has profound respect and admiration.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE VERMILION

The Vermilion Range received its name from the fact that the original development took place on the eastern shores of Lake Vermilion. The name itself is a French word and was applied to Lake Vermilion by the early French traders in the area. The lake probably derived its name from the "occurrence of conspicuous knobs of red jasper and iron ore which existed on the south shore of the lake and must have been known to the very early travelers."¹ The Vermilion Range stretches in an east-northeast direction for some one hundred miles to the Gunflint area on the Canadian border. It comprises an area of some one thousand square miles, varying in width from two to eighteen miles. This is the true Vermilion Range, but since merchantable ore has been mined only in the Ely and Tower areas, that area is generally referred to as the Vermilion. The Vermilion Range is the oldest of the Minnesota ranges and contains a very hard ore formed in deep pockets; hence, most of the mining has been underground, in sharp contrast to the Mesabi where most of the ore is mined in large open pits.

A. DISCOVERY AND EXPLORATION

As far back as the 1660's white men first heard of the iron ore

¹ Frank R. Holmes, Minnesota in Three Centuries (St. Paul: The Publishing Society of Minnesota, 1908), IV, p. 376.

in the Lake Superior region, but it was not until the late 1840's that the first formal report of iron ore appeared. In this report, David Dale Owen, U. S. Geologist, referred to the iron ore that existed in the Gunflint area. It was not until the 1860's, however, that people actually came to the Vermilion area in search of ores, and then it was for gold, which eventually turned out to be nothing more than fool's gold.²

In 1865 the Minnesota Legislature appropriated money, and Henry H. Eames was appointed to survey the North Shore area. Because Eames was more interested in gold than in iron ore, the development of the area was possibly delayed for some twenty years. Although he made mention of the existence of iron ore in the area, his reports indicated that gold existed in sufficient quantity to merit mining. When the word got out, the area was flooded with prospectors. Before a year had passed, a road destined to become the forerunner of the famous Vermilion Trail had been cut out through the wilderness from Duluth to Lake Vermilion, and by March of 1866 it was reported that some one hundred men were encamped around the lake. By May of that year a regular gold mining camp was established and a town laid out, a sawmill built, and some fourteen houses erected. It seems almost remarkable that despite the fact that Eames had reported the existence of iron ore fifty to sixty feet thick, it was to be another twenty years before the ore would

²A. Hermina Poatgieter and James T. Dunn (eds.), Gopher Reader, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, and Minnesota Statehood Centennial Commission, 1958), p. 217.

be mined.³ The gold rush, however, suffered the fate of many another gold rush when the actual mining failed to reveal the amount of gold reported there. This was not the last of the gold rushes into the area, but no strike of any consequence was ever made.

The first serious survey of the iron ranges was made by the men who were later to become instrumental in starting the iron mining industry. The man who was responsible for starting the exploration of the iron area was George C. Stone, a man who had tried many enterprises out with little avail. He realized that capital was of utmost importance in developing the area and with this purpose contacted Charlemagne Tower, a wealthy Philadelphia financier, who in turn contacted and teamed with Samuel A. Munson of Utica, New York, in financing an expedition into the area. Tower and Munson picked Professor Albert H. Chester, a professor at Hamilton College, as the scientist to accompany the expeditions, and George R. Stuntz, a man who had accompanied Eames on his survey and who was well acquainted with the area, as a guide. Other members of the party were Tower's son-in-law, Richard Henry Lee, manager Anson Northrop of Duluth, explorers B. F. Bishop and William Basset, and four Indians. Thus on July 10, 1875, the Chester expedition paddled up the St. Louis River headed for iron country.⁴

³William Watts Folwell, A History of Minnesota (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1930), IV, pp. 4-8.

⁴Hal Bridges, Iron Millionaire: Life of Charlemagne Tower (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), pp. 139-46. (Hereafter referred to as Bridges, Iron Millionaire).

The purpose of the expedition was to explore what was already known as the Mesabi Range, and after camping on Lake Vermilion, the party proceeded to what is now the extreme eastern end of the Mesabi. The discoveries here were anything but encouraging, and as they worked in a northeasterly direction, they were actually moving away from the rich deposits which were to be discovered in later years to the south and west. Chester found no reason to be optimistic about the Mesabi, and he so notified Tower and Munson, a decision which was to prove quite embarrassing in later years when the Mesabi would become one of the richest iron producing areas in the world. Chester then returned to Lake Vermilion and started to explore the immediate area, "and in township 62, range 15 west, he and Stuntz found a solid cliff of pure hematite, thirty feet high and twenty-five feet wide."⁵ Thus it was that the greatest iron field in the world was at first passed up as an unsound venture, and the Vermilion became the first of the Minnesota iron ranges to be developed. Charlemagne Tower, however, was willing to bide his time in developing what had been discovered until conditions were more favorable.

The next exploration of the area was made by Newton H. Winchell in 1878. He was the head of a state geological team sent into the Arrowhead country to make a geological survey of the area. His reports also indicated the presence of iron ore in the same general area as Chester had reported to Charlemagne Tower. Winchell notified state authorities

⁵Ibid., p. 151.

and encouraged them to develop what could become a great source of revenue for the state. His report was not favorably received by the state authorities and the matter was dropped.⁶

Charlemagne Tower and Samuel Munson sent Chester back to the Vermilion in the summer of 1880 to make an extensive survey of the Lake Vermilion area. George Stone, too, was not idle. He had two jobs to do for Tower; namely, to secure title to the lands in the Vermilion area, and as a state legislator to secure favorable legislation in the taxing of iron ore. By 1882 under the guiding hand of Stone, Tower had acquired most of the land needed to begin operations. The acquisition of land on the Vermilion, as in other parts of the public domain, is a story in itself and need not be told here. The important point is that Tower did acquire 20,507.41 acres of land in northeastern Minnesota. Also, the state legislature, in 1881, passed an act which would tax lightly any iron ore mined in Minnesota, in part because of Stone's efforts, and Tower proceeded to organize the Minnesota Iron Company.⁷

The stage was set to begin operations which were to become the forerunner of the greatest iron mining area in the world. What remained now was to provide the transportation necessary to carry supplies, men, and materials to start operations, and to provide the means to carry out the mined ore.

⁶Frank R. Holmes, Minnesota in Three Centuries (St. Paul: The Publishing Society of Minnesota, 1908), IV, pp. 376-8.

⁷Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 170.

Now that the machinery had been set into action, Tower did not waste any time in laying the groundwork for construction of a railroad to the Vermilion Range. The Duluth and Iron Mountain Railroad was incorporated in early 1881, and Stone was instrumental in introducing legislation providing the corporation with a grant of swamp lands. This legislation did not receive approval, and with the passage of an amendment to the Minnesota Constitution in the fall of 1881 doing away with swamp land grants, this method of land acquisition was no longer available. However, in 1874 the legislature had granted swamp lands to a corporation to build a railroad to the Mesabi Range, so Tower with proper help and special legislation secured rights to this land grant. With additional legislation he was given the right to re-locate the railroad with its origin at Two Harbors, then known as Agate Bay, and extending to a point on the Vermilion Range. Charlemagne Tower, Jr., was made president of the company, and plans for construction were then made.⁸

Meanwhile, development of the Vermilion Lake area had started, and ore was to be lying in wait for the completion of the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad.

B. SETTLEMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

With plans for the development of the Vermilion Range and the construction of the railroad more than just a dream and destined to

⁸ Ibid., pp. 172-84.

became a reality, settlement of the Vermilion area began. Here in the wilderness, with its many lakes, rivers, ridges, and virgin pine, four settlements of importance developed before the turn of the century. The four were Tower, Soudan, Ely, and Winton. Into this wilderness, with an aesthetic beauty hard to describe, came people from almost all parts of the world, to brave the isolation, the weather, the terrain, and the other forces of nature which tended to make advancement seem almost an impossibility. However, the plans were made, the challenge was there, and the settlers appeared.

In the summer of 1882 two men and a boy arrived in the Vermilion area to begin the mining of iron ore. The three--Andrew Sandell, Peter Erickson, and Thomas Walsh, the boy--packed supplies and equipment into the area on foot and began mining with hand drills. These three were the first iron ore miners in the state of Minnesota, their work commencing near the site of what is now the town of Soudan. Here they constructed a twelve foot square log cabin, hauled in a boiler from the old gold diggings which they used as a stove, and began what was to be the first mining location. Work on a small scale expanded as more and more people arrived. By August of that year at least four shallow pits had been dug; namely, the Tower, the Brietung, the Stuntz, and the Stone. Much of the steel needed came from the old gold diggings and was reshaped into the needed tools by a blacksmith.⁹

⁹Walter Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, Minnesota (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1921), pp. 360-1. (Hereafter referred to as Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County).

With the coming of cold weather, the work at the mines ceased and the remaining men faced a difficult winter. With heavy snows blocking the Vermilion Trail and with food down to a minimum, they survived by eating beans, canned tomatoes, and a few rabbits supplied by the local Indians. In January of 1883 Ted Wheeler, the Indian agent, brought in supplies which included the first boiler to be used at Soudan. The six day trip was a very difficult one over the hundred miles from Duluth. It was so intensely cold that bonfires had to be built to keep the horses from freezing at night.¹⁰

The boiler was brought in for the purpose of starting a sawmill, and in the spring of 1883, John Owens, of Escanaba, Michigan, was hired to erect the mill and to provide lumber for the construction of company buildings which were to include homes and a company store. During the early winter of 1883-84 supplies arrived to stock the company store so that all would be in readiness for the many miners who were to follow. By this time George Stuntz had already platted both the Tower and Soudan sites--Tower to serve as the business location and Soudan to serve as the residential location for the miners.¹¹ This agreement has continued in force and today only one small community store exists in Soudan. Since the miners were to move in more rapidly than the businesses, Soudan grew more rapidly at first than did Tower. The Tower boom came with the railroad.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 370

¹¹Ibid., p. 371

In March of 1884 about one hundred men, women, and children, under the leadership of Elisha Morcom, arrived in Soudan to occupy the homes that had been built and to bolster the mining force. This small group of miners, mostly Swedes and Cornishmen from the Menominee iron district in northern Michigan, was typical of the many groups to arrive shortly after this time. Good wages, good housing, and steady employment were the inducements, along with free transportation supplied by the Minnesota Iron Company, that led many of these people to the Vermilion. Correspondence between Franklin Prince, mining engineer, and Charlemagne Tower, Jr., indicated the number of miners in the area had risen to 540 by June of 1884.¹² After being comfortably settled in the company houses that had been built previously, the miners went to work. Mining proceeded at a steady pace, the ore was stockpiled, and three months hence the first load of ore was shipped on the new railroad. In all, the miners opened seven small pits--the Brietung, the Tower, the Ely, the Stuntz, the Lee, the Montana, and the Stone. Eventually these were combined to form the Soudan Mine, known for many years as the Minnesota.

Tower, as stated before, grew rapidly once the railroad was completed. Before completion of the road Tower was too isolated to be a boom town and the difficulty in bringing in supplies kept it from growing. Early in 1884, under the guiding hand of Charlemagne Tower, the man for whom the town was named, the town site was surveyed and lots went on sale.

¹²Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 206.

All was in readiness for the coming of the first train on July 31, 1884, the same date on which the first shipment of ore sped down the tracks to Agate Bay. Tower then grew rapidly and in November of that year it became the first incorporated village north of Duluth, with incorporation as a city coming in April, 1889. Although the city was primarily the business location of the southern Vermilion area, the population rose to 1,366 by the turn of the century.¹³

But the Vermilion mining activities were not destined to become centered in the Tower-Soudan area alone. As early as 1883 Captain H. R. Harvey discovered iron ore in the Ely area, almost twenty-five miles northeast of Soudan, at the site of the Pioneer mine. Although much prospecting was done in the area and settlers began to arrive, mining did not begin until the Chandler mine opened in 1885 or 1886, the date being difficult to determine.¹⁴

The original settlement in the Ely vicinity was made in the area still known as Spaulding Location on the shores of Shagawa River on the east end of Shagawa Lake. With the development of the Chandler mine, however, houses sprang up in the present Ely site and there the city grew. The fact that the city grew on the Ely site rather than the Spaulding site has led to much speculation on the part of residents today that the real estate men had much to do with encouraging settlement where it

¹³Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, p. 381.

¹⁴Historical Souvenir Booklet of the Centennial Roaring Stoney Days Celebration, (Ely, Minnesota: Centennial Roaring Stoney Days Committee, 1958), p. 3. (Hereafter referred to as Roaring Stoney Centennial Booklet).

suited them best. Although this location was to bear the name Ely from the very beginning, after Samuel B. Ely, an Ishpeming mining man, it was several years before the postoffice changed its name from Florence, the first official title, to Ely. The Ely townsite was an original forty acre homestead of Edward Brown, who in turn sold it to George Greenwood and others who platted it early in 1887.¹⁵

Unlike Tower, Ely prospered greatly before the coming of the railroad. The railroad already ran as far as Soudan and the distance from there to Ely was not so great that people could not take a stage in season or walk. The population increased to the extent where the Ely Iron Home on April 10, 1888, reported "...one or more families coming in almost daily." Talk of incorporation came as early as April of 1888, and before the first shipment of ore was made, Ely was incorporated as a village. Less than sixteen months after the first shipment of ore left Ely, the population was estimated to be about 1,200, large enough to lead to incorporation as a city in March of 1891.¹⁶ Businesses flourished and the mines employed and produced despite the panic of the 1890's. By 1900 the population of Ely had risen to 3,717.¹⁷

As in the Tower-Soudan area the first mining was open pit mining, but when it was discovered that the ore lay in great quantities deep

¹⁵Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, p. 382.

¹⁶Ely Times, December 26, 1890.

¹⁷Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, p. 390.

beneath the earth's surface, shafts were sunk. The first of the shafts sunk was the Chandler No. 1. This was followed by five other Chandler shafts, and four shafts to the east; namely, the Savoy, the Zenith, the Sibley, and the Pioneer. In addition to these the Section 30 mine and the White Iron mine produced ore in later years, but the bulk of the ore shipped from Ely came from the original five mines. Many other explorations of the area occurred, but they did not disclose ore in sufficient quantity to merit shipping.¹⁸

The vast timber resources of the Vermilion area helped to establish a fourth settlement in the area. Although Winton was to see its largest growth after the turn of the century, people started settling the area with the coming of the Knox Lumber Company which was established on the shores of Fall Lake. The first house was built in 1892, and from a population of 100 lumberjacks and sawmill hands in 1892 the population grew to about 600 by 1900.¹⁹ In later years Winton had its greatest boom with its population rising to the neighborhood of 2,000 people. Before 1900 Winton relied mainly on Ely for supplies and other necessities.

Thus the mining industry and its related activities were launched. To ascertain the success of these ventures one needs only to examine the record books for statistical figures of ore and lumber production, or better yet, to examine the bank accounts of the wealthy financiers, the

¹⁸Roaring Stoney Centennial Booklet, p. 3.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 56.

fee holders, and other persons who were in a position to reap the harvest of this fertile area. Thus far only a brief history of the pre-1900 Vermilion has been related. The real history of the Vermilion Range, however, existed in the lives of the many people who dug the ore, cut the trees, and provided the services so vital to the success of such a great venture. Names of the people who came are not nearly as important as is the fact that they did come to carve out of this wilderness a great industry; and come they did to a life that was at times tragic, at times romantic, and at almost all times hard. This it would seem is the real history of the Vermilion Range.

CHAPTER III

LIVING CONDITIONS ON THE EARLY VERMILION

As strangers travel the usually quiet streets of Ely or Tower today, little do most of them realize that less than a century ago life in these towns in some ways duplicated that in many of the wild and woolly mining towns of the early western gold and silver rushes. John Pearson, one of the early Tower residents living there today, recalls vividly the sermons of Billy Sunday, the famous revivalist, at the Tower Pavilion, and he verifies the statement supposedly made by Sunday that the only difference between Ely and hell was that Ely had a train that ran out.¹ This may well have been an exaggeration, but the fact remains that much of the vice and corruption of the early West also existed on the Vermilion Range.

In the very early days, the quiet of a late evening was likely to be shattered by the sound of revolver shots or by the sound of cursing and fighting among the toughs who had imbibed a bit too freely on the "hard liquor" that was readily available in the many saloons that existed in either town. Conditions were far from being as chaotic as they were in Deadwood or Virginia City, and by the time the Vermilion cities had passed through their infancy, they were prosperous and orderly mining communities. That the people in control of vice and corruption were in

¹Statement by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

the minority should go without saying, since eventually the opposite elements triumphed.

Lawlessness added greatly to the many hardships the early citizens endured, and yet almost without fail, most of the old-timers still refer to those early days as the good old days. Life was rough, but the old-timers talk about a better companionship and a greater respect for other people among most of the citizens. The total result seemed to be that although it was a hard life, people accepted it, took advantage of the many diversions available, and lived a good, neighborly life.

Much can and will be said later about the lawlessness of the Vermilion in its infancy. However, it is much more important that we turn our attention first to those people and activities that were the forerunners of what we have today, and to those things that survived the sometimes infamous childhood of the Vermilion Range.

A. THE VERMILION MELTING POT

The early Vermilion Range saw an influx of strangers of every type and description. Many came as permanent settlers, others came to make money so that they could return to the old country and improve their existence there, and still others came to make a "quick killing" in what they must have considered a fertile area. An excellent illustration of the types that came was made by Stewart Holbrook when he chronicled the arrival of people as follows: "Even before the railroad was finished, a rush of all sorts of people had come to the new range, and the first trains came in loaded with millionaires and bums and

working stiffs and tinhorn gamblers."² This was in reference to Ely, which he called the liveliest city on the Vermilion, but it could as well have been applied to any of the settlements there. The miners, the loggers, the railroad men, and the businessmen would come daily, as would the toughs, the fakers, the peddlers, and many others to seek work or to make a "quick buck." Among them one might find people from almost all parts of the world, people of all colors, and people of many faiths. The word was out, it seemed, that life on the Vermilion was good, that jobs were plentiful, that wages were high, and that money could be made by anyone. The Ely Times reported on December 4, 1891: "A colored gentleman, who is the victim of nearly all the misfortune that could befall one, is upon our street today. He is minus one arm, has a broken limb and is entirely blind." What this man was doing on the streets of Ely on a cold, wintery day will probably remain a mystery forever, but he does serve as an example that just about anyone might be found on the streets of these early, thriving communities.

As the miners, the lumbermen, and the railroaders moved in, each group was characterized by certain nationalities, while the businessmen that came represented just about every race, nation, and creed. One needs only to look at the birth statistics in an early year of life on the Vermilion to find out that the Vermilion was a veritable melting pot. Birth statistics in Ely for the year 1895 were as follows: 38 Finnish, 24 Austrian, 11 English, 13 Scandinavians, 7 United States, 5 Canadians,

²Stewart Holbrook, Iron Brew (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1939), p. 87.

3 Italians, 3 Germans, 1 Polish, and 2 Irish.³ This does not represent all the nationalities in Ely that year, but it does serve to illustrate a point. It should also be noted that all of the people from Central Europe--Slovenes, Croatians, Hungarians, and others--were referred to as Austrians during the early history of the Vermilion.

The Cornishmen represented a great part of the first migration to come to the Vermilion Range. Most of these were migrants from Michigan where they had labored in the iron mines there. The Cornishmen, better known as "Cousin Jacks," and "Cousin Jenneys," came originally from Cornwall in England where mining had been their chief occupation. Thus it was, that the "Cousin Jacks," the name derived from the fact that most of them were related to each other and referred to each other as "cousin," assumed most of the responsible positions in the mines. Many of them moved to other areas of the Iron Range in later years, and today very few of them remain on the Vermilion.⁴

Another group of people to arrive early was the Swedes, but both the Swedes and Cornishmen were soon outnumbered by the Finns and Austrians, although this migration was not to hit its peak until after the turn of the century. In the 1890's many of the miners were Finns and Austrians, and almost all of them had come directly from the old country. Italians represented a small portion of the miners at work before 1900,

³Ely Miner, March 11, 1895.

⁴Statements by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

and the larger number of Italians came later.⁵

The lumbering industry also brought in its share of people, and in the years preceding 1900, most of these were Scandinavians, Scotch, Irish, or Canadians. It was not until after 1900 that many of the Finnish woodsmen came to the Vermilion. Many of the loggers and sawmill hands did not come directly from their homelands, since most had previously worked in the lumber camps in Michigan, Wisconsin, and in other areas of Minnesota.⁶

The men working on the railroads were recruited mostly from Duluth or the Twin Cities, and many Scandinavians and Irish were included on the rail gangs. Once the railroad was finished, first to Tower and then to Ely, many of the workers became permanent residents of the two cities. Either they continued working for the railroad in making improvements, or they secured work of other kinds.⁷

That the Vermilion was truly a melting pot becomes more evident when one looks at the names of some of the early business men of the two cities. Here could be found Murphy's saloon, Shapiro's meat market, Van Blarcom's photo shop, McInnis and McNamara's general store, Poirer's boot shop, Whitesides' hotel, Bovaird's barber shop, Fenske and Lawrence's hardware, Olson's barber shop, Jackman and Mattila's confectionery, Grabowitz and Riksfjord the tailors, Bracco's general store, Weber the

⁵George E. Freeland and James T. Adams, America and the New Frontier (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 448.

⁶Statements by Charles Larson, personal interview, July 6, 1963.

⁷Statements by Arthur Knutson, personal interview, July 2, 1963.

painter, Charlie Gee's laundry, Don Pedro the artist, Brownell's meat market, and many others. In addition to the above businesses, there were several other Chinese laundries in both Ely and Tower, and Negroes operated barber shops in both cities.⁸

All of these people worked side by side to develop what we have today, and discrimination in any form was a very uncommon occurrence. Certainly the various nationalities tended to congregate, and as new persons moved in, they would be taken in by these groups of people who had preceded them. Ely still has its Finn Hill area, and in the early days sections of town were referred to by nationality. Soudan also had a Swede Town, but with the exception of Finn Hill, all of the names have disappeared.⁹ Rumors of the many "wars" between nationalities are prevalent today, but closer investigation has revealed very little of this in the period before 1900. Without a doubt there may have been occasions of nationality differences, but almost without exception, the old-timers interviewed stated that the early people of the Vermilion were very helpful toward each other and that all people, regardless of color or creed or nationality, had a great deal of respect for other people, something they felt was often lacking today.

Color lines were not sharply drawn. On the Vermilion, red men, white men, yellow men, and black men lived in almost complete harmony.

⁸Ely Iron Home, March 27, 1888, June 12, 1888, December 24, 1889; Ely Times, December 4, 1891, February 24, 1893, November 12, 1897; Ely Miner, October 13, 1899; Vermilion Iron Journal, September 14, 1887, December 22, 1892; statements by Charles Knapp, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

⁹Statements by Anna Colberg, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

On the surface at least, discrimination did not exist and no real conflicts because of color were discovered. Anna Colberg, one of the early Swedish citizens of Tower, recalls that she worked with a Negro cook at the old Vermilion Hotel and the "he was a very nice man who got along with almost everybody." Later this same cook was to marry an Irish girl and raise a fine family. The wife of Tom Taylor, Negro barber in Tower, was the superintendent of the Presbyterian Sunday School and sang in the church choir for many years.¹⁰ One of the few instances of discrimination reported was an account of the breaking of the plate glass front of the Gustaf Aspengren building during the night. He had rented it to a Jewish merchant after having been warned not to do so.¹¹ These instances, however, were few, it seems. Rumors of the nationality "wars" may well have come from the fact that the nationalities often banded together in the face of adversity or when a fellow countryman was in difficulty. Sometimes this may have been at the wrong time, but even then apparently they thought they were just being helpful and their sense of loyalty came to the fore. Typical of these affairs was the following, found in an item in the Ely Iron Home on August 13, 1894: "Officers Hopperton and O'Brien, in attempting to arrest a riotous Finlander last Saturday Evening, were attacked by a mob of the offender's friends, and clubs had to be used pretty freely before they secured their men."

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ely Miner, June 15, 1894.

A melting pot, at least in terms of many different nationalities and groups coming together, was thus formed. Many of the customs and cultures of the old country and other areas were retained, but generally a stable and interesting society resulted.

B. HOMES AND HOMELIFE

Home construction on both the east and west end of the Vermilion followed the same general pattern. The very first arrivals occupied log cabins of every size and description, but with the coming of the sawmills, frame houses were the order of the day. The first frame buildings to be built were the company houses constructed by the Minnesota Iron Company. "The twenty-six houses, though unlovely to look upon, were warmly built. Each was twenty-four feet square, was plastered against the cold, and had one large fireplace and a chimney. Furnishings consisted of homemade bedsteads, chairs, and tables."¹²

As more and more people came, frame houses sprang up almost overnight. Generally the frame houses of the miners and sawmill hands were two-story homes with a bedroom, kitchen, living room, and dining room on the first level, and sleeping quarters on the upper level. Often the front room, or parlor, and the dining room were one large room with a dining table located somewhere in the room. The sleeping area might be divided into three or four bedrooms, or it might be a dormitory.

¹²Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 203.

type room. The houses of the business men and of those who held positions of importance were often larger and nicer. Many of these had nice attics, fancy lattice work, and large porches. The houses were all plastered against the cold and a large wood burning stove provided heat in the winter. A kitchen type range provided the means for cooking, and cooking pots and pans served many purposes. The houses were as well furnished as most houses of that American period since the railroad provided the means for shipping in all of the latest items in that line. Those items that were small enough to be transported from the old country occupied a place of importance in the home. This was especially true of fancy items and dishes.¹³

Almost all of the house holders kept boarders, and boarding houses were a common sight. Rooms were at a premium, and all available rooms in the community were utilized. One often hears the story that beds in those days never got a chance to get cold since many of the boarding houses and homes rented out the same bed to two miners working different shifts. With the miners working ten hours a day, six days a week, this presented no real problem except on weekends. The boarders were so busy on the off 'days writing letters, visiting saloons, or taking part in other activities that this problem was usually worked out by the two occupants. As soon as the houses were built, they were

¹³Statements by John Pearson, Edith Ellefsen, John Somrock, Anna Colberg, Arthur Knutson, personal interviews, July 2-14, 1963, and Lee Brownell Collections, Ely, Minnesota. (This is a collection of historical materials which proved to be of value in research on the Vermilion Range.)

filled.¹⁴ In May of 1893 the newspaper reported twenty-five houses under construction but that "the one great need of Ely is more room and more houses. People are packed in the houses now like sardines and a hundred dwelling houses could be filled and would be occupied as soon as built."¹⁵

Boarding houses of the hotel type existed, but often boarding houses were merely private homes where all beds available were used by boarders. A typical boarding house of the hotel type was built near the mill in Tower to house and feed the employees, but probably the most famous of all was the "Junnila House." This was a Finnish boarding house that kept both boarders and roomers, with the boarders far outnumbering the roomers because of the excellent food served there.¹⁶ Those people who made up the boarder class were the many single men who came to the communities to work in the mines and mills and camps, the married men who came first and then would send to the old country for their families, and the men who came here only to make enough money to improve their existence when they returned to the homeland. It is estimated by Judge John Somrock, judge of the municipal court in Ely and a person who has displayed an active interest in history of the Vermilion, that fully fifty percent of the Slavs who came to the Vermilion to work had intentions of going back to their homeland. The number that

¹⁴Statements by Edith Ellefson, personal interview, July 8, 1963.

¹⁵Ely Times, May 18, 1893.

¹⁶Statement by Emore Ellefsen, personal interview, July 8, 1963.

actually returned is much smaller than this since many changed their minds once they had been here for some time.¹⁷

It was the intense desire for improvement on the part of the permanent settlers that led to the neat homes and gardens that existed. In the old country many of them had little or no land--they were mostly members of the peasant class--and to own a little plot of land was a source of pride to them. It was more than a sense of pride, however, that accounted for the many gardens that existed. The garden was a source of food, and if the owner had boarders at all, which he most likely did, it was a good way to save on the food bill. As one travels in certain areas of Ely today, it is quite noticeable that the houses are built very close together and very close to the street. In those days the houses were built in this way so that the area between the house and the out buildings, built as close to the alley as possible, could be used for garden space. If the people had a large number of boarders, they would often clear a little plot of land outside the city limits to use as an additional garden. Toward the close of the century many of the houses were enclosed with a picket type fence.¹⁸

Meat markets existed then, but it was customary for people to have animals of their own since there was no city regulation prohibiting them from having animals within the city limits. Not only were the animals an obstacle to decent sanitation, but they provided other

¹⁷Statement by John Somrock, personal interview, July 14, 1963.

¹⁸Statements by John Somrock, personal interview, July 14, 1963, and Lee Brownell Collections, Ely, Minnesota.

problems as well. They were obstructions to street travel and they would on occasion be vicious enough to be dangerous to the population since they were permitted to roam the city freely.¹⁹ The pigs were raised for meat, and they would be slaughtered as needed. After the slaughtering occurred, the meat would be placed in the well which served to keep it cool in the summer. Enough might be stored there to last for three or four days, and the rest would be salted and smoked in the smoke house which was one of the outbuildings on the property. In the winter, of course, the meat might be frozen and kept for a longer period of time. The chickens were kept for food and for the eggs they produced.²⁰ Although many people kept cows for milk, dairies were in existence. The Star Dairy in Tower, according to the Vermilion Iron Journal of June 16, 1892, offered ten milk cows and a new milk wagon for sale cheap. This might well be an indication of how the dairy business prospered in those days of competition from home-owned cows!

Life for the womenfolk was not an easy life. In addition to child rearing and general household duties, the boarders had to be fed and the laundry done for them. If the homes had from four to eight men boarding on each shift, this meant that from eight to sixteen men, in addition to the family, had to be fed. The boarding houses were generally operated by a couple, and since these boarding houses often had twenty or more men staying there, cooking was a full time job for the

¹⁹Ely Miner, April 7, 1897.

²⁰Statements by John Somrock, personal interview, July 14, 1963.

lady of the house. Often a girl would be hired to help the woman of the house. It was customary to bring these girls over from the old country, the fare being paid by the owner of the home. The turnover was rapid, however, since the men far outnumbered the women on the early Vermilion, and as one of the boarders took a shine to the girl, he would pay off the man for the travel fare and claim the girl as his bride.²¹

To the Austrians at least, this led to one of the happier times in their lives. The wedding celebration lasted for three or four days following the evening ceremony, and these were days of dining, dancing, and drinking. The best of food was served and dancing went on at all times. Potica, a tasty Slovenian pastry, was one of the featured items on the menu. As many as three accordian players might be hired to keep the music going. The pattern was much the same for all of the various nationalities although some of the others' celebrations were not of such long duration.²²

With so many single men, and men whose families were still in the old country, children did not make up a large percentage of the population. For those who did live on the early Vermilion, life was not a life of ease. As soon as they were old enough, they were assigned routine household duties--cooking, washing dishes, chopping wood, running errands. For the enterprising boy, money was to be made. Arthur Knutson, who grew up in Ely and later served as city clerk for many years,

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

remembers that delivering a hot dinner to the men at work in the mines was quite an accomplishment. He recalls that it was not the easiest thing to run home from school, eat dinner, pick up three or four dinner pails at different houses, deliver them to the distant mines, and then return to school in time.²³ Delivering newspapers was another of the jobs that boys often held.²⁴ By the time most of the children were fourteen or fifteen, they had pretty steady jobs--the boys probably out for hire and the girls busily engaged in household duties.²⁵ As in our present day those who were not kept busy and not closely supervised sometimes became a problem. Such at least seems to have been the case at the Tower postoffice where they were a nuisance when they congregated there in the evenings.²⁶ Ely had some troubles in this respect too, since it prompted the newspaper to come out with a somewhat dogmatic report: "There are some small boys in this city who are fit candidates for the reform school. They are getting to be regular little 'toughs.' Some of them are getting so they do not go home at all but eat and sleep, no one knows where."²⁷

The stranger away from home also found a home on the Vermilion.

²³Statements by Arthur Knutson, personal interview, July 2, 1963.

²⁴Statement by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Vermilion Iron Journal, March 1, 1888.

²⁷Ely Times, September 6, 1895.

There were several excellent hotels on both ends of the Vermilion, but it seems that there were never enough. Tower was desperately short of hotel space, and in 1891 the cooperative spirit of the people was exemplified by the construction of the Vermilion Hotel. This large structure, finished in January, 1892, was financed by subscription of the citizens of the area. It was a three story, 96x98 foot building, with forty guest chambers, heated by steam, and lighted with arc and incandescent lights. It contained baths, hot and cold water, a barber shop, a dining room, an office, a lobby, and a reading room. The basement served as a bar and billiard room.²⁸ Facilities were good and food of great variety was served. Similar buildings existed in Ely, and the Christmas spread at the Exchange Hotel in Ely in 1890 might be illustrative of the fine food served. The menu showed the following foods available:

Celery, Extra Select Oysters, and Queen Olives
 Soup--Cream Lobster
 Fish--Boiled Trout, Egg Sauce
 Boiled--Lew [sic] of Mutton, Caper sauce; Chicken, Oyster sauce
 Roast--Turkey with Apple Dressing and Cranberry sauce; Stuffed
 Goose, Champaign sauce; Loin of Beef, brown gravy; Baked
 Ham, spiced sauce; Fillet of Venison, rum sauce
 Entrees--Stewed Veal with dumplings; Breaded Lamb, cream sauce;
 Escalloped Oysters; Frog Saddle on toast; Pineapple Frit-
 ters, lemon sauce
 Salad--Herring
 Vegetables--Mashed and boiled potatoes, French peas, Sugar cured
 corn, Asparagus
 Dessert--English Plum Pudding, Brandy sauce; Apple, Lemon, Grape,
 and Blueberry Pie; Raspberry Shortcake, Lemon Tarts, Sher-
 ry Wine Jelly, Assorted Nuts and Raisins, Oranges, Bananas,
 Assorted Cake, Fruit Cake, Angel Cake, Golden Cake, White
 Mountain Cake, Tea, Coffee, Chocolate, Cheese, Caret [sic]
 Punch.²⁹

²⁸Vermilion Iron Journal, January 7, 1892.

²⁹Ely Times, December 26, 1890.

The visitor to the Vermilion Range, if he could find room in one of the hotels, would find very comfortable living quarters.

C. TRANSPORTATION AND UTILITIES

It would seem that with such long working hours not much time could be devoted to civic matters, especially since much of the leisure time was devoted to home improvement. Somehow, however, residents found the time, and the civic-minded people set to work very early to improve their surroundings.

One of the highlights in the lives of the early settlers was the coming of the railroad. Life for them was made doubly hard because supplies had to be carried in on the old Vermilion Trail to the Tower-Soudan area before the railroad was completed. This had to be done in the winter time and it proved to be an impossible task at times because of weather and road conditions. The railroad came to Soudan on July 31, 1884, but it was not until July 10, 1888, that the extension to Ely was completed.³⁰ The very first route from Soudan to Ely was by way of a water route over Lake Vermilion, Mud Creek, Burntside Lake, and Shagawa Lake.³¹ The first road to Ely was cut through the woods in the fall

³⁰William Dillon, "Our 75th Anniversary," Missabe Iron Ranger, (July, 1959), p. 5, and Ely Miner, July 10, 1888.

³¹Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, p. 382.

of 1887 and this proved satisfactory during the winter of 1887-1888.³²

An estimated sixty teams were employed on the road and merchants brought in supplies as fast as they could before the spring breakup. Once the road broke up, the only communication between Ely and Tower was on foot.³³ Little wonder that they looked forward to the completion of the railroad extension! Once the railroad was completed, the merchants did not rely on the road for transporting supplies, but it was still used as a means of travel. Undoubtedly it was passable only in season, and up to the turn of the century, it seems little improvement was made on it since there were no reported improvements in the papers.

Once incorporation came, village councils turned their attention to improvement of city streets to handle the horse and buggy travel in the summer and the sleighs and cutters in the winter. Streets were graded and built up, but they remained in deplorable condition for the most part--mud to the axle in rainy weather, and dusty and rutty during the dry weather.³⁴ In Tower an attempt was made to keep down the dust by means of a horse drawn sprinkler, but apparently with little success.³⁵ Wooden sidewalks were constructed very early to ease transportation on foot, but with the coming of bicycles, it was sometimes dangerous

³²Ely Miner, April 3, 1888.

³³Ibid., April 10, 1888.

³⁴Statements by Charles Larson, personal interview, July 6, 1963, and Lee Brownell Collections, Ely, Minnesota.

³⁵Vermilion Iron Journal, June 30, 1892.

to travel on them since the riders quite often used the sidewalks rather than the streets.³⁶

The construction of a street railway between Tower and Soudan in 1890 was one of the unusual features of early Vermilion travel. The track was about two miles in length, extending from the sawmill on the lake to Soudan. Its purpose was to carry the workers to and from the mines and sawmill. The streetcar was pulled over a narrow gauge track by a steam boiler fired by cord wood. It made as many as ten trips per day with a charge of eight cents per trip. Beset by financial difficulties almost all through its operation, it was abandoned in 1899.³⁷

While the city fathers were unable to do much about the street problems, rapid advances were made in other areas. Fires, always a great hazard to these cities with their many wooden buildings, occurred often. Added to this was the danger of forest fires which could easily wipe out any or all of the settlements. Much of the credit for early fire prevention should go to the newspapers, which were continually calling for the establishment of an adequate source of water and for the purchase of adequate fire equipment. Before 1891 a cistern was built under the city hall in Tower and a pumper engine purchased. This equipment, along with a volunteer fire department, provided excellent fire

³⁶Ely Miner, April 29, 1895.

³⁷Herman Olson, "Tower-Soudan," Missabe Iron Ranger, (July, 1959), p. 30.

protection for Tower until 1926 when sewer and water came.³⁸ The village of Soudan relied on the Minnesota Iron Company for its protection. No special water supply was provided, but the company did maintain a fire wagon.³⁹ A fire hall was built there in 1898.⁴⁰ Winton, being primarily a residential location before 1900, depended on the Knox Lumber Company for its fire protection.⁴¹ Agitation for a fire department and fire protection in Ely was started as early as 1888, and work on a city water works started later in that year.⁴² The first fire department was organized in May of 1889, and by the middle of the 1890's the department, housed in its own fire hall, owned at least two hose carts and a chemical wagon.⁴³ By late 1896 water mains were laid and hydrants installed; and in the early 1900's a fire alarm system with fourteen boxes advantageously placed existed, and a thirty man volunteer fire department was ready to answer calls with a hook and ladder truck and 3,000 feet of hose on three hose carts.⁴⁴

Water for consumption presented no real problem to Vermilion citizens except in Ely. Wells were the early source of water and served

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Statements by Ronald Morcom, personal interview, July 15, 1963.

⁴⁰ "Tower-Soudan," Missabe Iron Ranger, (July, 1954), p. 7.

⁴¹ Roaring Stoney Centennial Booklet, p. 58.

⁴² Ely Iron Home, March 22, 1888, and May 8, 1889.

⁴³ Lee Brownell Collections, Ely, Minnesota.

⁴⁴ Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, p. 386.

for many years in Tower, Soudan, and Winton. In Ely, however, according to numerous newspaper reports, wells could not be dug deep enough, and with the exception of the spring water found in several places, the water was of poor quality. Here again the newspaper provided a real service when it published these accounts of the poor water and pushed for the construction of a water works. A typical account appeared in the Ely Iron Home on October 30, 1888, and gave the following report of the water situation in Ely:

He who has drank [sic] a glass of water, such as is used on most tables in our village--yellow and with a strong odor and its horrible taste, rendering it absolutely unfit for use--is judge.

The poor water supply in Ely prompted construction of a water works in the early 1890's. Water was piped to taps at corners and alley entrances at various places in the city. Water other than for consumption was obtained from different sources and sold by the barrel to conserve this precious commodity.⁴⁵ This water works served Ely until early in 1900 when a water plant was built on the shore of Shagawa Lake.⁴⁶

Prior to the building of electric plants, the cities used candles, kerosene, and carbon for lighting. Electricity came early to Ely and Tower, but Winton and Soudan did not obtain electricity before the turn of the century. In 1890 a franchise was granted to the Tower Electric Light and Improvement Company to furnish electricity to the city. It is

⁴⁵Ely Iron Home, August 6, 1889.

⁴⁶Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, p. 386.

interesting to note that a stipulation in the contract called for the construction by the same company of a hotel at a cost of \$15,000, but for some reason the hotel was never completed. The company did construct an electrical plant and electricity came to Tower. The company was not very successful and in 1899 the plant was taken over by the city.⁴⁷ Ely received its first electricity in 1892, and this plant provided the needed electricity until a new plant was constructed in conjunction with the water plant on the shore of Shagawa Lake.⁴⁸

D. THE BUSINESSES

Business prospered during the era. Money on the Vermilion was plentiful, and the people were willing to spend it. Once the railroad had been completed, supplies of all kinds could easily be shipped in and stocked. Businesses of all types existed with the Morcom Brick Yard and the Iron Range Brewing Company being among the prominent ones in the area.⁴⁹ The early business establishments were generally large frame buildings with high false fronts, but with the coming of the brick yard to Tower, many of the buildings there were constructed of brick or had brick fronts.⁵⁰ Stores were apparently typical of the era, as were the items

⁴⁷ Herman Olson, "Tower-Soudan," Missabe Iron Ranger, (July, 1959), p. 30.

⁴⁸ Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, p. 386.

⁴⁹ Vermilion Iron Journal, May 31, 1888, and Charles Knapp, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

⁵⁰ Vermilion Iron Journal, August 4, 1892, and Lee Brownell Collections, Ely, Minnesota.

they had in stock.

Competition was pretty well limited to stores of a like type. Stores would handle only those materials or supplies in their line, and the specialty stores flourished.⁵¹ Price wars were not unheard of, especially among the clothing stores. On one occasion the Vermilion Iron Journal had to reassure its readers that the prices of the New York Cheap Cash Store and those of the Boston Clothing House were real!⁵² One of the real sources of competition, and one despised by the merchants, was the constant influx of peddlers. Newspapers often noted the arrival of the inevitable scissors grinder, the chimney sweep, and many peddlers. The seriousness of this competition is difficult to determine, but it did prompt the business men to organize. A Business Men's Association was formed in Tower, and with all of the activity of the "blind pigs" in Ely, a Retail Liquor Dealer's Association was formed there.⁵³

Business was conducted mostly on the credit basis. Many of the people carried "pass books" which served to record purchases during the month, and on pay day they would settle their accounts. A man's word was his bond, and credit was readily extended even though the names of the people might not be known. Entries in the books were often noted

⁵¹Statement by Herman Olson, personal interview, July 15, 1963.

⁵²Vermilion Iron Journal, August 27, 1891.

⁵³Vermilion Iron Journal, February 2, 1888, and Ely Miner, September 1, 1897.

merely as a description of the man, such as "One Eye Eric" or "Finn with the big watch."⁵⁴ Stores also had "day books" in which credit sales for the day would be recorded, and settlement for the month was required after pay day.⁵⁵

Outside of the newspapers, business was not apparently influenced by the mining companies. It has been often pointed out that the newspapers were definitely pro-mining company, but this in itself is not a point that should necessarily be held against them. This was a period when capital held the upper hand, and the newspaper relied heavily on capital for existence. Undoubtedly they received much business from the companies and the officials. Often the mining company officials were the best educated people in the area, and also the most influential, and thus they were probably the best subscribers. The good done by the newspapers in building a better society must not be minimized. Their constant encouragements in the establishment of higher standards of living had a pronounced effect on the society, and the continual reminders about health and welfare led to the establishment of good facilities along this line. They deserve the utmost of praise for supporting these improvements.

E. RELIGION AND EDUCATION

Shortly after the coming of the settlers to the Vermilion, efforts

⁵⁴Statement by John Somrock, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

⁵⁵Statement by Herman Olson, personal interview, July 15, 1963.

were directed to the establishment of facilities to meet their religious needs. Even before churches were constructed, services were held in available buildings. The first Catholic services in Tower were held at Murphy's Store, and in early 1885 the mining company donated land for the construction of the Catholic Church, the first church in Tower.⁵⁶ Other churches were soon constructed, with the first church in Soudan being the Methodist Church.⁵⁷ Early Catholic services in Ely were held in a private home, and the first Protestant services were held in the school house. The first churches built in Ely were the Catholic and Presbyterian churches, both constructed in 1890. Before 1900 the First Lutheran, the Finnish Lutheran, and the Methodist Episcopal churches were completed.⁵⁸ The first church in Winton, the Community Church, was not built until 1902.⁵⁹ During the early life of the Ely churches, they were served by pastors who made regular trips from Tower and Soudan.⁶⁰

Ministers for the various congregations were often times visitors, and many notable ministers came to the area. None other was probably as famous nationally as was revivalist Billy Sunday who came to the Vermilion in summer of 1899 as noted before. One of the most unique of all church services in the area must have been "the church on wheels" that

⁵⁶Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, p. 377.

⁵⁷"Tower-Soudan," Missabe Iron Ranger, (July, 1954), p. 7.

⁵⁸Roaring Stoney Centennial Booklet, pp. 72-78.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 56.

⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 72-78.

rolled into Ely and Tower in the summer of 1896, it being a group of evangelists who used several railroad cars as meeting places for services.⁶¹

The cooperative spirit of the people was prevalent in religious work; since the churches were frequently used by other religious groups for services. New buildings were often used for social affairs by church groups before the building was put into operation as a place of business.⁶² Church socials and dinners were common, and newspaper reports such as the following are indicative of the type of activity the churches had: "A pasty and mince pie social will be held Wednesday at the Presbyterian church. A table of curios will be the feature of the evening. Adults 15 cents and children 10 cents."⁶³

Prominent among the many religious societies that existed on the early Vermilion were the following: Lutheran Ladies Aid Society, Ceril in Malat, Presbyterian Ladies, Episcopal Ladies Guild, Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor, St. Cyril and Method, Foresters, and the Society of St. John Baptiste.⁶⁴

In order to fulfil the educational needs of the citizens, school districts were organized and schools established. The first attempt to

⁶¹Ely Miner, June 12, 1896.

⁶²Statement by Edith Ellefsen, personal interview, July 8, 1963.

⁶³Ely Times, January 23, 1895.

⁶⁴Ely Times, April 10, 1891, February 9, 1893, June 28, 1894, April 3, 1896, and Vermilion Iron Journal, June 7, 1888, February 28, 1889, September 5, 1889.

establish a public school was not successful since the Minnesota State Department of Education denied the original petition for establishment on the grounds that "there was no need for a school way up in the woods."⁶⁵ Private schools were then established and classes held in available buildings. Murphy's store in Tower served as one of the first school houses in Tower.⁶⁶ The first school district was organized in 1884 and the first school on the Vermilion was constructed in Tower in 1885. A school in Soudan followed shortly, and in 1886, School District # 9 was organized.⁶⁷

The procedure on the other end of the Vermilion was almost reversed. Here the school was organized in 1888, with School District # 12 being organized in 1888. Classes met for the first time, however, in the new school constructed in January of 1889. Before the end of the year, the enrollment required an addition to this building. Upon completion of a second school ten years later, the district already employed twelve teachers.⁶⁸ A building built in early 1893 and later destined to become the city hall served as the first school in Winton. A new two-room school was built there in 1897.⁶⁹

⁶⁵William Noyes, "Tower-Soudan Schools," Missabe Iron Ranger, (July, 1954), p. 21.

⁶⁶Van Brunt, History of Duluth and St. Louis County, p. 378.

⁶⁷William Noyes, loc. cit.

⁶⁸Roaring Stoney Centennial Booklet, pp. 69-70.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 56.

All of the early residents who attended these schools speak of them with a great deal of pride. Newspapers carried periodic accounts of the conditions in the schools and of their accomplishments. Discipline was good, but attendance was very poor as shown in the periodic newspaper reports which were often accompanied by a message urging better attendance. Many programs were presented at the schools, especially on national holidays. A typical school report appeared in the Ely Times on February 22, 1895:

The second month of the winter term closed with appropriate exercises, in commemoration of Washington's birthday. . . . There seems to be an idea permeating the minds of some of our people that we are not fulfilling the spirit of the law in some of the minor particulars. If the rooms were scrutinized properly, those who are inclined to object even to small things will find themselves satisfied in every particular. . . . Citizens, we are open to inspection and are not sitting with closed doors and any and all sane and sober people are welcome to our respective rooms. . . . Parents, we sincerely ask you to have your children at school every day possible. If the children are in school we can perhaps impart a few ideas, but if not present, no matter how hard we try, all our efforts will be in vain.

The rooms, housing a large number of students, were described as being "large and commodious, and nicely finished in oiled white pine."⁷⁰

F. MEDICINE AND HEALTH

One of the primary concerns of people in any settlement is the health and welfare of its citizens. The Vermilion Range was no exception and its citizens were soon concerned with inducing doctors to come to the area, attempting to bring about the construction of hospitals,

⁷⁰Ely Miner, October 30, 1895.

and establishing proper sanitary measures. The cities of the Vermilion were fortunate that doctors came to the cities and villages early. Before doctors arrived, people were required to travel great distances if they wished to see a physician. To the people of Tower and Soudan this meant a hundred mile trip to Duluth; to the citizens of Ely it meant a twenty-five mile trip to Tower since Tower already had a doctor during Ely's childhood; and to the citizens of Winton it meant traveling to Ely.

Once physicians had become established in the communities, people turned their attention to the construction of hospitals. The Minnesota Hospital was built in Soudan in 1891, and the Shipman Hospital was completed in Ely in 1893.⁷¹ A small emergency hospital, affiliated with the Shipman Hospital in Ely, was built in Winton in 1897.⁷²

The mere presence of doctors and hospitals, however, did not make the citizens immune to the ravages of typhoid, diphtheria, cholera, and other diseases which might strike. Although no epidemics of major proportion came to the area before 1900, there were many deaths recorded from typhoid. The fact that boards of health existed in the cities on the Vermilion throughout the period of time preceding 1900 helped control the spread of this and other diseases. The regulations of these boards were published in the newspapers, and these, along with the never

⁷¹Vermilion Iron Journal, April 16, 1891; and Ely Times, November 10, 1893.

⁷²Roaring Stoney Centennial Booklet, p. 56.

ending clean up campaigns of the newspapers themselves, helped to keep conditions reasonably sanitary. The newspapers would publish accounts of unsanitary conditions and people were thus prompted to rectify the existing conditions. Typical of these reports was the following taken from the Vermilion Iron Journal of June 10, 1888: ". . . the condition of the garbage ground was shameful . . . in sight of everybody can be seen four dead porkers, four dead canines, and decayed vegetables and meats of all kinds. If such is the case . . . we can expect a little sickness in that part of town." Even the boards of health were not above being reminded of the unsanitary conditions. On January 9, 1891, the Ely Times reminded both the Ely Board of Health and the people:

The Times wishes to call the attention of the board of health . . . to look after the condition of the village Nothing could be said heretofore against our officers who have vigilantly watched the condition of our village and have kept the dread scourge of diphtheria and other diseases from our midst . . . [but] at this season of the year there are many who think there can be no danger in the dumping of slops about their very doors. And it stands against us that many parts of our village present an appearance which is not alone filthy to contemplate but dreadful, when one thinks of the inevitable consequences which must arise in the spring. The increase of this menace could be greatly obviated by a system of drainage, that could be put in in season.

Sanitary conditions were made even more difficult with the number of animals that were permitted to roam freely about the cities. Pigs seemed to be the biggest problem as they went about rooting up manure piles and dumping over slop barrels. Late in the 1890's an ordinance was passed in Ely requiring the lockup of pigs, but it seemed there was a bit of trouble in getting people to observe this ordinance.⁷³

⁷³ Ely Miner, May 12, 1898.

Another sanitation problem was created by the people themselves when personal habits in the midst of a gathering left something to be desired. Such at least seemed to be the case at the Ely post office as reported in the newspaper:

. . . in case anyone who has a lock box, wishes to get his mail before the general delivery is open, he must take a sweat bath in his struggles to get to the front, swim through pools of tobacco spit, inhale vast clouds of tobacco smoke from villainous pipes, laden with worse tobacco. The whole atmosphere polluted and befouled by being inhaled successively by fifty pairs of lungs and super-charged by this stinking tobacco smoke is a menace to good health and a sure way of spreading contagion.⁷⁴

In addition to repeated warnings against providing the breeding grounds for typhoid germs, the people were also constantly reminded to clean up to prevent the outbreak of diptheria and cholera, both of which had reached epidemic proportions in other areas of the United States during this period. Many deaths were recorded in the newspapers among children, with cholera infantum one of the most common causes. The cause of only a few deaths, but the reason for many lost working hours, was "la grippe," a malady that we know as a severe cold today.⁷⁵

Quacks also came to make some "easy money" on the Vermilion. Life in the area was short for them, however, since it did not take the people long to find out that the man Mergler in Tower and the Indian doctor by the name of Cuddy in Ely were really just quacks.⁷⁶

Medicine shows, medicine wagons, and healers also made their

⁷⁴Ibid., January 5, 1894.

⁷⁵Ely Iron Home, January 28, 1890.

⁷⁶Ibid., June 12, 1888, and December 24, 1889.

appearance. Shows such as those put on by the Silver Herb Medicine Company and the Kickapoo Medicine Company appeared regularly.⁷⁷ Pioneers report that the shows were usually good, but comment on the medicine was not available. One of the most unique of the healers to appear was a man just referred to as "the old Indian doctor." His speciality, it seemed, was the removal of tape worms.⁷⁸

Dental care was available only when dentists visited the area. Dentists placed advertisements in the papers prior to arrival and set up shop in an available room. The pulling of teeth was generally done at home, or if the problem was too serious, the doctor would be consulted.⁷⁹ Visits to the dentists were not frequent by most people, many times because of prohibitive prices. Even the dentists, it seemed, were willing to take a good share of the money that was available. The Vermilion Iron Journal of January 12, 1888, reported that the prices charged were absolutely too high and if this continued, it would not be long before "the dentist owned the range" or would "be able to pay the national debt."

G. USE OF LEISURE TIME

With the long working hours of most of the people, leisure time was at a premium. With the exception of traveling companies, amusements

⁷⁷Ely Miner, September 25, 1895, and Ely Times, June 19, 1891.

⁷⁸Statement by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

⁷⁹Statements by Arthur Knutson, Edith Ellefsen, Anna Colberg, personal interviews, July 2, 8, 11, 1963.

had to be provided by the people themselves. Diversions from the working routine were readily available, and despite the limited amount of time available for most of the people, activities of all kinds were started.

Since all of the Vermilion communities are situated on the shores of nearby lakes, much of the social activity centered on or near the lakes. Sunday picnics were the most common type of activity there. The lakes were filled with boats and canoes, many of them rented from the local boat houses. In addition, many of the people owned their own crafts and boat houses lined the shores of the lakes.⁸⁰ Steam launches were used to transport to all parts of the lake. Typical of the steam launches were the Steamer Paul which ran scheduled trips on Shagawa Lake between the boat house and the park, and the Minnie Lamont and the City of Holland which plied the waters of Lake Vermilion on outings and moonlight rides.⁸¹

McKinley Park in Soudan and Sandy Point in Ely were both picnic areas provided for families of the mining men by the mining companies. Other picnic areas, such as the Austrian picnic grounds on the east side of Ely and the Pavilion in Tower, were also used for family and social gatherings. Almost all of the picnic grounds had pavilions where dancing could be enjoyed by all, and the lower part of the pavilion was

⁸⁰Statements by Edith Ellefsen, personal interview, July 8, 1963.

⁸¹Ely Times, June 12, 1891, and Vermilion Iron Journal, June 6, 1889, and September 5, 1889.

a bar where drinks could be "sold" by means of tickets.⁸² One of the interesting stories about picnics at McKinley Park concerns the fact that the mining company would not allow liquor on the premises. As a result a scow would be put out on the lake with a gang plank leading to shore. As the day progressed, the plank became quite narrow for many of the customers, but perhaps the dunking they got proved to be quite helpful.⁸³

Even in winter the people made good use of the lakes. Rinks were maintained, and skating parties with band music were quite festive affairs. Newspapers during the winter months reported many of these skating parties and skating races held at the rinks. Among other winter activities enjoyed by the citizens were sledding, sleigh ride parties, and snowshoeing, with snowshoe clubs for both men and women formed for the purpose of taking hikes to various areas.⁸⁴

Indoor activities included, among other things, dancing, house parties, and cards. Euchre and five hundred were card games of enjoyment, while poker was played for both fun and profit in many of the boarding houses and saloons. Poker playing went on almost endlessly at some of these places.⁸⁵ House parties were common, especially if the

⁸²Statements by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

⁸³Statements by Ronald Morcom, personal interview, July 15, 1963.

⁸⁴Ely Iron Home, January 14, 1890.

⁸⁵Statements by Charles Knapp, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

house had a piano. Dances were numerous and well attended, and dancing seemed to hold the greatest attraction for many of the people.⁸⁶ The newspapers, in their social reports, ran accounts of calico hops, leap year dances, holiday dances, and masquerade dances, but no others, it seems, enjoyed the success of the Fireman's Ball. The dance program of the Fireman's Ball of July, 1892, is typical of the dances held. Its program read as follows:

1. Grand March
2. Quadrille, Ladies Choice
3. Polka
4. Waltz
5. Schottische
6. Virginia Reel
7. Lanciers
8. Portland Fancy
9. Waltz
10. Polka
11. Schottische
12. Hungry Waltz
- Supper
13. Cicillian Circle
14. Quadrille
15. Waltz, Ladies Choice
16. Polka
17. Lady of the Lake
18. Tempest
19. Waltz Quadrille
20. Fireman's Dance
21. Boston Fancy
22. Polka
23. Dan Tucker⁸⁷

Music and drama were important in the lives of the people in the old country, and the tradition continued on the Vermilion. Opera houses were erected in two cities, and frequent operas, concerts, dramas, magicians, and magic lantern shows could be seen. In addition to many traveling shows that performed, local dramatic and music clubs were formed and performances such as Ten Nights in a Bar Room by the Tower Mines Dramatic Club and Our American Irish Cousins by the Ely Stock Company could be seen at the opera houses.⁸⁸ Musicians were plentiful, but often they were lured to other areas of the range with the promise

⁸⁶Statements by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

⁸⁷Lee Brownell Collections, Ely, Minnesota.

⁸⁸Vermilion Iron Journal, September 14, 1887, and Ely Miner, March 23, 1898.

of lucrative employment.⁸⁹ Brass bands, cornet bands, concert bands, and orchestras existed, as did city bands and nationality bands for almost all groups.⁹⁰ At least one band came up with an original name, that being the Soudan Tornado Band.⁹¹ Hardly a funeral, celebration, or public gathering went by that was not accompanied by band music.⁹²

People were active in both indoor and outdoor sports and recreation. None enjoyed the prominence, though, that baseball did. All of the cities had teams, parks, and a good following. A fierce spirit of competition existed, with challenges being issued through the local newspapers. As early as 1888 teams had been formed at Tower, Soudan, and Ely, and in the late 1890's a four team league existed with Ely, Tower, Virginia, and Eveleth as members.⁹³ There was such a good following for the baseball team that special trains made runs for the games, and the desire to beat the other teams was so great that special players were often hired. Although opposed to playing baseball on the Lord's Day when most games were played, Billy Sunday, a former big leaguer in his own right, did play for the Tower team one fourth of

⁸⁹Ely Miner, March 11, 1896.

⁹⁰Ely Iron Home, August 3, 1888, August 27, 1889; Ely Times, January 12, 1892, August 28, 1891, June 15, 1894; Ely Miner, April 1, 1896; Vermilion Iron Journal, October 20, 1887, November 17, 1887, April 19, 1888.

⁹¹Vermilion Iron Journal, January 1, 1891.

⁹²Statement by John Somrock, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

⁹³Ely Iron Home, July 24, 1888, and Ely Miner, June 15, 1898.

July.⁹⁴

Other outdoor activities included foot races, firemen's tournaments, and skating in the winter. Boxing and wrestling, especially the Cornish type, was limited primarily to the tough element in the area and they were of a professional nature with purses usually put up for the winner.⁹⁵

Game animals and fish were plentiful. In the very early days no game laws existed and much hunting and fishing for both fun and profit was done. To catch thirty or thirty-five pound northern pike was no special feat, and the moose and deer were so plentiful that fences had to be built to keep them out of the gardens.⁹⁶ Many photographs of wildlife on the streets of Ely exist, and at one time a team of moose was even employed to pull a sleigh.⁹⁷

Much of the leisure time was taken up in club and organizational activities. Fraternal organizations such as the Knights of Pythias, Good Templars, Knights of Macabees, and Odd Fellows were formed early, and societies for fellowship and welfare were numerous by 1900. Numbered among the latter were the Finnish Temperance Union, Scandinavian Union, Austrian Society, Library and Literature Society, Scandinavian Aid and Fellowship Society, Ash Barrel Club, Soudan Temple of Honor,

⁹⁴Statements by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

⁹⁵Ely Iron Home, April 3, 1888, and Vermilion Iron Journal, March 1, 1888.

⁹⁶Statements by Charles Larson, personal interview, July 6, 1963.

⁹⁷Lee Brownell Collections, Ely, Minnesota.

Knights of Sherwood Forest, Loyal Temperance Legion, Young Men's Social Club, and the Royal Adelphi Club.⁹⁸ Politics, though seemingly ruled with an iron hand by the mining companies, also led to the formation of clubs. Almost without exception people will talk about the undue pressure that was often exerted on the miners to make sure that they voted the right way. Whether people were told directly how to vote is not known, but it seems that if a worker wanted a job badly enough, it was a good idea for him to ask for the right ballot at the election. Split ballots did not exist then, and with many of the mining men serving as election judges and officials, it was easy for them to keep an eye on the miners. The fact that the mining men were primarily Republicans and that the newspapers were strong mining company boosters probably explained the fact that most of the clubs that were noted in the papers were Republican.⁹⁹

Books were rare, and most of the reading was done in the newspapers. Newspapers, magazines, and popular dime novels could be purchased at some of the stores. Many of the young boys were employed as carriers for the St. Paul Globe, the St. Paul Dispatch, the Chicago Journal, the Minneapolis Journal, the Minneapolis Tribune, and the Daily Inter-Ocean.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Ely Iron Home, January 15, 1889, December 10, 1889, December 17, 1889; Ely Times, February 6, 1891, March 10, 1891, July 31, 1891, September 23, 1892, March 2, 1894, January 3, 1896; Vermilion Iron Journal, October 6, 1887, October 20, 1887, May 1, 1888, August 2, 1888, January 31, 1889.

⁹⁹Statements by Edith Ellefsen, personal interview, July 8, 1963.

¹⁰⁰Statements by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

Despite the fact that many of the early Vermilion citizens were just lately removed from the old country and could possibly not even speak English, national holidays were always observed. The Fourth of July was the holiday of the year, and it was a day of celebration from dawn to late at night. Newspapers carried notices of the planned festivities for weeks before the big day arrived. A typical Fourth of July saw the streets decorated and a full program of activities. July 4, 1889, was no exception and the celebration in Tower is a splendid example of what the people did on that day. Arches made from pine trees, and booths decorated with pine trees and pine boughs lined the streets. The day started with the firing of a 113 gun salute. Two parades followed, a comical parade at 6:00 and a procession with bands, fraternal orders, and individual units. All of the bands marched in full dress, as did those organizations that had special attire. A reading of the Declaration of Independence and speeches followed the procession. Late in the morning a baseball game was played, with races and another baseball game slated for the afternoon's activities. An Indian pow-wow went on all day, and a grand ball topped off the day's activities.¹⁰¹

H. LAWLESSNESS

Lawlessness existed in all of the frontier mining communities and the Vermilion was no exception. Often times this is an unpleasant part of an area's past, but it too is an important feature of the living

¹⁰¹Vermilion Iron Journal, June 27, 1889.

conditions. Much of the vice and corruption was promoted by a "tough element" that made it a practice of moving from place to place as new cities developed. Eventually the law "caught up" and the toughs moved on. Such was the case on the Vermilion and many of the lawless breed moved on by 1900. Much of the credit for cleaning up the Vermilion should go to the local newspapers which waged a continual battle against this element.

From the many newspaper accounts of lawless activity, it must be concluded that saloons and drink were contributing factors to much of the trouble. Saloons could be very respectable places, but such, it seems, was not the case with most of those that existed on the early Vermilion. The saloons were the homes of most of the "sharpies," toughs, and gamblers that found a home in early Tower or Ely. Much of the pay of the hard-working people would be quickly lost in these places, and what they managed to save might be taken from them by one of the toughs as they walked home on the poorly lit streets. Many of the places were really dives, and shootings, knifings, and fights were very common. Most of the real dens of iniquity were forced to exist outside the city limits, and under the guise of dance halls, they were really houses of prostitution. A few of the most notorious ones were Kelly's near the river in Tower and the "shop across the swamp" in Ely.¹⁰² Court records show that these places were a good source of income for the city of Ely,

¹⁰²Vermilion Iron Journal, February 28, 1889, and Ely Miner, October 10, 1899.

however, since the people were picked up monthly with the resulting fine or forfeited bail adding to the coffers of the city.¹⁰³ One of the really unique dens made its appearance on Shagawa Lake in 1888, but it was quickly roasted in the usual manner by the Ely Iron Home on July 17:

. . . some indecent, ungodly cuss has erected a floating house . . . and the vulgar, profane language of its brazen-faced harlots, drive decency from their midst. . . we predict that if the captain doesn't set sail and get his vessel into some less public port, he will wake up some fine morning and find that there is not enough left of crew and craft to wad a gum on. Move out.

Move on they did, but the number that arrived almost daily made up for those that left or were forced to leave. "Scarcely a day goes by," said the Ely Iron Home on August 13, 1889, "that Marshall Hopperton does not have a batch to escort to the train." The many burglaries and cases of highway robbery were usually attributed to this element of toughs.

Although the toughs were driven out after a short period of time, it seemed that some of the lawlessness had already crept into the decent ranks, and this was to be a source of trouble throughout the years before 1900. Many people carried revolvers, and many people became adept at using the knife. The Finns were especially noted for the use of their "pukka" knives, but generally the knives were used to slash rather than to kill.¹⁰⁴ The following newspaper account seems to be good

¹⁰³Statement by John Somrock, personal interview, July 14, 1963, and Ely Iron Home, August 14, 1888.

¹⁰⁴Statements by Edith Ellefsen, personal interview, July 8, 1963.

example of the many that appeared:

Jake Weiss' saloon last Saturday afternoon, was the scene of a stabbing affray of the true Finlander style. . . . and knives were drawn all around after a few more cuts and slashes . . . the marshall and night watchman appeared on the scene and jugged the whole gang.¹⁰⁵

Although the knife was used to slash rather than to kill, murders happened far too frequently. The pattern was always pretty much the same, for regardless of whether the knifings happened in the locations or in the saloons, they were usually preceded by a drinking session, and the participants were pretty far into a state of intoxication.

The indiscriminate firing of revolvers added greatly to the general appearance of lawlessness. The very first occupant of the city jail was a man arrested for firing a revolver in the city limits.¹⁰⁶ Pay day at the mines or the return of the lumberjacks from the woods were times when God-fearing people attended to business at home.¹⁰⁷ When murders were committed, prisoners were often hustled out of town for fear of lynching. Although no cases of lynching were ever reported, on one occasion a mob of several hundred men gathered at the Ely depot to meet the incoming train which was to bring a man acquitted in Duluth of the murder of a man in Ely. Fortunately, the man did not arrive, much to the relief of the local law officers.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵Ely Iron Home, April 9, 1889.

¹⁰⁶Ely Iron Home, July 31, 1888.

¹⁰⁷Statement by Edith Ellefsen, personal interview, July 8, 1963.

¹⁰⁸Ely Times, March 3, 1893.

The illegal sale of liquor also caused some problems. It was quite common for boarding houses to purchase kegs of beer which they would tap, bottle in quarts, and then sell to the boarders. These salesmen, known as "blind pigs," were very active, and they were a great concern to local law officers.¹⁰⁹ Liquor was sold in this manner to such an extent that one of the law officers in Tower reported that the "blind pigs" used three car loads of beer to every one used by the licensed saloons.¹¹⁰ Another common violation was the selling of liquor to the Indians, a federal government offense.

Once the game laws came, many of the residents had trouble adjusting to the laws and to the game wardens. This was especially true during the periods when the mines were shut down for short periods, since people would rely on game for food.¹¹¹

Cock-fighting held a fascination for some of the most prominent people in the two areas. "The Columbia" in Tower and the boat house in Ely were the scenes of many of these bloody battles.¹¹²

Lawlessness, with many of its names and characters seemingly lifted from the pages of fiction, gave a somewhat romantic nature to the

¹⁰⁹Statements by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

¹¹⁰Vermilion Iron Journal, September 5, 1889.

¹¹¹Statements by Charles Larson, personal interview, July 6, 1963, and Ely Miner, July 31, 1895.

¹¹²Statements by John Pearson and Charles Larson, personal interviews, July 6, 11, 1963.

Vermilion. Every mining community supposedly had its "Last Chance" saloon and the Vermilion was no exception. In addition, the names of the "Bucket of Blood" saloon, "Two-fingered Matt," "Poker Chip Casey," and "Faro Mike" added color to the scene.¹¹³ To the law abiding citizens, however, all of this was probably too real.

¹¹³ Statements by John Somrock and Anna Colberg, personal interviews, July 11, 1963, and Vermilion Iron Journal, May 31, 1888.

CHAPTER IV

WORKING CONDITIONS ON THE EARLY VERMILION

Working conditions on the early Vermilion were not always the best, but discounting the physical dangers, they may not have been any worse than in other sections of the country. This was an era when capital was dominant, and if unions existed at all, they were in the formative stages. The influence of the companies in the worker's private life and the lack of respect for the worker was not peculiar to this area alone, so to say that conditions on the Vermilion were especially bad might or might not be an exaggeration. Without entering into the capital-labor dispute, an attempt will be made to state the facts to the extent to which they were available to the writer.

A. THE MINES

Any statement about the early working conditions in the Vermilion mines, or the influence that mining companies had on the lives of the miners, is likely to be challenged by one group or another. It is very difficult to determine the authenticity of remarks about conditions made by either group, since both labor and capital would be extremely biased about their own particular position. Nothing much has ever been written about the working conditions of the Vermilion Range. About the only written material that exists can be found in the newspapers, and they were known to be extremely biased in favor of the mining companies. The other side of the picture can be seen only from the information which is

supposedly common knowledge among the people whose fathers and grand-fathers worked in the mines during this era.

Before the turn of the century the principal producers of iron ore on the Vermilion were the Minnesota mine at Soudan, and the Chandler, the Pioneer, and the Zenith at Ely. The Sibley and the Savoy at Ely started producing as early as 1899, but neither was as large as the other four. All of the mines producing in 1892 were consolidated under the Minnesota Iron Company that year, and in the late 1890's many came under the control of the Oliver Iron Mining Company, a division of the United States Steel Corporation.¹

The earliest mining in both areas was open pit mining, but with the sinking of underground shafts, different methods in Soudan and Ely were employed. Due to the particular structure of the rock, the Minnesota employed what is known as longitudinal back stopping while the Ely mines employed the caving system. A description of the two methods need not concern us here, but it should be noted that the rock formations differed greatly in the two areas, which made mining in the Minnesota much safer. The ore in the Minnesota is found in a very hard rock and dangers of cave-ins were not nearly so great as they were in Ely where the rock was more broken and subject to crumbling. As a result the mines at Ely had to use much more timber and lumber to bolster cave walls, while the natural rock served as walls in the Minnesota at Soudan. Both mines operated the year around, with the ore stock piled

¹Charles E. Ellis, Iron Ranges of Minnesota (Virginia, Minnesota: Virginia Enterprise, 1909), no page numbers.

in the winter for spring shipment.²

The equipment used in the early mines was of a very primitive nature if judged by today's standards. Hand tools were used, and what power was needed was supplied by steam or mules. Steam was used to lift cages and to hoist ore, and mules were used to pull tram cars which hauled the ore to the hoisting area. Picks, shovels, and a wheelbarrow were all the equipment required by the common miner. Drillers worked in pairs, with one man holding the drill and the other swinging the sledge. Blasting was confined to a great extent to those who knew the business.³

Standard dress consisted of high boots, overalls, and a sealskin hat. Water was not so great a problem on the upper level so the hob-nailed leather boots, as compared to today's rubber boots, sufficed. The temperatures are very consistent in the mines, so overalls and overall jackets were sufficient to keep the miners comfortable. Miners wore sealskin hats with candle holders above the front brim. Candles were the main source of light, and candle holders were of the type that could be attached to the cap or inserted into a crevice or timber by means of a long, pointed end.⁴ Upon visiting the mine today, the non-miner will find a modern well-lighted mine with safety precautions at every turn. Still it leaves one with a strange and eerie feeling when one first sets

²Ibid.

³Statements by Ronald Morcom, Arthur Knutson, and Charles Larson, personal interviews, July 2, 16, 15, 1963.

⁴Statements by Arthur Knutson and Charles Larson, personal interviews, July 2, 6, 1963, and Lee Brownell Collections, Ely, Minnesota.

foot into the mine itself. It is interesting, therefore, to note the description of the early mines as viewed by a non-miner.

. . . you leave the light of day behind, as darkness is supreme. By the light of your candle you dispel the enshrouding gloom which your eyes become accustomed to as you go deeper into the immediate depths. After going down a series of ladders, you reach the first level, or station, and there a sight meets your gaze that is new and extremely novel, if you have never witnessed such a scene before. Stretching out in the distance is a yawning tunnel, with its black rugged walls of iron that seem to hold you enshrouded within its cheerless embrace, and which is lighted up at intervals by a tallow candle that sends its flickering glare about a small space, but whose tiny spark can be seen in the distance like the flame of a glow worm in the darkness. You stand almost in awe at the sight. Here, deep in the bowels of the earth where the quietness is broken only by the dripping of an occasional drop of water, or the rumble of a tram car as it suddenly whirls past you with its load of mineral wealth Wending your course through passage after passage, going from crosscut into drift, raising yourself into sub-levels that stretch round and around this space of ground and extending one above the other, you come upon the red-coated miner with his ever clanking pick, the drillers striking with unwearying strength the long iron bar that is held in the hands of another who turns it in a new position for added effect, and which eventually leaves an opening for the insertion of powder that loosens the ground for the shovelers. Here again, are little knots of men taking out the old and broken timbers which have been smashed by the thousands of tons of ground that rests upon it, and which is being replaced by new and substantial ones that will insure as much as possible the safety of the mine.⁵

Without a doubt the poor lighting afforded by the candles was a cause of numerous accidents and deaths. The hazards of open shafts, cave-ins, and falling rock were often not discernible in the semi-darkness. Dangers that existed were often not discovered until it was too late. Cave-ins in the Ely mines were frequent because of the rock structure, and in the Soudan mine, where mining was done in cave-like rooms, falling rock was a constant cause of injury and death according

⁵Ely Times, January 30, 1891.

to newspaper reports. What effect the bad air had on the general working conditions of the miners has not been determined, but it seems to be an accepted fact today that fresh air adds greatly to the efficiency and safety of workers. Water was not such a great problem unless the pumps broke down, and then the mines would normally be closed down temporarily. Safety precautions such as those that exist today were unknown, and generally the miners had to learn the hard way, if they lived.⁶

Accidents and deaths were numerous during those early days, and from the number of lives lost as reported by the newspapers, it would seem that little value was placed on the life of the worker. Many times these people had no one who would be very concerned about what happened to them. They had no relatives here, and thus not much clamor was raised about another lost life. The men who were killed would often be placed in a rough-box, still dressed in their miner's hat, overalls, and boots, and buried. In later years many of these bodies were uncovered on the site of the old cemetery.⁷ Later on, when more and more families came, it became quite customary to sue the mining company for damages in the case of death or injury, and often the workers were awarded large sums of money by the courts. Overly eager attorneys, those which we might call "ambulance chasers" today, were prevalent and they often made off with the greater part of the settlements.⁸

⁶Statements by Charles Larson, personal interview, July 6, 1963.

⁷Statements by Edith Ellefsen, personal interview, July 8, 1963.

⁸Statements by Charles Larson, personal interview, July 6, 1963.

The newspapers usually printed short news items about serious injuries or deaths in the mines. These often contained a somewhat detailed description of the accident, and sometimes the name of the person was not even included, either because it was not known or maybe because it just was not that important. One of these items appeared in the September 2, 1892, issue of the Ely Iron Home: "There have been several accidents at the Chandler mine this week, none fatal however, excepting one, an Austrian, whose name we did not learn, being killed." If the newspaper accounts can be considered accurate, it should be noted, however, that some of the accidents related were decidedly the result of carelessness.⁹ It is interesting to note that the Ely Times on January 3, 1896, reported that one of the prominent mining captains at the Chandler, in an interview with the editor, "informed us that during the year just closed [1895] there had not been a fatal accident at that mine and none of any kind where the injury was at all serious. This is a most excellent showing and cannot all be attributed to good luck and is no doubt due to good management and the employment of adequate safety appliances." It becomes a bit difficult to understand this statement, however, when the same paper reported fatal accidents in the Chandler during that year in the May 10, May 17, and June 21 issues, and serious injuries in the February 22, June 14, and November 15 issues. No effort has been made to determine the exact number of injuries or deaths in any particular period, but it is interesting to note that the eighth fatal

⁹Ely Iron Home, June 18, 1889, and Ely Times, May 20, 1896.

accident at the Chandler was reported as early as November of 1889.¹⁰

That the mining men and the newspapers were not in sympathy with the movements to improve working conditions can be seen from two separate incidents. In 1895 there was considerable agitation for the creation of a state inspector of mines. The reaction of one of the top Ely mining officials was that this was a waste of money and that "any man who is competent to decide what is the proper way to work a mine can get more money to manage a mine than the state will pay."¹¹ From all indications this seems to have been a typical reaction on the part of mining officials in this era. Later, of course, things were to change considerably when the mining companies discovered that improved working conditions made for better workers. A second incident occurred in 1889 when there was much talk about the number of lives lost. A newspaper editorial came out with the following comments:

The frequent loss of life in mines brings forth from chronic fault finders a great howl about what the iron companies should be made to do. The fact is most of our companies use great precaution to prevent accidents and usually it is the carelessness of the miner that causes the calamity. . . . If the workmen will not use every precaution to ensure their own safety, the mere fact of certain laws being on the statute-book will not help them.¹²

From the very beginning the miners were ruled by an iron hand of the mining company. Bosses were exceedingly tough, and they were men who acted first and asked questions later. Men were hired with few questions asked, and firing was done the same way. This made for no

¹⁰Ely Iron Home, November 18, 1889.

¹¹Ely Times, February 15, 1895.

¹²Vermilion Iron Journal, October 22, 1889.

particular problem, however, as jobs were plentiful and one could always go to work at another mine.¹³ A rigid code of written rules existed, and men were expected to observe these as well as the many unwritten rules. Although mining captains expressed a certain degree of interest in the welfare of the early miners, their heart was with the company and their activities were directed toward the good of the company.¹⁴ Conditions were not exactly hell in the mines as has so often been said, but at least on one occasion, rumor had it that the devil himself was down in the Chandler! Captain Pengilly, prominent early mining captain at the Chandler mine, was quick to squelch the rumor by telling the men that the devil was dead, and that had he seen the gentlemen down there, he should have assigned him a number and put him to work!¹⁵

Unions and union activity was strictly forbidden among the miners. Captain Morcom, bringing many of the rules and regulations of the iron mines in Michigan with him, incorporated this rule into the first code at the Minnesota mine in Soudan.¹⁶ As far as can be ascertained, only one real attempt at union organization was made before 1900, and that in 1896. Robert Askew, president of the Northern Mineral Mine Workers Progressive Union, made an attempt to sign up members in both Soudan and Ely. Mining company officials quickly fought this by

¹³Statements by Charles Larson, personal interview, July 6, 1963.

¹⁴Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 208.

¹⁵Ely Times, January 10, 1896.

¹⁶Bridges, Iron Millionaire, pp. 207-208.

attending the meetings and explaining that no real need for a union existed on the Vermilion because of the high wages and excellent rapport between workers and company. The officials also pointed out that the main purpose in recruiting men for the union was that the union was interested only in the \$1.15 fee for joining.¹⁷ The union on the other hand, argued that the union would improve conditions. Listed on their platform were the following items: an 8-hour day, choice of own physician, semi-monthly pay days, mine inspectors chosen by ballot, and enforcement of employer's liability laws.¹⁸ Probably the factor that had the most influence in making up the minds of the miners was the notice posted in the Minnesota mine that all union members would be dismissed from their jobs.¹⁹ When a miner was fired for this reason at the Minnesota, the general manager of the Minnesota Iron Company at Soudan was arrested. At the subsequent trial he was acquitted, but it is interesting to note the reaction when he was asked about the posted notices. He merely looked at his attorney, and the attorney replied for him that the notices referred to an entirely different matter.²⁰ This largely ended the union activities for this period of time.

There seems to be a difference of opinion on the idea of "divide and control" as it pertained to the miners. This was the method whereby

¹⁷Ely Times, March 17, 1896.

¹⁸Ely Miner, March 25, 1896.

¹⁹Ibid., March 27, 1896.

²⁰Ibid., April 20, 1896.

men of different nationalities would work together on a job. It seems that the worker group felt that this was a means of management for maintaining better control over the men.²¹ Another opinion expressed was that this was done by the mining companies so that the men might mix and learn from each other.²² Whatever the reason, it did lead to many bilingualists among the miners.²³

The mining companies were lenient in granting time off for funerals or for holidays, but all of these absences would be deducted from the men's time.²⁴ Even on election day the men were given a chance to vote, and often they were given half a day preceding Christmas or New Years Day. Whether or not they were deducted time for these has not been determined.²⁵

Wages, although low, did not seem to be a real source of trouble. The average wages paid the miners in 1892 was \$1.81 per day, and by 1899 they had risen to an average of \$2.00 per day with miners receiving \$2.20, trammers \$2.00, underground laborers \$1.80, and surface laborers \$1.75.²⁶ The initial pay period for a miner came after he had been employed for a period of six weeks, and thereafter he was paid monthly.

²¹Statement by John Somrock, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

²²Statement by Ronald Morcom, personal interview, July 15, 1963.

²³Statement by John Somrock, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

²⁴Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 208.

²⁵Ely Times, December 10, 1889, and Vermilion Iron Journal, December 24, 1890.

²⁶Ely Miner, October 6, 1899.

Deductions for medical care and other indebtedness to the company were made in advance.²⁷

Walkouts, strikes, and riots were infrequent occurrences. Wages were the cause of one brief walkout at the Zenith mine. In March of 1887, reports the Ely Miner of March 10 of that year, wages were unavoidably detained and the miners not paid on time. A walkout followed, but after a reasonable explanation was given, the men returned to work. The biggest riot of the era occurred at the Minnesota mine in 1892, and it was the only one of note. Over 300 Austrian and Italian miners succeeded in shutting down the mine after the company laid off 315 men for failing to show up for work on Corpus Christi Day. These men refused to let others work, and armed with sticks, stones, clubs, and revolvers, they set off a general riot. President Bacon of the Minnesota Iron Company met with some of the leaders, but when their demands for immediate reinstatement, a twenty percent raise, and free oil for the lamps was denied, the riot resumed. Three companies of the state militia were called in, and after twenty-one arrests had been made, work resumed.²⁸ This was not an organized strike, however, and from all available information, none ever occurred during this period.

The mining industry has been the life blood of the Vermilion for many years, but this alone does not put the companies above criticism.

²⁷Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 208, and statements by Charles Larson, personal interview, July 6, 1963.

²⁸Vermilion Iron Journal, June 23, 1892.

On the other hand, lest one feel that the companies were really tyrants, it must be remembered that they are responsible for what the Vermilion is today. Much of what has been recorded here has been verified, but much has come by word of mouth and must be carefully weighed. Whatever the conditions in the mines were on the early Vermilion, it must remain for the reader to form his own opinions on the matter.

B. THE RAILROADS

The construction of the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad was an undertaking that was both difficult and expensive. A contract between the Duluth and Iron Range Railroad Company and Wolf and Company, well known railroad builder in the West, was signed as of June 20, 1883, with completion of the route from Agate Bay to Township 62-15, the Soudan area, scheduled for August 1, 1884.²⁹ The railroad was constructed at a cost of \$1,996,633.04, and the first shipment of ore was made on July 31, 1884, one day before the completion deadline.³⁰ Contracts for the extension to Ely, completed some four years later, were drawn up at a cost of \$36,000 per mile, or a total cost of some \$800,000.³¹

Although the building of the railroad was in itself no great feat of engineering, the terrain encountered was such as had not often been

²⁹Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 186.

³⁰William W. Folwell, A History of Minnesota (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1930), IV, p. 15, and William Dillan, "Our 75th Anniversary," Missabe Iron Ranger, July, 1959, p. 5.

³¹Vermilion Iron Journal, November 17, 1887.

seen before in railroad construction. This thickly wooded area, rising 1,100 feet within the first twelve miles from Agate Bay, was an area of swamps, hills, and streams.³² By July of 1883 more than a thousand men had been put to work to clear the route of trees. Stumps had to be dug out by hand or blasted. All of the work was hand labor with the exception of the teams that pulled the graders and scrapers. Ties had to be hewn from area timber and tamped into the road bed.³³

The construction of the road bed through the swamps made the work very difficult for the men. Here they were required to work in muck up to their knees, with mosquitoes and black flies a constant source of irritation.³⁴ On the extension to Ely, the ballasting in one place required a fill of fifteen feet with the bed settling no less than six feet into the swamp.³⁵ The usual method of supporting the roadbed in the swampy area was to build a special substructure of logs laid transversely to a thickness of three feet and then covered with a ballast of rock.³⁶

Work on the main line was halted late in December of 1883 when the frozen ground made work impossible. Early in April work was resumed, but the weather was still an obstruction to construction. Late storms

³²Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 214.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 217.

³⁵Vermilion Iron Journal, September 27, 1888.

³⁶Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 214.

caused temporary halts and much damage to the road bed, which in turn caused the loss of valuable time and effort. Only the employment of a total force of some 1,400 men working day and night, and a favorable stretch of July weather in 1884 led to the completion on the deadline date.³⁷

Life for the working men on the railroad was not easy, and the constant departure of the men from work made recruitment a never-ending job. Men of all types and descriptions were hired for railroad work, which prompted the Vermilion Iron Journal to write on June 7, 1888: "A genuine tough looking crowd were the railroaders Singular how men who labor so hard can become so negligent of personal appearance and all that goes to make a human being decent." This article made reference to the men working on the Ely extension where some 800 men worked for \$1.75 per day, with wages later being reduced to \$1.50 with the influx of workmen from the Twin Cities. Very few accidents were recorded despite the fact that all of the men were unskilled workers, employed in a variety of jobs from team handling to blasting.³⁸ In writing about the life of the workers on the rail gangs, Bridges gives the following account:

For the life of the railroad gang was hard; it had been hard from the very first mile, and it would be so to the last. Each season brought its special tortures. During the winter the men, camping out in tents along the line, suffered through miserable

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Vermilion Iron Journal, December 15, 1887.

days and nights in the forty-below-zero cold. Now they sweltered in the tamarack bogs, wading knee-deep in muck and swearing purple oaths as they clawed at the bites of blood-sucking flies and mosquitoes.

It took tough men to endure that life, and the men who managed them on the job were tougher still. Bosses of railroad construction gangs in those days were less likely to say 'please' than to enforce their orders with fists and boots.³⁹

Those people who have spent a hot summer day working in the middle of one of northeastern Minnesota's swamps or those who have labored in the forty-below cold may have an idea of what the conditions were like. Add to this the tough bosses, poor wages, and transient labor and the picture becomes somewhat clearer.

C. THE LUMBERING INDUSTRY

Lumbering on a commercial basis on the Vermilion hit its peak in the early 1900's. Much lumber was already shipped to other areas during the 1890's, but in the beginning the lumber industry was closely related to the mining industry. Sawmills were established for two purposes--to provide lumber for building and to provide lumber and timbers for the mines. The logging itself would be done in the winter time, while attention turned to the sawing of logs at the mills in the summer. Once the trees had been felled and trimmed, they would be transported by horse-drawn sled or skidded along an icy road to the nearest water. Here they would lie in wait for the spring thaw and the eventual spring drive. The sawmills were advantageously placed near water, so that logs could be driven by means of connecting lakes and streams to the mill

³⁹Bridges, Iron Millionaire, p. 217.

itself. The rivers provided their own power to move the logs, and once they reached the lake, they would be towed in large "booms" by means of steam driven scows.⁴⁰

To provide timber for the mills, camps were established throughout the area. Life in the lumber camps was rugged, and the lumberjacks were a rough, hardy lot. Quarrels were settled by means of fist or boot, especially when the ever present liquor was consumed in too large amounts. Spring was anxiously looked forward to, for this meant an end of their work and a chance to spend the money they had earned during the long, hard winter.⁴¹ Lumberjacks were always coming and going, many working just long enough to build up a small stake to take to town for a good time. They were noted for their ability to fight with their cork-heeled boots.⁴² A common story has it that the lumber camps always employed three crews, one coming, one working, and one going.⁴³

Life in the camps had its bad points, but on at least one score it was good. The camps had a reputation for feeding well. Good cooks were employed, and the food, although not served with great variety, was well prepared and served in great quantity. Fresh meats and vegetables were shipped in in sufficient quantity, and often meat from game animals

⁴⁰Statements by John Pearson and Charles Larson, personal interviews, July 6, 11, 1963.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Statement by Edith Ellefsen, personal interview, July 8, 1963.

⁴³Statement by Arthur Knutson, personal interview, July 2, 1963.

was served.⁴⁴

For the most part, however, life in the camps was primitive. A typical lumber camp, depending on size of course, consisted of bunk houses, a dining house or "cook camp," a barn for the horses, a warehouse, an office, and a blacksmith shop. The bunkhouse was a very non-permanent structure and extremely cold. Heat was provided by a centrally located stove, but this was not sufficient to keep the cold from coming through the many cracks. Beds were very bad and often infested with lice and bedbugs. Blankets for the bunk type beds were furnished by the company. Entry was made by sliding in from the bottom, and they quickly received the nickname "muzzle loaders." In the "cook camp" the first cook was lord, with the size of the camp determining whether he had a second cook or a third cook. "Cookies" were employed to do the dishes, clean the tables, and scrub the floors, while a "bull cook" did the heavy work, like chopping wood and carrying water. Dishes and cups were generally tin, although sometimes heavy mugs served in place of the tin cups. The barns were under the control of the "barn boss," and it was his duty to take care of the horses. The teamsters slept in their own bunkhouse. The horses, shipped in for the winter work, were often shipped south for the summer. The building that served as an office also served as a bunkhouse for the foremen and time-keepers.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Statements by John Pearson, personal interview, July 11, 1963.

⁴⁵Statements by Arthur Knutson, Charles Larson, and John Pearson, personal interviews, July 2, 6, 11, 1963.

Workers were required to walk great distances, which meant starting for work before it was light. Normally they would not return to camp before dark, and the camp, it would seem, was a pretty welcome sight to them.⁴⁶

Despite the steady turnover of men, there seemed to be few employment problems, but this was probably due to the fact that recruiting agents in the larger cities supplied the lumber industry with a steady flow of men. The agents were paid for each man they sent, and many of those who came were not prepared for the strenuous work, the long hours, and the relatively poor wages.⁴⁷ Wages were paid by the month, with board included, and \$30.00 was considered to be a good salary in the camps.⁴⁸ A "time check" system of payment was frequently used for the lumberjacks. By this method checks were issued for later payment, but the one hardship imposed on the worker was that they could only be discounted at a later date, this resulting in a considerable loss to the worker.⁴⁹

There is no evidence that safety precautions existed or that medical care was provided. If one is to judge from newspaper accounts, accidents in the camps were not so numerous. Those that did occur were generally caused by falling trees. Accidents in the sawmills, where

⁴⁶Statement by Herman Olson, personal interview, July 15, 1963.

⁴⁷Statements by Charles Larson, personal interview, July 6, 1963.

⁴⁸Ely Miner, October 13, 1899.

⁴⁹Ibid.

there was a great deal of machine activity, were more numerous, but not to the extent that they happened in the mines.⁴⁹

⁴⁹Statement by Herman Olson, personal interview, July 15, 1963.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Although the Vermilion was explored as early as 1660, it was not until the gold rush of the 1860's that the first settlers moved into the Vermilion area. The settlers who entered with the gold rush were disillusioned, however, when the reported gold fields did not yield the metal in sufficient quantity to merit mining, and it was not until some twenty years later that the first permanent settlers came into the area. In the early 1880's, with the help of Eastern capital, the Minnesota Iron Company was formed for the purpose of mining the reported iron ore in the area. Through shrewd business moves, land was acquired for mining purposes and for the construction of a railroad. Once this was done, operations began and people moved into the area very quickly. The very first settlers found life on the Vermilion difficult because of the lack of transportation, but with the completion of the railroad, hardships were eased to a considerable extent.

The first twenty years of the development of the Vermilion Range were a period of transition from complete wilderness to civilization that was firmly established. In this remote wilderness area a society of some 5,000 people had developed by 1900 in orderly mining communities linked to civilization by a multi-million dollar railroad system. Four communities--Tower, Soudan, Ely, and Winton--grew into cities and villages that were fairly well developed despite their remoteness. The key to the development was undoubtedly the railroad, for without it this

growth would have been almost impossible.

In addition to providing the transportation necessary for development of the area, the railroad also provided the means for people to move into the area, and people from almost all parts of the world came. People of many races and creeds came to develop a way of life that combined the traditions of the old country with those of a typical American melting pot. The majority of the newcomers were Finnish or Austrian, the latter being people from various areas of Central Europe, but many Englishmen and Scandinavians also settled in the area before 1900. Many of the people found opportunities that enabled them to develop a way of life that was clearly parallel to that in other areas of the United States.

These newly found opportunities were directed toward two areas--community development and self-development. The intense desire to own land encouraged people to save enough money so that they could purchase a small parcel of land as soon as they were able. It was a source of pride to them, and improvements on the land were quickly made. Out of this pride grew communities built around neat homes and well-kept property.

Before communities reached an advanced stage of civilization, however, transportation and utilities had to be improved; churches, schools, and more homes had to be built; businesses developed; proper medical facilities and sanitary conditions encouraged; and law and order established. The people set about this with much enthusiasm if one is to judge from the short time that it took these things to develop, for

the turn of the century saw great progress in all of these areas. It is all the more remarkable that these things did happen despite the poor working conditions of the time, especially when they were accompanied by so many dangers to life and limb. Or were all of these accomplishments made in spite of the working conditions? Might it not be entirely possible that such poor working conditions caused the people to direct their attention to finding satisfaction in other areas?

These questions will probably go unanswered, their resolution not being the purpose of this study. The study was undertaken to determine the living and working conditions of the Vermilion Range before 1900, and thus, it is imperative that we turn our attention to some specific conclusions about life on the pre-1900 Vermilion Range.

The new arrival on the early Vermilion was likely to be one of three different types; namely, a person who came to establish a home, a person who came to make a "quick killing" by whatever means he could, or a person who came to make enough money to improve his existence in the old country. Men from many countries came, and each working group was characterized by certain nationalities. The early miners were Englishmen and Swedes, but they were soon to be replaced by Finns and Austrians. The railroad men were mostly Scandinavians, with Irish, Scotch, and Scandinavians making up the greater part of the early loggers. Despite this conglomeration of nationalities in such a small area, there seemed to be little discrimination because of creed or color. The new arrival might well live among members of his own group in the many locations that developed in the communities. He soon learned the value of

cooperating to build a good society, and this cooperative attitude also led to an attitude of respect for other men. This respect may have developed as a result of the lack of respect shown to the working man by the companies, for outside their work at least they could feel the equal of others.

The new arrival on the Vermilion undoubtedly had a difficult time finding a home when he first entered the region. Houses were not readily available, and existing houses were extremely crowded with almost all families having boarders, some even sleeping these men on two shifts. If the arrival was only a visitor, he still would have difficulty finding a place to stay, but if he was fortunate enough to stay at one of the hotels, he would find his accommodations quite comfortable. Homes were typical of this era in American history, and home life was such that the women of the house and the children had to work hard in the home, for this was their first responsibility.

The early Vermilion citizen took an active part in community affairs--civic, social, or religious. Transportation facilities, with the exception of the railroad, were very poor and the people turned to city government to improve these and other public utilities. Unfortunately, before 1900 the streets, although graded and lined with wooden sidewalks, remained in a deplorable condition. City growth and organization also brought forth demands for fire departments and fire protection. Generally speaking, the Vermilion citizen was fairly well protected from fire, and fires such as those that wiped out other towns and cities did not occur on the Vermilion before 1900. Water was a

problem only in Ely, but this was remedied with the construction of a water works at a very early time. Although the development was more rapid in some areas than in others, the Vermilion resident of 1900 enjoyed the advantages of a well-organized community. Fire protection, good city government, law and order, and a good water supply were available for most of the citizens.

The Vermilion citizen was also very fortunate in that he could easily find the type of service he demanded from the businesses in the community. It seems that the stores were generally able to supply the customer with almost all types of goods, and with some stores specializing in certain items. Competition was no great menace, and possibly only the saloon dealers suffered from this. What little competition there was came primarily from peddlers.

Health, education, and welfare improvements were eagerly sought, and much leisure time, primarily devoted to many cultural, social, and religious activities, was directed towards incorporating these improvements into a lasting society. Boards of health were established in both Tower and Ely, and although sanitation still remained a problem, the boards were possibly responsible for preventing the outbreak of an epidemic of major proportions during this time. Dentists visited the towns frequently, and hospitals were constructed in Soudan, Ely, and Winton. The educational system that developed, despite meager beginnings, seems to have been good. Attendance was a real problem, but despite this, the schools were crowded. Churches were constructed and the religious needs of the people were adequately cared for. Much of

the religious activity centered around societies and organizations.

Leisure time was at a premium for the early Vermilion resident, but for the time that was available, attention was most often directed toward activities that were provided by nature or those provided by the people themselves. The lakes were used in both summer and winter as a means of recreation, but among the recreational activities, baseball was the one sport that held the interest of the greatest number of people, both as participants and spectators. Cultural activities, especially music and drama, since they were a carry over from the old country, were not forgotten and performances by both amateur and professional groups could be seen at the opera houses. Holidays were generally observed, with the Fourth of July being the highlight of the year.

The early Vermilion arrival found that some lawlessness existed. Gambling and prostitution flourished amidst a citizenry that was adept at handling private matters with fist, revolver, or knife. There was little evidence of good law enforcement, but toward the end of the century much improvement had been made.

Despite the advances made in living conditions, for a fairly high standard of living seems to have been developed by 1900, working conditions for the early Vermilion citizen were not good. Hours were long, wages were low and conditions unsafe for the miner. Attempts at organization were quickly squelched. For the loggers and railroad men, many of the same conditions existed, although the work was not as dangerous. For them, however, living conditions on the job left much to be desired.

In addition to these specific conclusions, there seem to be

several general conclusions one might draw about life on the early Vermilion. Although living conditions were hard, they were probably not any worse than in other parts of our country. This was especially true once the railroad moved into the area, and once law enforcement was established. These people were a hardy lot though, and they seemed to appreciate the fact that lives as citizens in a free society were much improved over what they had known before, and as such they were able to withstand hardships and working conditions as they existed at the time.

A second general conclusion is that working conditions on the Vermilion were bad mostly because of the dangers involved. The capital-labor relationship was not good, but most important in making for poor conditions was the complete disregard for safety precautions which seems to indicate a lack of respect for the life of the worker. Capital might argue and say that conditions were as good as could be provided, and this may be true, but the fact remains that the working conditions were not desirable.

What the future of the Vermilion holds cannot be ascertained with a great deal of certainty. Today only one mine remains in operation and the greater part of the industries of the early Vermilion no longer exist. Much of the rich Vermilion ore, with its high iron content, still exists, but competition from other mining areas and from taconite have made the expensive underground mining impractical at the moment. With the exception of a few small companies, the lumbering industry also departed from the area once the seemingly endless virgin forests were harvested. The passing of the greater part of these two industries has

not, however, put an end to the society that was the counterpart of the industries. There are still some 8,000 people on the Vermilion today, working wherever work is to be found. Every indication points to some lean times on the Vermilion, and hardships may well face those who elect to stay. Hardship, however, is the corner stone of the Vermilion foundation, and that foundation, built in the infancy of the Vermilion, was the result of an indomitable spirit that refused to yield to difficulties that faced the early pioneer. So also, the society today will undoubtedly live on.

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