

SHAPED BY RAILS

A century ago the Itasca County landscape was being dramatically transformed from a forest wilderness into tree stumps, pastures, and fields. Logging companies bought much of the timbered acreage and methodically cleared the landscape of white pine, red pine, and other commercially valuable trees, then sold the land to settlers for prospective agricultural use.

The largest of the logging companies was the Itasca Lumber Company, which was established in 1887 by William T. Joyce of Muskegon, Michigan, and Healy C. Akeley of Minneapolis. Logs were customarily cut during the winter, piled up on stream banks and floated downstream via tributaries to the Mississippi River and on to mills located primarily in Minneapolis. But as logging operations pushed farther north, approaching the continental divide that traverses Itasca County, stream flow was inadequate for that method of logging. So in 1890 the Itasca Lumber Company began constructing a railroad northward from Cohasset for the purpose of transporting logs to the Mississippi. By 1897 this rail line extended about 18 miles north, winding around hills, lakes and wetlands. The manager of the Itasca Lumber Company, J. P. Sims, sought to acquire better facilities on the Mississippi in Cohasset, but was unable to reach an agreement, so he abruptly ordered operations moved to Deer River and began constructing a parallel route. Perhaps the more important reason for moving operations to Deer River, however, was the fact that it was more accessible to northern and western Itasca County where substantial stands of timber waited to be harvested. The land surface was relatively level north of Deer River and potential construction costs were assumed to be much less than extending the Cohasset line farther into a very hilly area.

Over the next few years construction of the rail line progressed steadily northward from Deer River keeping just ahead of logging operations as timber supplies were depleted and new timber stands needed to be accessed. The main line extended about 17 miles north to Jessie Junction (now Alder, about three miles south of Marcell) where the line split, one branch continuing north toward Marcell, Bigfork, Effie, and Craig on the Bigfork River, which was reached in 1912. The other branch extended west from Jessie Junction to "Coal Dock" (later Mack), on to Jessie Lake, along the east side of the lake to the Jessie Lake station near the north end of the lake, then on to Spring Lake, Bass lake and Stanley (now Wirt). A short spur from Stanley to Pomeroy was constructed in 1916, giving access to the Bigfork River. Reaching the Bigfork River was important because Itasca County logs could then be floated north down the Bigfork and Rainy rivers, across Lake of the Woods to Kenora, then east by rail to Montreal and on to Europe or west to the Prairie Provinces.

Branching out from the main rail line were many spur lines, constructed to make access to timber easier. Spur lines might be used for several years, then abandoned as the timber supply was exhausted. Ties were often laid out on frozen ground in winter without

proper ballast. As a result, tracks would buckle under the weight of a full load during the spring thaw, and trains were at risk of tumbling over. The remains of one locomotive still lie beneath the mud north of Cohasset. Derailments and accidents were not uncommon. The most serious accident occurred in March 1907 with a head-on collision between north and southbound trains near Lake Jessie. Both the conductor and engineer of the heavily loaded southbound train were killed.

Stations were erected at convenient locations along the rail line and small communities sprang to life to serve the nearby population. Some of these communities survive to the present day, but most do not. Now, for example, there is little evidence that Jessie Junction was once a bustling community, headquarters for section crews, with a boarding house, grocery store and various storage buildings. At the crossing of Turtle River, about a mile and a half west of Jessie Junction, was a stop for locomotives to take on water, and further west the locomotive fuel supply was stored at Coal Dock. The name was changed from Coal Dock to Mack in 1912 when a post office was established there. Mack at one time had a railroad station, general store, lunch room, post office, bunk houses for a logging camp, a CCC camp nearby, and as many as 100 homesteaders in the area. Nothing remains now but a few building foundations, most of which have been covered over during recent reconstruction of state highway 6. The death knell for Mack began about 1915 when the newly constructed Deer River - Northome road intersected with the Jessie Lake - Marcell road about three miles north of Mack. This intersection became known as Hoover's Corner (later Hayslip's Corner) and much of the local commerce began to shift there. When the railroad closed down in 1932 and the post office moved to Hayslip's corner in 1938, Mack was no more. About a year later the post office was renamed Talmoon.

According to the June 28, 1939 issue of the Herald-Review, the word Talmoon is a phonetic spelling of the Swedish colloquial expression Tal Moen, which means a clearing in the woods, especially a pine woods. Swedish families on and near Little Turtle Lake had one or two cows each and would bring them to graze on the grassy knoll just south of the crossroads. This common gathering place thus inspired the unique name of this community - the only Talmoon in the entire nation. Some say that the citizens preferred a pastoral image to overcome the corner's past reputation. Each community, existing or departed, on or near the rail line, has its own story - but more on that later.

In order to serve the potential year-round population, the Itasca Lumber Company railway needed to be licensed by the state and meet the requirements of being a common carrier. So the Minneapolis and Rainy River Railway (known as the M & R) was incorporated separately from, but still owned by, the Itasca Lumber Company. The name reflected its grand ambitions of stretching from the state's economic center to the Canadian border, taking a cue from its larger and successful role model, the Duluth and Winnipeg Railroad. At one time M & R manager Sims sought to construct a facility in Deer River to facilitate the transfer of goods between the two rail lines. When Sims request was rebuffed, he

pointed out that the M & R might not be as long, but it was just as wide as the D & W. That apparently persuaded them to do business with the M & R and Sim's request was promptly attended to.

At the peak of operations in 1911, the M & R had eleven locomotives, 272 log (Russell) cars, 92 flat cars, eight box cars, four passenger cars and four miscellaneous cars. By 1914 the railroad had a surplus of equipment and began to sell some rolling stock. At its peak, the railroad ran four trains a day each way. By 1918 service had been cut back to two trains a day from Deer River to Alder - one following the west branch, and one following the east (north) branch. By 1924 all logging cars were gone and service was available only three days a week. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday the train ran up and back on one branch and on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday it ran up and back on the other. After several years of losing money, and the depression smothering economic activity, the M & R, as a common carrier, petitioned the state Railroad and Warehouse Commission in early 1932 to abandon its remaining 63 miles of track. The request was granted about six months later and the rails and remaining equipment were promptly removed and sold for scrap.

Until about 1915, the railroad was the primary means of transportation into central and northern Itasca County, at which time serious road building was just getting underway. The Deer River - Northome road had been authorized by the county and was under construction. This route was surveyed straight north from Deer River along the section lines as far as Jessie Lake, then taking a one-mile jog to the east, continuing north into what later became Koochiching county, then straight west to Northome. Straight line routes were preferred in road construction because they did not dissect property and cause inconvenience to owners. The Deer River - Northome route followed very closely the present route of State Highways 6 and 1. The main construction obstacle lay just north of Deer River, and was known as the "big bog", which was difficult to traverse in the Spring or after rainfall. A reporter from the Grand Rapids Herald-Review, on an expedition to survey economic development in outlying areas of the county in 1914 wrote: "When one inquires at Deer River whether it is possible to drive to Jessie Lake, the answers received are varied. Some say that it is not safe to start over the Big Bog, especially after a rain. The livery man at Deer River said that the bog is about eight miles wide and could be difficult to cross, but the first four and a half miles before reaching the bog were quite passable." Ten miles of Highway 6 were later relocated up to two miles west, bypassing much of the bog. The M & R had conquered the bog a few years earlier. The roadbed was constantly sinking and thousands of huge logs and countless trainloads of sand and gravel were hauled in for fill. It was finally necessary to build a trestle with deep pilings, the costs of which undoubtedly exceeded by far the earlier estimates. The bog was thereafter referred to as "the big sink hole".

Building corduroy roads was a simple and practical way to traverse wet areas, though the resulting ride was slow and uncomfortable. Corduroy roads were so called because they

resembled the small ridges in the fabric of that name. Small trees were cut and laid across the roadway. These were about 16 feet long (permitting two vehicle widths and room for passing) and 4 to 8 inches in diameter. The roughness in riding over the logs was somewhat overcome by adding a layer of dirt on top of the logs. In difficult situations it might be necessary to lay poles lengthwise first, over which the shorter timbers were placed. These roads, according to the Herald-Review of September 12, 1946, "would shake rigs and people to the extent of damage and great discomfort."

The Itasca Lumber Company not only owned a great deal of property, but set about acquiring even more from other logging companies. At one time the ILC owned some 60,000 acres of cutover land. The land was classified for its agricultural potential and an intensive campaign to induce settlers was undertaken. They expected a rush of land-hungry settlers after the timber was cleared from the land, then hoped to serve the settlers' needs for supplies and access to markets. This could assure the ongoing profitability of the M & R. after the great pine forest was gone. Immigrants and others eagerly bought the land and began erecting homes, removing stumps, growing hay, oats, potatoes, and vegetables, and keeping a cow or two for milk and several chickens for eggs. The principal market for the produce was the nearby lumber camps whose men and horses consumed large quantities of food. At its peak the ILC operated 15 to 20 lumber camps, each averaging about 100 men - and there were smaller loggers in the area as well.

Whereas most logging companies farther south operated only during the winter months, transport by rail permitted year-round logging - in fact required it in order to give a reasonable return on investment. This, in turn, accelerated the rate of tree depletion. ILC logging camps were known for their abundant good food which was important in attracting and keeping competent lumberjacks. In the early years fresh meat for the camps was supplied by hunting moose. As the forest was depleted, however, the moose were eradicated. The cutover lands, however, provided abundant habitat for a wide variety of native vegetation, the numbers of deer increased rapidly, and venison appeared more frequently on the table at lumber camps. Procuring and keeping fresh meat during the summer, however, was a problem. Until electricity and refrigeration arrived at Lake Jessie after World War II it was seldom that anyone had fresh meat during the summer because there was no way to keep it from spoiling. Generally speaking, food during the summer was not very appealing. Root vegetables and canned goods were kept in deep cellars where year-round temperatures were about 45 degrees. Cold spring water, where available, was best for keeping perishables - especially milk - and springs were a particular attraction around Jessie and Spring Lakes. Anyone who owned such a spring had a prized possession. Ice was cut from the lake during winter and packed in sawdust for use in home ice boxes. Fresh meat, however, would not keep satisfactorily under any of these conditions. Providing fresh meat during the summer to ravenous lumberjacks was a special problem. So instead of the usual salted, smoked or dried meats, the Itasca Lumber company secured well seasoned processed meats for its hard working crews, i.e. sausage - especially liver sausage, which was relatively cheap as well as nutritious. The

sausage was delivered by the M & R, thus its nickname, the “gut and liver” line. With some disdain, lumberjacks are reported to have announced the train’s arrival by declaring “here comes the gut and liver.”

While white and red pine were the species preferred by loggers, all species were utilized - but not sent down the river because they became waterlogged and would sink before arriving at the mills hundreds of miles downstream. Logs less than about six inches in diameter were used for corduroy roads, tamarack being preferred. Cedar, when available, was used for local building construction. Other logs were cut into lumber at the saw mill in Deer River and shipped out on the D&W. Birch, oak, and maple were preferred for firewood. The Itasca Lumber Company not only logged its own timber, but contracted with other companies to log their trees as well. Likewise, the M & R hauled timber not only for the ILC, but for anyone else who would pay the freight.

Life on the frontier was complicated by poor access. Before the railroad arrived at Jessie Lake shortly after 1900, access was over foot trails that wandered through the woods, by oxen pulling wagons over “tote roads” which wound around trees and swamps, or by canoes that could be dragged over rapids and shallow areas. Most, however, chose to travel by foot - even after the train arrived. Walkers would typically carry 100 to 150 pounds on their backs taking a full day to hike from Jessie Lake into Deer River. Foot travel was cheaper and often more convenient than the railroad, it was quicker and more comfortable than riding in a wagon over rough corduroy roads, and more adaptable than traveling by water, especially since streams of any size do not cross the continental divide.

The railroad ultimately failed because it had exhausted its principal resource and source of revenue - trees. It could not compete with the flexibility of trucks in hauling freight and the convenience of automobiles for transporting people. Neither agricultural development nor population growth reached expectations, and the demand for service declined as the Great Depression tightened its grip. Though the M & R has been gone almost 70 years, its footprints remain on the landscape.

NCG 10/09/00

Note: this is the first of several short articles on local history that will be printed in the Jessie Jabber. Comments and personal stories are eagerly sought.

References

Commercial Club of Grand Rapids, Map of Itasca County, 1919

Isaacs, John, and Sharon Ott, Deer River Area Centennial History, 1998

King, Frank, Minnesota Logging Railroads, 1980

Marshall, Bill, "The Gut and Liver Line", Itasca County Historical Society Newsletter, Summer 1989

Mattson, Keith W. "Coal Dock - A Community Forgotten", unpublished, based on personal interviews by Don Ojanen, Dec. 22, 1999

Rottsoik, James E., Pines, Mines, and Lakes: The Story of Itasca County Minnesota, 1960

Grand Rapids Herald Review, selected issues, 1914 - 1946