

# The People of the Mesabi Range

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THE MESABI RANGE was a great expanse of forests and swamps in northeastern Minnesota when, in 1890, iron ore was discovered near what is now the thriving village of Mountain Iron. This first find of ore led, with later surveying, to the uncovering of vast ore beds along the southern slope of a range of low-lying hills which stretch in a flattened S-curve some eighty miles in length and two to ten miles in width in a general northeast-southwest direction. In 1890 the area of the Mesabi, some seventy miles northwest of Duluth, was enveloped in wilderness. The Duluth and Iron Range Railway, which ran between Two Harbors and the Vermilion Range, skirted the range at the village of Mesaba, far to the east of the newly discovered deposits. At the west end of the range, lumbermen steadily pushed their operations up the Mississippi and Swan rivers after 1870, but by 1890 they had not yet reached the section in which the ores were first discovered.

Unsettled and isolated until the discovery of ore, the Mesabi Range came to quick life after 1890. The digging of iron ore began in a high pitch of mining fever; companies were organized to mine the ore deposits, men moved into the area to seek new jobs and possibly acquire wealth, and mining camps and villages were laid out to care for the influx of population. In 1892 the first shipment of ore was made from the Mountain Iron mine; in the next year nine mines made shipments; and there were eleven in 1894, with a total tonnage of one and three-quarter millions.<sup>1</sup> By 1895 the Mesabi had attained its present reputation as the most productive of all the Lake Superior ranges. The increase in population was in keeping with the rapid expansion of ore output. In 1892 some fifteen hundred men were reported as actual or prospective workers on the range.

<sup>1</sup> Lake Superior Iron Ore Association, *Lake Superior Iron Ores*, 252-254 (Cleveland, 1938).

In 1895 six villages and seven townships reported a total population of 8,870. Five years later the population of the Mesabi communities reached 15,000 and they had 65,000 inhabitants in 1910.<sup>2</sup>

The people who were attracted to the Mesabi mines were predominantly of foreign stock, and they represented a confusing array of immigrant groups. In the first wave of people to the range in the 1890's were Americans; English from Cornwall; English, Scotch, Irish, and French from Canada; Scandinavians; and Finns; as well as some Slovenes, Italians, Bohemians, Poles, and Lithuanians. After 1900 Slavs and Latins began to arrive in considerable numbers. They included Slovenes, Croats, Serbs, Montenegrins, Italians, Bulgarians, Greeks, Poles, Russians, and others. At the height of the influx of population to the range, about 1910, there were at least thirty-five minority groups of sufficient size to be identified; scattered individuals were present from a handful more.

The story of the diverse immigrant groups who settled on the range and worked in the mines, as well as that of the paths they followed in traveling to the Mesabi communities, reflects in graphic profile the manner in which a colorful section of northern Minnesota was peopled.<sup>3</sup>

The sources of population on the range may be grouped as follows: an early labor force recruited from the older ranges of the Lake Superior area, principally from the upper Michigan peninsula; desertions, mainly of marginal workers, from the lumber operations in the area of the range; direct immigration from Europe; indirect migration of Europeans from other areas or cities of first settlement in the United States; and labor agents, employment offices, and advertising, which were used to a limited degree.

By 1890, when the Mesabi deposits were discovered, the older

<sup>2</sup> Fremont P. Wirth, *The Discovery and Exploitation of the Minnesota Iron Lands*, 24 (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1937); Minnesota, Fourth Decennial Census, 126 (St. Paul, 1895); *United States Census, 1900, Population*, part 1, p. 226; *United States Census, 1910, Abstract, With Supplement for Minnesota*, 560, 626.

<sup>3</sup> The field work upon which this study is based was done in the summer and fall of 1939, and a part of the material was incorporated into an unpublished doctoral dissertation entitled "Mesabi Communities: A Study of Their Development." It was submitted at Yale University in 1940. Information about the minority groups in the Mesabi Range country was obtained primarily through interviews, inasmuch as relevant printed materials are scant.

Michigan ranges had already developed a mixed population which came to be the prototype of that of the Mesabi communities. The Marquette Range, which first shipped iron ore in 1854, was developed principally by miners from Cornwall. Until the middle 1860's the Cornishmen were virtually the only miners of the Marquette district, but the Irish began to come in then, and the two groups furnished, not without bitter rivalry and conflict, the labor forces of the mines. At the same time the earliest Scandinavians and Finland Swedes filtered into the district, as well as some French Canadians and Germans. Finns began to arrive in numbers after 1880, primarily from the provinces of Oulu and Vaasa. Other ethnic groups went to Michigan in later decades; they included Slovenes, Italians, Poles, Bohemians, and Slovaks. By the middle of the 1890's the population of the Michigan ranges was marked by an ethnic confusion.<sup>4</sup>

From this conglomerate population were drawn the initial recruits for the Vermilion Range operations in Minnesota, which began in 1882 when the Minnesota Iron Company was organized by Charlemagne Tower and his associates. Native Americans, Cornishmen, Irish, Scandinavians, Finns, French Canadians, and Germans comprised the larger groups, but Italians and Slavs were also represented. In the main, the population was drawn from the countries of western and northern Europe.<sup>5</sup>

When mining operations got under way on the Mesabi, the first and main source of labor was from the older ranges of the Lake Superior area. This remained true during the entire first decade of activities. Companies which owned mines in Michigan as well as in Minnesota were particularly able to shift employees to the Mesabi operations. This was especially true during the latter part of the 1890's, after the numerous, small, and often speculative companies of the earlier years had disappeared into the consolidation of com-

<sup>4</sup> Stewart H. Holbrook, *Iron Brew: A Century of American Ore and Steel*, 51-53, 59 (New York, 1939). Material gathered in interviews supports this analysis of ethnic succession on the Michigan ranges.

<sup>5</sup> William J. Lauck, "Iron Ore Mines on the Mesabi and Vermilion Ranges," in *Mining and Engineering World*, 35:1269 (December 23, 1911); G. O. Virtue, *The Minnesota Iron Ranges*, 353 (United States Bureau of Labor, *Bulletins*, no. 84 — Washington, 1909).

panies under the control of the great steel furnace corporations.<sup>6</sup> A small but steady flow of men moved from the Michigan mines to the Mesabi after 1892; the economic hardship that accompanied the depression of 1893 made many companies willing to send their men to Minnesota, or caused the men to go voluntarily. They hoped for employment in the mines, but they were prepared to work in the forests as lumberjacks if necessary. From Duluth, Superior, and other cities or areas in Minnesota and Wisconsin went men to look for work or for business or professional opportunities in the new Mesabi villages. A constant shuttling to and fro between the Mesabi and near-by Vermilion ranges also occurred.

Of the early labor force on the Mesabi, the most skilled and experienced were the Cornishmen (known locally as "Cousinjacks"), who had learned to mine in the tin mines of Cornwall, and had worked in Pennsylvania before migrating to the Michigan ranges. They not only furnished a large body of miners, but the main supply of mine bosses as well. By the turn of the century, however, they had been largely displaced by Scandinavians and Finns, and had moved on in large numbers to mine in the Rocky Mountain area. Those who remained were mine captains and shift bosses.

The Swedes comprised the largest group of the Scandinavians to settle on the Mesabi Range. Norwegians came next, but they were much fewer in number than the Swedes, while the number of Danes and of Icelanders never was large. Probably more than a fourth of those classified as Swedes were Finland Swedes, who, although they spoke the Swedish language, had emigrated from Finland and maintained a separate identity from the true Swedes.<sup>7</sup> Early settlers

<sup>6</sup> The consolidation of mining companies is summarized by the writer in his "Mesabi Communities," 51-63. Excellent material is included in Wirth, *Minnesota Iron Lands*, 186-206; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 4:1-59 (St. Paul, 1930); Henry R. Mussey, *Combination in the Mining Industry: A Study of Concentration in Lake Superior Iron Ore Production* (Columbia University, *Studies in History, Economics and Public Law*, vol. 23, no. 3—New York, 1905); and Walter Van Brunt, ed., *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:285-288, 399-408 (Chicago, 1921). See also James H. Bridge, *The "Carnegie Millions and the Men Who Made Them,"* 257-274 (London, 1903); and Joseph G. Pyle, *The Life of James J. Hill*, 2:210-231 (New York, 1917).

<sup>7</sup> The distinction between this group and the Swedes from Sweden, on the one hand, and the Finns of Finland, on the other, is important on the Mesabi Range. See Carl J. Silfversten, "Finland Swedes of Northeast Minnesota," a typewritten manuscript in the files of the St. Louis County Historical Society, Duluth.

of the area reveal that the Swedes came predominantly from the southeastern provinces of Sweden, including Gotland, Göteborg och Bohus, Skaraborg, Kronoberg, Halland, Värmland, and Älvsborg. The Finland Swedes lived along the Finnish seacoast from Hanko to Turku; most of the range group came from the province of Vaasa, and more specifically, from Österbotten. Norwegian immigrants appear to have come from the southeastern provinces of Norway — Akershus and Buskerud — and from along the seacoast from Bergen to Nordland. The Danes and the Icelanders came from scattered areas rather than from specific centers in their countries.

Like the Finns who mined in Michigan, those of the Mesabi Range were predominantly from the southwestern agricultural provinces of Vaasa and Oulu. After 1900, immigrants began to come from other parts of Finland, notably from cities such as Helsinki, Turku, and Viipuri in southern Finland.

Immigration from the British Isles to the Mesabi district appears to have been indirect for the most part. Most of the English-speaking groups were derived from Canada rather than from Britain. They include the Canadian English, Scotch, and Irish, and intermixtures among them — people who have maintained a separate identity from the Cornishmen and have never been intimate with them. The Canadian groups came from eastern Ontario and Quebec; from the latter province came also the Canadian French. There was no direct immigration from France. The Canadians originally went into the United States as lumberjacks, many of them crossing the border at Detroit. They worked in the Michigan and Wisconsin forests during the winter months, and returned to Canada for the summers to work on their own farms. Over a period of years many of these people settled permanently in the United States. Generally they remained with the lumber companies, moving into Minnesota after the Michigan and Wisconsin forests had been cut. In general, they were quickly accepted and treated as native Americans.

The early Slavic movement to the Mesabi Range occurred mainly from the Michigan and Vermilion ranges, and included Slovenes, Poles, Bohemians, Slovaks, and others. Of these groups only the

Bohemians and Slovaks failed to increase in number considerably after 1900. They were drawn from the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, and from Hungary in what was then Austria-Hungary. German and Russian Poles comprised the early Polish group, the German Poles having emigrated from the provinces of Posen and Silesia, while the Russian group came mainly from the vicinity of the cities of Warsaw and Lublin. These two groups of Poles did not associate intimately with one another, and they tended to refuse identification with the Austrian or Galician Poles, who went to the Mesabi after 1905. Most of the Italians on the range in the 1890's were from northern Italy.

The lumber industry attracted Germans to the Mesabi Range, as well as groups of Irish, French Canadians, Scandinavians, and Finns. When ore was discovered in 1890, the lumber companies were already cutting timber on the upper reaches of the Mississippi River, and additional operations were begun near the newly laid-out range villages. Virginia became the center of considerable lumbering activity. From the woods it was easily possible for men to transfer to the mines. Not many Germans, however, became miners. They usually remained with the lumber concerns, often as saw filers or other craftsmen. But in the interflow between mine and woods employment during the first decades of range history, the mines generally won out. Lumber operators who were interviewed felt that the professional lumberjacks did not as a rule forsake the woods for the mines; those who became mine workers were marginal laborers, and most of them were recent immigrants who accepted the work that paid the highest wages.

Members of the minority groups obtained jobs in the Mesabi mines according to their previous experience and their ability to speak English. As the most skilled miners, the Cornishmen became the first mine captains and shift bosses, although in later decades mine officials were recruited elsewhere, particularly from the Scandinavian, Finnish, Slovene, and Italian groups. The skilled labor required of steam shovel operators, locomotive crews, and craftsmen, as well as of office workers, was performed by Americans, Cornish-

men, Irish, and French Canadians. Mine crews were made up of Scandinavians, Finns, Slovenes, Italians, and other groups. Relatively few of the Canadian English, English, and Scotch became miners. They were business and professional workers in the range communities or they remained in the employ of the lumber companies.<sup>8</sup>

By 1900 the older ranges could no longer furnish labor sufficient for the Mesabi mines. The demand for labor continued to increase, however, and it became urgent as new mines were opened and stripping and open-pit operations expanded in volume. The Mesabi Range was far removed from the main labor markets of the country, and it was difficult to entice workers to such distant mining settlements. Range newspapers of this period reflected the dearth of labor which confronted the mine operators. "Owing to the scarcity of men on the Iron Ranges," a typical news item of 1899 reads, "mining company officials are advertising in other parts of the country for miners. An additional 1,000 men can find work on the Mesaba and Vermilion Iron Ranges at the present time with the demand promising to be greater when the shipping season opens the latter part of the month."<sup>9</sup>

Immigration from Europe, rather than the conscious efforts of the mining companies, however, solved the labor problem. In the decade following 1890, the ranks of the foreign born on the Mesabi increased slowly as the result of direct arrivals from abroad, but after 1900, when the total volume of European immigration to the United States reached flood proportions, the flow of population to the range communities quickened. The immigrants in the Mesabi villages sent letters and money to those who had stayed behind, and thus publicized the range in far-off European settlements. Members of each ethnic minority group acted as magnets to attract their countrymen. Immigrants who might have settled elsewhere in the United States went to Minnesota, where they could be helped to jobs by persons already employed and happy to intercede for them with "the boss."

<sup>8</sup> Lauck, in *Mining and Engineering World*, 35:1269; Virtue, *Minnesota Iron Ranges*, 353; LeRoy Hodges, "Immigrant Life in the Ore Region of Northern Minnesota," in *Survey*, 28:709 (September 7, 1912).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from an article published "forty years ago," in the *Virginia Daily Enterprise*, April 3, 1939.

Furthermore, the mining companies, which could use unskilled labor, put the men to work immediately. Since immigration after 1900 came preponderantly from southeastern Europe, the Mesabi communities received increased proportions of the Yugoslav and Italian groups, although accretions continued for the Scandinavian and Finnish colonies.

Many foreign-born workers migrated to the Mesabi Range from cities or regions where they had first settled in the United States. This was particularly true of the Slavic groups, who paused to work in Pittsburgh, Wilkes-Barre, Cleveland, Chicago, and other cities. During periodic lay-offs they found their way to the range, attracted there by friends or relatives who reported in letters the booming condition of the Minnesota mines. Most of these people had not been long in other areas. A study of the employees of the Oliver Iron Mining Company on the Mesabi and Vermilion ranges was made in 1907. It showed that of 12,018 employees 84.4 per cent were foreign born; half of the latter, or 49.3 per cent, had resided in the United States less than two years, and 12.4 per cent less than one year. Groups with the largest numbers who had been in America less than one year were the Montenegrins with 34.3 per cent, the Austrians with 16.6 per cent, the Croats with 14.9 per cent, the Slavs with 13.6 per cent, and the Slovaks with 12.8 per cent. Nationalities showing a high proportion of persons who had resided in the country ten years or more were the Irish with 87.7 per cent, the Scotch with 77.4 per cent, the English with 74.4 per cent, the Scandinavians with 48.4 per cent, and the Germans with 23.7 per cent.<sup>10</sup>

After 1905, when stripping operations became extensive on the range, resort was sometimes made to labor agents or labor exchanges to secure employees for work in the open pits. Labor agents, many of them Serbs or Montenegrins, were usually former miners who operated saloons or other businesses and had become leaders among their countrymen. They entered into contracts with the mining companies or the stripping concerns to deliver workmen, usually recruited from immigrant colonies in the eastern or central United

<sup>10</sup> Virtue, *Minnesota Iron Ranges*, 345.



States industrial cities. The labor agent arranged for their employment, and generally supervised their living accommodations, which were often in mining camps.

A *padrone* system appears, likewise, to have existed among some of the Serbs, Montenegrins, Sicilians, and possibly Greeks. The *padrone* was the labor agent or leader of a group of men who contracted with the mining companies for their employment as a unit. Usually he retained for himself the control of the camps in which his men were housed, and he made his income by boarding the men, and mulcting whatever he could from them or from the companies. This system was suitable for large construction operations where a big labor supply was needed, and it was used primarily for stripping jobs on the Mesabi. There is evidence, however, that underground mines occasionally secured men through *padrones*. They functioned between 1907 and 1912, and thereafter disappeared, since the need for their services no longer existed.

It does not seem likely that direct recruiting of immigrants in the European countries by labor agents for the mining companies was undertaken on a large scale. There are residents on the range at present who were solicited to emigrate, but the persuasion was by agents for concerns in other areas. In August, 1907, Serbs and Montenegrins were shipped to the Mesabi Range by the local companies to break the strike of that year. The men were sent in boxcars to the range villages, where it is still recalled that, if they had not come directly from Europe, at least they had not stopped on the way long enough to wash the soil of their native land from their faces. Nevertheless, it is improbable that these people were direct recruits from Europe. More likely they were recent arrivals to the United States who were hired after they landed for shipment to the strike-bound Mesabi Range.<sup>11</sup>

After 1900 underground mining was done chiefly by Finns, Slovenes, Croats, and Italians, though some Poles, Slovaks, Bohemians, Lithuanians, Bulgarians, and others also were employed. Most of

<sup>11</sup> Constantine Panunzio, *Immigration Crossroads*, 45 (New York, 1927); M. B. Cothren, "When Strike-breakers Strike," in *Survey*, 36:535 (August 26, 1916); M. H. Vorse, "Mining Strike in Minnesota," in *Outlook*, 113:1036 (August 30, 1916).

the Slovenes and Croats have continued in underground work; the others, however, have worked in open-pit operations as well. After 1905, when open-pit mining and stripping activities increased in volume and importance, the most recent immigrants found employment mainly in surface operations. Into this type of work went the Carpatho-Russians, Montenegrins, Serbs, Bulgarians, Romanians, South Italians, Galician Poles, Lithuanians, and Greeks who arrived in that period. They worked chiefly in track or lining gangs in the open pits or on the ore or earth dumps, where unskilled labor could be quickly trained and used.

Southeast Europeans gradually displaced the Scandinavians in the mines after 1900. Unlike the Cornishmen, who went to other parts of the country to continue as miners, the Scandinavians were pushed up rather than out of the industrial hierarchy on the Mesabi Range. They transferred to the skilled trades in the villages, where today they form the largest proportion of carpenters, masons, plumbers, and plasterers. The Scandinavians who have remained in mining are usually officials or craftsmen. During the first decade of the twentieth century, when the ore bodies on the range were being charted, they also formed the main labor force of the drill and exploration crews, since they were expert diamond and churn drill operators.

The earliest adequate census figures on the population components of the Mesabi Range area are those for 1905, when the fifth decennial state census was taken in Minnesota. In that year the Finns were definitely the largest ethnic group in the Mesabi population, with the Scandinavians, Canadians, and Slavs comprising other major elements. Listed as Austrians in the census were the Slovenes and Croats; few German-speaking Austrians have gone to the range. Although a substantial Slavic immigration occurred after 1905, the group was by no means small in that year.<sup>12</sup>

Of the Yugoslav groups in the Mesabi area, the largest was the Slovene. The range contingent was derived chiefly from the province of Carniola, with lesser numbers from Styria, Coastland, and Carin-

<sup>12</sup> These conclusions are based upon figures published in Minnesota, *Fifth Decennial Census, 176, 177* (St. Paul, 1905).

thia. Slovenes were present from the early years on both the Vermilion and Mesabi ranges, and they therefore set up currents of immigration from Europe before 1900. Cleveland, which has a large concentration of Slovenes, was a stopping place for many before they went to the Mesabi. After the Slovenes, the Croats formed the next most numerous group of Yugoslavs on the Mesabi. The two groups have generally been identified because of a common Roman Catholic bond, although they have not always lived in harmony. The Croats emigrated from the provinces of Slavonia, Croatia, and Dalmatia. Many of them stopped first in the industrial cities, mainly about Pittsburgh, before venturing to the Mesabi. The Serbs and Montenegrins, who are identical ethnically with the Croats but are members of the Greek Orthodox church, came from the provinces of Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. The numbers from the kingdom of Montenegro have apparently never been large.

The Russians of the range are Little Russians, also known as Ukrainians or Ruthenians. They came mainly from the Carpatho Mountain district in eastern Galicia, which before 1918 was a province of Hungary. The number of Russians who emigrated from Russia was small, the most extensive group having come from Kiev. From Galicia also came a large group of Poles, who were listed in early census reports as Galician or Austrian Poles. These two groups appeared on the range after 1905. Before going there many of their members had stopped in Russian or Polish colonies in Wilkes-Barre, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, and other cities.

Italians on the range in the 1890's were mainly North Italians, drawn from the provinces of Piedmont and Lombardy in Italy and Tyrol in Austria. After 1905 the Italian emigration came from virtually all the Italian provinces, with the largest representations from Piedmont and Marches. North Italians have, however, remained numerically superior to those from the south.

From Russia as it existed before the First World War came Finns, Finland Swedes, Poles, Jews, and Lithuanians. The two latter groups came after 1905 from approximately the same areas—the provinces of Kovno and Vilna in Lithuania. Thus most of the Mesabi

Range Jews are Lithuanian Jews; only small numbers have come from the Polish or Russian sectors of Russia or from other European countries. In the early 1890's there were Jewish businessmen on the range who had moved from such near-by cities as Duluth and Superior, where they were engaged earlier in retail enterprises. On the range they entered business or the professions.

Substantial numbers of Greeks and Bulgarians emigrated from Macedonia at a time when that province was still controlled by Turkey. Those who came from the Grecian mainland and islands appear to have had no definite centers of emigration. They were the latest group to arrive on the range, settling there chiefly after 1910, and going there usually after initial employment on the railroads running to the area. The Bulgarians, who arrived after 1907, worked in surface operations. Romanians were present on the range in numbers for some years after 1907, but they have since disappeared from the area almost entirely. Small groups came also from Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Turkey, Mexico, Syria, Argentina, and other countries.

The immigrant movement to the Mesabi came to a standstill with the outbreak of the First World War. Before that conflict, however, immigration had slackened considerably. After 1912 the Balkan wars drew large numbers of immigrants back to Europe for military service. Among them were Montenegrins, Serbs, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Romanians. The Montenegrins, who were chiefly young, single men, in the prime of life and imbued with an intense patriotism for their native land, left en masse, going in such large numbers that their large range population was reduced to a nominal fraction.

The movement away from the Mesabi Range was accelerated, also, by the depression of 1914-15, which was caused in part by the uncertainties of the opening year of the First World War and the temporary loss of the foreign market. The range was particularly hard hit, and as a result men began to drift away to other sections of the country in search of employment. After the war, the usual movement of immigrants returning to Europe, which was always notable in the Mesabi communities, was resumed. In addition, there

were many immigrants who left because love for their native soil made them eager to participate in building up such European countries as Yugoslavia, Finland, Poland, and Lithuania, which gained their independence as a result of the war.

During the boom war years of 1916 to 1918, the mining companies were compelled by a temporary shortage of labor to begin upon a program of mechanization of mine and pit operations. The machines and mechanized processes then introduced proved immediately rewarding to the companies, and they were retained and extended in the years following, with the result that since 1920 there has been a steadily decreasing need for labor on the Mesabi Range. This has resulted in a continuous drift of workers away from the range. After 1920 some ethnic groups disappeared almost entirely from the area. The colonies of Romanians, Bulgarians, Montenegrins, Greeks, and Slovaks faded away, and only a few members of these groups remain on the Mesabi. The number of Irish, Norwegians, French Canadians, and others has been materially reduced. The range population of 1946 is dominated by a smaller number of minority groups, of whom the Finns, Yugoslavs, Italians, Scandinavians, Poles, English, and Canadians are the most numerous.

With the passage of years the proportion of immigrants in the Mesabi population has steadily diminished. In 1900, half the residents were foreign born; in 1940, the proportion had dropped to twenty per cent, as indicated by the federal census of that year. The immigrants and their children, however, constitute eighty-five per cent of the total population. Today the American-born children of the immigrants are the adults of the Mesabi communities, and they carry on after their parents. From twenty-five to thirty-three per cent of these immigrant young have intermarried with members of other minority groups.<sup>13</sup> The range is actually a melting pot, and by the time a third generation appears there, the ethnic identity of most of its members will be obscure or unimportant. Interest in ancestry will then be more one of curiosity than of concern with ethnic origins.

<sup>13</sup> The figures on mixed marriages are discussed by the writer in his "Mesabi Communities," 447, 448.



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