



Original Article

Community-driven mining heritage in the Cuyuna Iron Mining District: Past, present, and future projects



Fred Sutherland*

Michigan Technological University, Social Sciences, 1400 Townsend Avenue, Houghton, MI, United States

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ABSTRACT

The Cuyuna Iron Mining Range is a former North American mining district located about 90 miles (145 km) west of Duluth in Central Minnesota. The district is the furthest south and west of the three Minnesota iron ranges (Vermillion, Mesabi, and Cuyuna). It was a strategic supplier of iron ores with the qualities needed by North American steel mills in two world wars. After the rapid decline of mining in the Cuyuna Range during late 1960s; however, much of the mining infrastructure was abandoned. A landscape of former mine communities and scenic lakes where mine pits once were located now remains, but unlike Minnesota's other two major iron mining ranges, very little has been done identify and promote features of the Cuyuna's mining heritage to a wider audience.

This paper examines the surviving features of the Cuyuna Iron Range that made this district important. It reports findings from surveys of seven iron mining communities which aimed to broaden the understanding of important local sites. The data generated from this effort are being used to inform plans for cultural tourism focused on the iron mining heritage of the Cuyuna Iron Range.

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1. Introduction

Scholars studying communities that once supported mining tend to focus upon the historical documents and sites related to the mining era. Far fewer scholars pay attention to the present-day community trying to survive without the economic revenues those activities had provided. Community planners and development agencies that engage with former mining communities may provide token acknowledgment of a region's mining heritage. These may be in the form of simple signs or logos depicting workers. However, the redevelopment plans promoted by those agencies frequently demolish, obscure, or ignore the buildings and sites that had the greatest significance to that community. Plans that address modern community interests and feature remarkable sites from a region's mining heritage can change how communities with mining heritage are portrayed. One region that has undergone phases of mining decline, historical assessment, and economic redevelopment is the Central Minnesota iron mining district known as the Cuyuna Range. Efforts to understand, preserve, and

promote the mining heritage of this area contain lessons which can be applied to the other mining communities.

Two other important regions that feature mining heritage are the networks of mining heritage sites listed on the European Route of Industrial Heritage (ERIH) and the public/private partnerships in the former copper mining district of the Keweenaw Peninsula of Michigan. The latter example involves the National Park Service promoting several privately owned sites related to copper mining as part of the Keweenaw National Historical Park (KNHP). The National Park Service headquarters for this collaboration is located in the community in Calumet, Michigan. Many other mining heritage sites are featured as a single site or community to represent what was once a district-scale mining network, such as the Soudan Underground Mine State Park in Tower, Minnesota. These examples have provided some inspiration on how to portray the Cuyuna Range's mining heritage to a wider audience. However, the top-down approach of these state, national, or multi-national organizations can make it difficult for the communities within these mining districts to directly shape how the heritage of their region is shared with the rest of the world. Most recently, Liesch (2014) noted how many local residents within the KNHP had little knowledge about basic park information, including the boundaries and sites comprising the park.

Having members of the local community involved with the process of gathering and developing content about a region's

* Tel.: +1 518 755 0913.

E-mail addresses: fesuther@mtu.edu, fsutherland@clcmn.edu, fsuthy@gmail.com

mining heritage can reshape how it is featured as a destination. In 2012, partnerships between students and staff of Michigan Technological University were forged between members from the communities associated with the Cuyuna Iron Mining Range of Minnesota in 2012. This collaboration has led to new opportunities and identified key challenges related to mining heritage and tourism. During interactions between members of an “industrial communities” and scholars, it became clear that more than one academic approach would be needed to understand and portray the various aspects of life in a mining district. Since “industrial communities” is not a commonly used term in the social sciences, a thorough explanation is required.

2. Defining an industrial community

Industrial communities, such as those which formed in the Cuyuna Iron Range during the 20th-century, are an integral part of the transformations wrought by industrialization on human societies across the world in recent centuries. Industrial-scale production and extraction often required concentrations of labor and capital beyond the levels sustained by small agrarian settlements. Industrialists in North America and Europe frequently had to develop communities to house and support a working population for their industrial operations when there were no nearby urban centers. The limitations of transportation available for working populations in North America and Europe prior to the wide availability of personal automobiles in the 1950s further compounded the challenges of housing and supporting a workforce close to the center of an industrial enterprise. These circumstances, which are typical of places undergoing industrialization, create communities that are often highly dependent upon a single industrial process. They typically contain dense populations of people often spanning various ethnicities, genders, and classes. These communities may or may-not include members of the laborer’s family.

Scholars in the disciplines of history, anthropology, and archeology have investigated the records, populations, landscapes, and artifacts associated with communities in and around industrial sites. These three disciplines share scholarly interest in the concepts of space, power, ethnicity, gender, and the impacts of industry upon the health and environment of industrial communities. The methodological range of each discipline offers valuable insights about industrial communities which strengthens and deepens our understanding of them.

2.1. *Historians of class construction, community interaction, and corporate influence*

The early development of industrial communities in the Cuyuna Range occurred from around 1910 to 1932. This period was dictated by how groups of immigrant workers formed class identities around institutions such as worker’s halls and ethnic associations. Many scholars have carefully explored class formation within industrialized societies, although historians were the first scholars to closely study industrial communities. Prior to the 1960s, very few scholars had investigated the industry and community of a particular region with equal attention. One of the first works to accomplish this balance was historian E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). Thompson focused on the transformation of agrarian and crafting societies in Northern England into a more modern-looking industrial workforce organized around the concept of class. In particular, Thompson investigated the forces leading to the political formation of a self-conscious working class that could articulate its grievances collectively. In North America, historians Dawley (1976) and Dublin (1979) undertook similar explorations

of class or group formation among the shoemakers of Lynn and the renowned “mill girls” of Lowell, Massachusetts.

Around the 1970s and 1980s North American historians began investigating how industrial communities sustained themselves physically and economically. Buder (1970) explored the arrangement of community structures and underlying ideals within a railcar manufacturing company town. The author investigated how the company town of Pullman, Illinois was ultimately unable to meet the idealistic visions its creators had for creating a healthy and content working population. Gaventa’s (1980) study of coal mining communities included a more detailed investigation of management’s role in shaping how industrial communities develop. The author revealed how managerial policy permeated the society that Appalachian coal miners lived in. These policies framed the ways miners could and could not resist company control.

The Cuyuna Iron Range in the 20th-century displayed many complex economic, social and political arrangements. Most scholars before the 1980s only explored one or two dimensions of what makes an industrial community. Since the 1980s, historians have written about industrial communities with a greater appreciation for the interactions that ethnicity, gender, and class have within an industrial community. Their research does not attempt to study an industrial community as economic or labor historians had done. Instead, recent scholars have focused upon how segments of an industrial community interacted with one another. Examples of this work are presented in Arnesen (1993), Kelly (2001), and Dunaway (1996, 2003). Shifflett showed how constructed communities and company policies in the coal mining districts of Appalachia did not destroy or limit the ability of workers to shape their own identity. Arnesen (1993) and Kelly (2001) both emphasized the factors of race in working communities in the southeastern United States. Notably, the former explored the formation of biracial labor coalitions which are able to briefly overcome strong racial divisions within Post-Bellum New Orleans. He demonstrated how managers carefully orchestrated radicalized attitudes between white and black workers in order to divide and defeat efforts to unionize their workforce.

The commodity chains of mineral extraction with sites of production are another important perspective that can be revealed by the activities of the Cuyuna Iron Range in the 20th-century. The aspect of the Cuyuna Range that is most often mentioned by iron mining historians is the unusual, but not unique, inclusion of manganese in much of the Cuyuna’s iron ore bodies. Manganese is an important ingredient for making hard steels. This deposit of low grade ferro-manganese ore was recognized during the 20th-century as a vital strategic resource for North America’s steel industry (Lamppa, 2004, p. 193; Himrod, 1940, p. 61). Cuyuna iron ores containing manganese played a strategic role as the largest domestic supply of manganese to the steel industry of the United States through two world wars and the Korean War. During the Cuyuna Range’s first boom years from 1913 to 1919 around the time of the World War I, international supplies of manganese, mostly originating from Russia, had been cut off. These circumstances heightened the importance of Cuyuna’s ore for steel manufacturers in the United States (Lamppa, 2004, p. 193).

One example of how scholars use the study of commodity chains within and between industrial communities is described by Dunaway (1996). The author introduced a careful investigation of household and regional economics to demonstrate that the so-called “backward” and “isolated” communities of Appalachia were deeply tied to the economy of the eastern port cities and global exchanges of commodities. Dunaway’s (2003) second work investigated how black families in Appalachia endured a form of “super-exploitation,” specifically how workers had to supply much of their own food and clothing, often through the efforts of women

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