The Iron Hunter
Osborn, Chase S.

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Chapter 28

Accidental Fortunes from Iron Ore

The tale of how fortunes were made by many men in the Lake Superior iron ore ranges is a story of fortuitous happenings. An iron ore formation surrounds Lake Superior north and south. The first discoveries were made in Michigan. Later the Mesaba and other ranges opened in Minnesota placed that State in the leading place in iron ore production in the world. Almost without exception the iron districts were in regions covered by great forests of virgin white pine—*pinus strobus*. These trees in instances grew to great proportions. Some of them measured more than six feet in diameter at the base. So light and perfect in texture were these big trees that they were called cork pine. Driving streams threaded the pineries on their way to the Great Lakes. These supplied transportation to navigable waters for the logs. Naturally these forests early attracted the attention of lumbermen. When the pineries in Maine began to be exhausted, hardy Yankees of character and courage from the Androscoggin came to Michigan after their idea of a golden fleece. They “took up” vast tracts of land from the Government along the Saginaw, the Tittabawassee, the Shiawassee and other Lower Peninsula rivers. Most always these lands were “entered” at a dollar and a quarter an acre. Bolder spirits forged to the northward into the valleys of the Tahquamenon and the Menominee, and on westward to the Wisconsin River country and then into Minnesota. When the timber came into the market it was logged, floated down stream to sawmills and cut into lumber. Only the very choicest, and that nearest streams making a short haul, was cut at first. Piles of skidded logs were left in the woods amidst the resinous tops and limbs. Fire would get into the waste jungles and cause direful loss.
of life as well as of property. Hundreds of lumber towns have been wiped out and thousands of lives sacrificed on the pyres of carelessness. Even to this day death-breeding forest fires occur in Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Just as soon as the pine was cut off, the lumbermen would let the scarfed lands “go back” for taxes, recognizing no other values. Some of these lands are now most fertile farms. On others iron ore was found. When the land was originally purchased the buyer had nothing in view but the timber. If iron ore was known to exist in a certain region, some wiser land owners would hold on to their possessions and pay the low taxes. Others would not. Almost never did they do anything to develop the lands. Prospectors would come along and ask for an option to explore on a lease and royalty basis. They would develop a mine and the land owner would have a fortune he had not turned his hand over to earn. In many cases before or after the timber was cut the owners of land when making transfers would “reserve” the mineral rights on a gamble. These reservations have never been taxed and are still permitted to be made according to law. Not infrequently the original owners would have died and their heirs would be surprised to have a request come to them for an option to explore on lands now owned by others and to which they had no idea they had any claim. The lap gods just dug into the earth for them and filled their pockets with dollars. A great many rich iron mines in Michigan and Minnesota are on lands once purchased from the Government for pine timber. Perhaps the Wellington Burt fortune, of Saginaw, is a typical instance of how the economic symplegides opened to people who were blind so far as iron ore was concerned. There are dozens of other cases just like the Burt one, and some of them have an annual income amounting to upwards of a million dollars from accidental royalties.

Government land grants, honest and dishonest, earned and unearned, conveyed billions of dollars worth of iron ore from the public to private owners. Notable examples are the Lake Superior Ship Canal Railway and Iron Company, the Great Northern Grant, and there were many more. Perhaps the accumulation of
the pyramidal Longyear fortune is as legitimate a case as any. John M. Longyear was a bright, rather physically weak young man of alert vision and fine character. He was sent to Marquette, on Lake Superior, as the agent of the Lake Superior Ship Canal Railway and Iron Company. This company in selecting the lands allotted in its grant engaged the services of the three Brotherton “boys” of Escanaba. They were the very best land lookers and iron hunters in all the Lake Superior region. Upon their reports all the Canal Company’s lands were chosen. These had to be alternate sections. Mr. Longyear had all the information supplied by the data gathered by the Brothertons. He secured financial backers and bought the lands lying between the Canal Company’s property. It just so happened that most of the mines found turned out to be on the Longyear lands. The fortune that was won in this way runs into the multiplied millions.

The story of the big Chapin mine on the Menominee Range presents facets of exquisite humor and at the same time illustrates how little significance was attached by owners to early land holdings. The Chapins lived at Niles, Michigan. They entered the Chapin Mine forty at a dollar and a quarter an acre, equaling fifty dollars. A wedding occurred in the family. To the officiating preacher was given a deed for the forty acres in question. The guileless dominie did not even record the deed and paid no attention to it whatever. A few years later the big mine was found. It has produced ore worth more than twenty million dollars and still has rich reserves. A wide-awake young lawyer heard of the preacher and investigated the story. He had a hard time finding the minister, but finally trailed him to the Pacific Coast in an obscure little town. Suit against the Chapins was begun. After hanging fire in the courts for a more or less tedious time, a compromise was made with the preacher for a cash consideration of two hundred thousand dollars. This was divided evenly with the lawyer and the Chapin mine lawsuit was heard of no more.

Just a little time ago a title to a valuable mine was traced to a Russian servant maid who had returned to Warsaw. The able
young lawyer who ferreted it out was sent to Europe by a big mining company. He found the girl, with the assistance of a kindly priest, paid her well, got her relinquishment and came home. The company gave the lawyer a check for twenty-five thousand dollars, paid all of his expenses and gave him a high place in their law department. This recital refers to Raymond Empson, attorney, of Gladstone, Michigan, and to the Cleveland-Cliffs Iron Company, of which William G. Mather, of Cleveland, Ohio, is president. In all of the dealings there was only one desire uppermost in the mind of Mr. Mather and his managing vice-president, M. M. Duncan, and that was to give the poor girl her just consideration and to treat the young lawyer fairly. This is coming to be the policy of modern business and it will go a long way to retard bolshevism. I could go on almost endlessly writing of the romances of iron ore. Stewart Edward White charmingly tells the story of white pine in his popular “Blazed Trail.” There are a thousand blazed trails in the adventures of the iron ore hunters.