Very early in its development I visited the Mesaba range many times.

At the commencement of every epoch of great importance, or rather while the parts are being marshalled for the making of history, many of the more minute things are lost sight of, and thus the era starts blunted and its history is incomplete. So it is with the discovery of iron ore in Minnesota, and more particularly that portion known as the Mesaba range, the most productive iron ore region ever known in the world.

The original discoverers of iron ore in Minnesota are unknown. The Sioux Indians knew about the ore material and associated rocks but did not know what they were or how to use the raw material. In this they were more backward than African aborigines. In the written relations of the Jesuit Fathers, who were the first missionaries to these red men, allusion is made as early as 1660 to the existence of economic minerals in the Lake Superior country. Writings by LaGard in 1636, by Pierre Boucher in 1640, Fathers Raymbault and Jogues in 1641 and Claude Allouez in 1666, tell of the finding of considerable quantities of iron ore in the several localities that are now defined as the mineral ranges of the Lake Superior basin. In 1668 Father Jacques Marquette traversed the northern wilderness and paid particular attention to its economic geology. To the unremitting interest of this venerable priest, the Lake Superior country owes the debt due for its primal and practical discovery.

The first references to the Mesaba district found in literature concern the parts of the district immediately adjacent to the canoe routes offered by the rivers Mississippi, Prairie, Swan, St.
Louis, Pike and smaller streams. The first official description was
given by Major Z. M. Pike in 1810, and the veteran explorer,
Henry R. Schoolcraft was there in 1832. In 1841 J. N. Nicollet
published a map of the hydrographic basin of the upper Missis-
sippi, on which the Mesaba range, called “Missabay Heights,”
was for the first time delineated, by hachures, although very im-
perfectly. In 1866 Colonel Charles Whittlesey reported on ex-
plorations made in northern Minnesota during the years 1848,
1849 and 1864, mentioning Pokegama Falls, near Grand Rapids.
Mesaba, which is spelled in half a dozen different ways, to suit
the fancy of the speller, is the Chippewa word for giant, and the
name was given the granite range of hills to the north of Hib-
bing. The early explorers used the word Mesaba to cover the ter-
ritory now embraced in the regions known as the Mesaba and
Vermillion ranges. In 1868, Henry H. Eames, the first state geol-
ogist of Minnesota, reported the finding of iron ore at Emmabass
Lake near Biwabik. In a second report, published in the same
year, Mr. Eames was more explicit, and referring to the general
elevated area of the northern part of the State including the
Mesaba Range, said:

“In this region are found also immense bodies of the ores of
iron, both magnetite and hematite.” From this time on desultory
exploratory work was done along nearly the entire length of the
range from Ranges 12 to LaPrairie River. There is considerable
doubt as to who was the first actual explorer to penetrate the
wilds of the Mesaba Range, but from all that can be gathered it
would seem that the honor belongs to Peter Mitchell. The first
examination of this range by a mining expert with particular ref-
ence to the occurrence of iron ore in merchantable deposits
was made in 1875 by Professor A. H. Chester, of Hamilton Col-
lege, New York. In this report, published in 1884, may be found
this reference to an earlier occupation of the land:

In the northwest quarter of section 20, in township 60, north of range
12, west, the most important of the workings of Mr. Peter Mitchell, the
first explorer of the range, was found. This was a pit six feet in depth,
and from it was said to have been obtained the best ore he brought back. This old pit was cleaned and sunk to a depth of eleven and two-tenths feet.

Professor Chester is generally given the credit of having been the first explorer on the range, but we have his own words that Mr. Mitchell was ahead of him, possibly two or three years. Between the time of Professor Chester’s examination of the range and the publication of his report nine years later, Professor M. H. Winchell, state geologist, noted the range in two of his reports, mentioning the existence of iron ore on the east end. Up to that time, while it was readily conceded that iron ore existed there, it was not generally believed that the ore was of a merchantable grade or in sufficient quantity to warrant development. In fact, well up to 1890 the range had been looked over by numerous mining experts sent in there by the larger interests, and the reports were not favorable. The portion of the range examined particularly by them was the extreme eastern end, where exposures of magnetic iron are numerous, but even up to the present time no body of ore of workable dimensions has been located at that point. The fact that the range had been turned down by the several mining experts did not deter the hardy pioneer explorers, to whose faith and purpose are due the development of the Mesaba. They believed that rich iron ore in paying quantities was to be found in the district and they continued working diligently, breasting the untold hardships that meet the pioneer in a wild country. The more persistent of the early explorers were the Merritts—Lon Merritt, Alfred Merritt, L. J. Merritt, C. C. Merritt, T. N. Merritt, A. R. Merritt, J. E. Merritt, and W. J. Merritt—of Duluth, and their faith in the range was the first to be rewarded. On November 16, 1890, a crew working for them, under charge of Captain J. A. Nichols, struck iron ore in a homestead claim embracing the northwest quarter of section 3, 58–18, just north of what is now known as the Mountain Iron mine. The Merritts were not discouraged by the adverse reports made by the experts and the numerous failures of other explorers. The
Mesaba was an attractive and promising field, and their faith in it was never shaken, even though their money was spent and two years of the hardest kind of labor remained unrewarded. All who applaud the pioneer are glad to know that these pioneers who were so unresting in their search for iron ore have been richly repaid and that those who remain of the family are enjoying lives of ease due to the early toil that tried their fiber.

The next discovery of importance on the range was the Biwabik property, by John McCaskill, an explorer, who found iron ore clinging to the roots of an upturned tree. The Merritts explored the tract. It is interesting to note that the first two iron mines discovered have proven the largest shippers from the range. The output of the Biwabik mine up to the close of navigation in 1917 was 4,053,731 tons, while the Mountain Iron mine had made in the same period the stupendous production of 7,254,201 tons. With the discovery of these mines it may be said that the range was fairly recognized as a mining district of commercial importance, and there followed a rush of explorers to the scene of action. Finds of large bodies of ore followed, and mining towns sprung up all along to give attention to the needs of the throngs of people that flocked in.

It is generally believed that Frank Hibbing, of Duluth, was the first explorer to shoulder his packsack and push his way through the trackless wilderness to the point where now stands the modern city of Hibbing—called the “Gem of the Mesaba,” but E. J. Longyear preceded Hibbing to the territory by at least a year. Mr. Longyear cut a road into what is now the Hibbing district and it was he who broke the seal that bound the hidden wealth that has been brought to light since that time. Frank Hibbing was really more of a prospector than Longyear. He located a number of promising prospects and acquired interests in lands along the range. Mr. Hibbing was a man without means, but so encouraging were his reports that he soon interested A. J. Trimble, then fresh from many successful ventures on the Gogebic range, in Michigan, with him, and the Lake Superior Iron Company was formed. John M. Longyear, of Marquette, and R. M. Bennett, of
Minneapolis, secured options to explore Mesaba Range lands and sent E. J. Longyear with an exploration outfit to give the lands a test. Mr. Longyear was then fresh from the Michigan College of mines, and was one of the first class that graduated from that splendid institution. In the summer of 1891 Mr. Longyear arrived at Swan River, on the line of the old Duluth and Winnipeg Railroad, now the Great Northern, which was the nearest railroad point to the land he intended to explore. He followed the old Wright and Davis tote road to a point about a mile and one quarter west of what is now Nashwauk, and from there began cutting a road through to what is now Hibbing. Having made a passable road, Mr. Longyear established an exploring camp one-half a mile north of the present Mahoning mine, and the old camps are still there, a mute reminder of the earliest work on that end of the range. Mr. Longyear prosecuted exploratory work with a diamond drill without finding ore in paying quantities until February, 1892, when he found a large body of ore in the northeast quarter of section 22, 58–20. The body of ore, said to measure eight million tons, remains undeveloped. A few years ago it became the property of the old Lake Superior Consolidated Iron Mines Company and was taken into the holdings of the United States Steel Corporation upon its organization. Mr. Longyear’s next find was the Pillsbury mine. This was the first iron mine opened in the Hibbing district, though it did not make a shipment until 1898. The first mine to ship ore from the district was the Sellars, in the spring of 1894. The next mine to be opened in the district was the Burt, followed closely by the Hull, Rust, Sellers and Day mines, in which Hibbing and Trimble were interested, and then the great Mahoning.

The finding of the great Mesaba beds of iron ore opened the eyes of the eastern furnace men, and they met and formed an organization to locate iron properties on this range. W. C. Agnew was chosen as the most suitable man to conduct the work. Mr. Agnew accepted the proposition and arrived with a working crew in the summer of 1893. He started exploratory work on lands where the Mahoning mine was found, one mile
west of Hibbing. Mr. Agnew discovered this mine and superintended its development. The Mahoning presents the largest single body of iron ore ever discovered in the world. Imagine an elliptical opening in the earth half a mile long, a quarter of a mile wide and nearly two hundred feet deep, and you will have some idea of what the great Mahoning open pit presents today—more than forty acres of solid iron ore exposed to view. There yet remains eighty acres of ore uncovered. The first shipment from the Mahoning was made in 1895, and up to the close of navigation, 1917, the total output was 4,791,651. The possible year's shipment out of this mine is to be limited only by the capacity of the railroads for carrying away the product.

After the first excitement of mine discovering subsided somewhat, a financial depression occurred and exploratory work nearly ceased until better times recurred. But at no time was the range and its immense possibilities lost sight of by the financial interests of the country. In 1900 there was a revival of exploratory work, and from that time on there has been a steady increase in ore development and the end is not in sight. After the organization of the United States Steel Corporation, there was a rush of independent mining men to the Mesaba to secure holdings before everything fell under the control of the big organization. The result is that while the Minnesota Iron Company, a subsidiary branch of the Steel Trust, owns heavily of the iron properties, the tonnage of independent concerns holding interests in that district is probably greater than that of the trust. The independent mines include among others the Stevenson and Jordan, owned and operated by Corrigan, McKinney & Company; the Laura and the Winifred, by the Winifred Iron Mining Company; the Albany, Utica and Elizabeth, by the Crete Mining Company; the Longyear, Columbia, Leetonia, Pearce, Morrow and Croxton, by the Sellwood-Drake-Bartow interests; and the Agnew, Shenango, Kinney, Sharon, Grant, Leonard and Susquehanna mines, all in operation. So it will be seen that the Steel Trust has very healthy competition.
Up to the close of navigation 1918, to which period production is usually tabulated, because almost all of the ore is shipped by way of Lake Superior, the Mesaba Range had sent forward a total of 486,319,826 tons.

The production of all the Lake Superior districts in 1918 was 63,164,341 tons, of which 43,359,107 tons came from the Mesaba and other Minnesota ranges.

It is estimated that by the end of the season of 1920 the first billion tons of iron ore will have been produced by the Lake Superior district.