Magpie Mine Revived?

AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT
-by DONALD E. PUGH

Prospector, Bert Blackington had already searched ten miles of rugged glacier abrased hills and skirted numerous beaver dams north of Wawa when his trained eye finally spotted the reddish hematite stained rock for which he had long sought. Blackington was to retire on the wealth received from the sale of this claim to the Algoma Steel Company in 1909. Because ore was constantly needed for the roaring blast furnaces in the Sault, the company, by 1911, had constructed a railway spur north from the A.C.R. over the Magpie River to the location. Diamond drilling between 1909 & 1913 had revealed a forty to sixty foot vein of siderite iron formatio- estimated at 2.25 million tons and possesing thirty-seven per cent iron. By 1911 the Algoma Steel Company had completed a flourishing iron ore town with a broad main street bordered by impressive two story frame bunk houses and an immense three story stone manager's building. Food for this town, including vegetables, meats, flour and butter was valued by Sault Ste. Marie merchants at $292,000. for five years operation.

Iron ore content led to considerable research and the construction of the first sinter plant in Canada. By this process the ore was crushed, blended and heated to form flaky black sinter cinders which contained 15% more iron content than siderite. The physical size of the sinter plant with its six great blast furnaces was immense; a gigantic building the size of a football stadium backed by towering smoky chimneys. In comparison to this massive structure, the imposing headframe appeared small, and the complex array of supporting buildings, steam and generating plants, assay offices, administrative buildings, etc. were insignificant. Power for this industrial complex was carried in by hydro lines from the large Steep Hill concrete dam on the Magpie River. Development of the plant and dam was estimated at a cost exceeding two million dollars.

As the mine prospered, social life fell into a regular routine. Miners used the post office and general store, but travelled 15 miles to the Helen Mine for entertainment along the A.C.R. tracks. The eighty school children of the twenty - thirty families attended their own school until they were of age to work in the mine or leave for the outside world.

The future of the mine was cut short. The hot dry summer of 1921 lowered the level of the Magpie River so that power generation was suspended. A massive forest fire that year burnt the Helen Mine, destroyed a portion of the gold boom town of Wawa, but spared the Magpie Mine. Although only 1.5 million tons of the 2.3 million reserves had been mined, the Magpie was abandoned in late '21 in favour of the superior U.S. Mesabi ore. At this point no iron ore was being mined in Canada at all. The plant and the Steep Hills power station have been abandoned ever since and the railway spur and Magpie bridge have been removed.

Today the Magpie Mine is accessible on foot by a narrow winding rocky road which winds its way up and down some ten miles past rushing brooks and scenic small lakes from Highway 17. The area is well known to local residents for its abudant partridge, beaver, wolf, bear & moose which thrive in this wilderness setting amongst the pleasantly contrasting white

birch and black spruce forest. The first sign of the Magpie Mine is the appearance of a double row of bleached cement foundations, half covered with the remains of blackened, collapsed cedar shingled roofs. This once flourishing residential section is now heavily overgrown by stout trees. The thick stone walls of the manager's house yet stands, although its roof has long since disappeared. Passing a small, forlorn guard house, the hiker encounters the industrial complex itself. Two cement pillars, jutting into the sky, are all that remains of the once busy headframe. The shaft itself is sealed by a cement cover, dated 1966. The gigantic chimneys, dynamited for safety, lie crumbled on the ground like discarded drinking straws; their concrete flaking from the intricate network of rusted, twisted reinforcement rods. Two parallel cement walls, twenty feet in height, 200ft. long, and 100 ft. apart mark the remains of the sinter building itself. Large circular holes on the southern wall outline the former feed ducts to the massive blast furnaces, whose crumbling brick lined interiors seem to crouch, amidst the scattered piles of coal, slag, and sinter.

Fifty years of abandonment have done little to erase the vastness of the operation, the capital invested, and the waste. Environmental destruction is visible even at this late date. All that rusts or rots still remains.

Nature may not be able to reclaim the site of the Magpie Mine. Increasing demand for steel by expanding metropolitan centres suggests that within a few years, Magpie Mine may be revived. And so continues the environmental ripoff . Is it really to our advantage?