

How immigrants shaped the Iron Range, 1880 – 1930

by David LaVigne

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During the early twentieth century, the population of the Iron Range was among the most ethnically diverse in Minnesota. Tens of thousands of immigrants arrived from Finland, Austria-Hungary, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Canada, England, and over thirty other places of origin. These immigrants mined the ore that made the Iron Range famous and built its communities.

Minnesota has three iron mining ranges, which are collectively known as the Iron Range. The Vermilion is the northernmost, and it began shipping ore in 1884. The Mesabi Range is the largest and most important, and it started ore shipments in 1892. The Cuyuna first shipped ore in 1911 and is the southernmost range.

With the onset of mining operations, the population of the three ranges expanded rapidly. In 1885, there were fewer than five thousand people living on the Iron Range. By 1920, the population exceeded a hundred thousand. This growth was spurred by the need for labor in the mines and corresponded with a massive wave of immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Immigrants eventually constituted more than half of the Iron Range population. In the mines, they formed 85 percent of the workforce.

Forty-three different nationality groups populated the Iron Range. The earliest immigrants were Finnish, Swedish, Slovenian, Canadian, Norwegian, Cornish, or German. After 1900, the origins of the population expanded, with Italian, Croatian, Polish, Montenegrin, Serbian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Slovak, Hungarian, and Greek immigrants filling mining jobs. A sizeable Jewish population started main street businesses. Chinese immigrant men ran restaurants and laundries.

When the population began to stabilize after 1910, Finns made up the single largest immigrant nationality. They constituted a quarter of all foreign-born persons. Slovenes and Croats—referred to collectively as “Austrians”—were the next largest group at over 20 percent of the immigrant sector. Italians and Swedes each comprised close to 10 percent of the foreign-born population.

For immigrants, life on the Iron Range was not easy. Mine laborers worked long hours and received low wages. Underground mines operated on a contract labor system—an arrangement in which miners received payment based on the amount of ore produced—which led to bribery. Miners paid to get assignments in the most accessible and therefore most profitable ore. Mining work was also dangerous. Hundreds of deaths occurred due to accidents, with the deadliest being the Milford Mine disaster in 1924.

Beyond the industrial workplace, immigrants faced other challenges. The cost of living was high. To maximize savings, immigrants lived in substandard housing conditions. In a practice known as the “hot bed system,” day- and night-shift workers alternated sleeping in the same beds. Unmarried immigrant women labored long, hard days as domestic servants. Married women

rarely worked outside the home, but they supplemented family incomes by keeping boarders or lodgers.

In addition to material hardships, immigrants confronted social prejudices. Native-born Americans occupied the best-paying jobs at the mines. They viewed immigrants from northern European countries as “desirable” workers. For example, many Cornish immigrants entered supervisory roles. Southern and eastern European immigrants, however, occupied lower positions in the workforce hierarchy. Mining company officials described these immigrants as “black races” who were physically and intellectually inferior.

Community leaders likewise looked down on southern and eastern European immigrants. They objected to immigrants’ congested living situations, imbalanced sex ratios, perceived immorality, and association with political radicalism. The fact that many immigrants were Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Jewish caused further anxiety. Local chapters of the Ku Klux Klan developed during the 1920s in opposition to Catholic and Jewish immigrants.

Despite these challenges, immigrants adapted to the new circumstances. One key adaptation strategy was the formation of ethnic institutions. Saloons and socialist worker halls offered refuge from the hardships of mining. Fraternal and mutual benefit societies guaranteed financial support when accidents or deaths occurred. Churches and synagogues provided a spiritual home. Immigrants also constructed boarding houses, temperance societies, shops, consumer cooperatives, and newspapers.

Another adaptation strategy was the retention of connections with the homeland. Many immigrants came to the Iron Range only temporarily. Their aim was to save money and return to their countries of origin. During the early years of mining development, when most immigrants were men, this was especially common. But immigrants maintained homeland connections even when settling permanently. They sent home money and exchanged letters with friends and family in the old country.

Ethnic institutions and homeland connections divided the immigrant population on the Iron Range. Each immigrant group had its own community life, and tensions existed between groups. In larger cities, for example, there were usually separate Catholic churches for the Irish, Slovenian and Croatian, and Italian populations. Immigrants continued to speak their native tongues. They resided in ethnic clusters. They married partners of the same nationality.

Over time, though, ethnic distinctions diminished. Shared experiences created a new, interethnic identity. One such experience—and a third strategy for adapting to life on the Iron Range—was workplace organization. The first large-scale strike occurred in 1907, when the Western Federation of Miners organized an ill-fated walk-out on the Mesabi. In 1916, the Industrial Workers of the World led the most important labor conflict in Iron Range history, but it failed as well.

Americanization efforts were more successful in breaking down ethnic distinctions. Following the 1916 strike, mining company officials sought to prevent further labor unrest by investing in corporate welfare programs. They supported community beautification projects, model villages, gardening contests, visiting nurses, picnics, and Christmas parties. The construction of modern parks and recreational facilities led to Iron Range communities fielding excellent athletic teams.

Public schools and libraries were especially important to Americanization efforts. Adults attended night schools to learn English and prepare for citizenship examinations. In an effort to target women, instruction even extended into immigrant neighborhoods. However, the greatest attention went to the children of immigrants. Iron Range school buildings were palaces of learning. When Hibbing built a \$4 million high school in 1923, it was among the most impressive in the nation.

The era of mass immigration to the Iron Range ended at the close of the 1920s. In 1924, the U.S. Congress passed legislation that limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe. At the same time, iron mining operations became increasingly mechanized, reducing the size of the labor force. As second and later generations gradually outnumbered their immigrant forbearers, the Iron Range shifted from an “immigrant” population to an “ethnic” one.

For more information on this topic, check out [the original entry on MNopedia](#).