

A BILLION TONS OF IRON ORE

by

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Around Labor Day, somewhere out on the open waters of one of the Great Lakes, a giant ore boat steamed southward toward America's steel mills loaded heavy with a special cargo rich in Michigan history.

No one knows for sure which laker carried a particular ton of red rock in her generous belly, taken by hardy miners the likes of whom have worked Upper Michigan's generous iron country for 130 years.

But this freighter, whose name and crew may be forever unknown, docked at Detroit, Cleveland or Chicago and unloaded its shipment of iron ore pellets, setting a mathematical and economic milestone.

For this bulk carrier toted the one-billionth ton of iron ore shipped from Michigan's iron ranges, perhaps from the same rock formations where men first hauled ore out of the mines on their backs in 1845.

A billion tons of ore—based on today's formulas for making steel out of iron ore—equates to 652,741,514 tons of processed iron.

Another way of looking at it: iron ore mined in Michigan would make enough steel to construct 6,044 Mackinac Bridges!

The first important deposits of iron discovered in the U.S. were found in Michigan by a group of state geologists led by William A. Burt. The group was in the woods west of present-day Marquette on the morning of September 19, 1844, when they noticed that their compasses were making wild gyrations. They stopped their survey work and began to look for the cause of the problem.

Everywhere under foot they found the heavy reddish lumps of rock, laden with iron. The Marquette range became the foundation of the American iron industry, and has since yielded nearly half of the billion tons of ore taken from our state. The range is 33 miles long and from two to five miles in width. Later, in 1848, the Menominee Range was discovered, and in 1883 the Gogebic Range was found. Other deposits have since been added to these finds, and all have added their production to the Michigan output.



The iron industry has come a long way since the first iron was smelted back in the mid 1800s. The ore boat (above and below) is loading at a special dock at Marquette. Rail cars above the dock dump their loads into the chutes for speedy loading. A world leader in iron production for years, Michigan continues to rank among the top 10 areas, although one of our major ranges is no longer mined.

