
Lives Transformed: *Education and the Iron Range*

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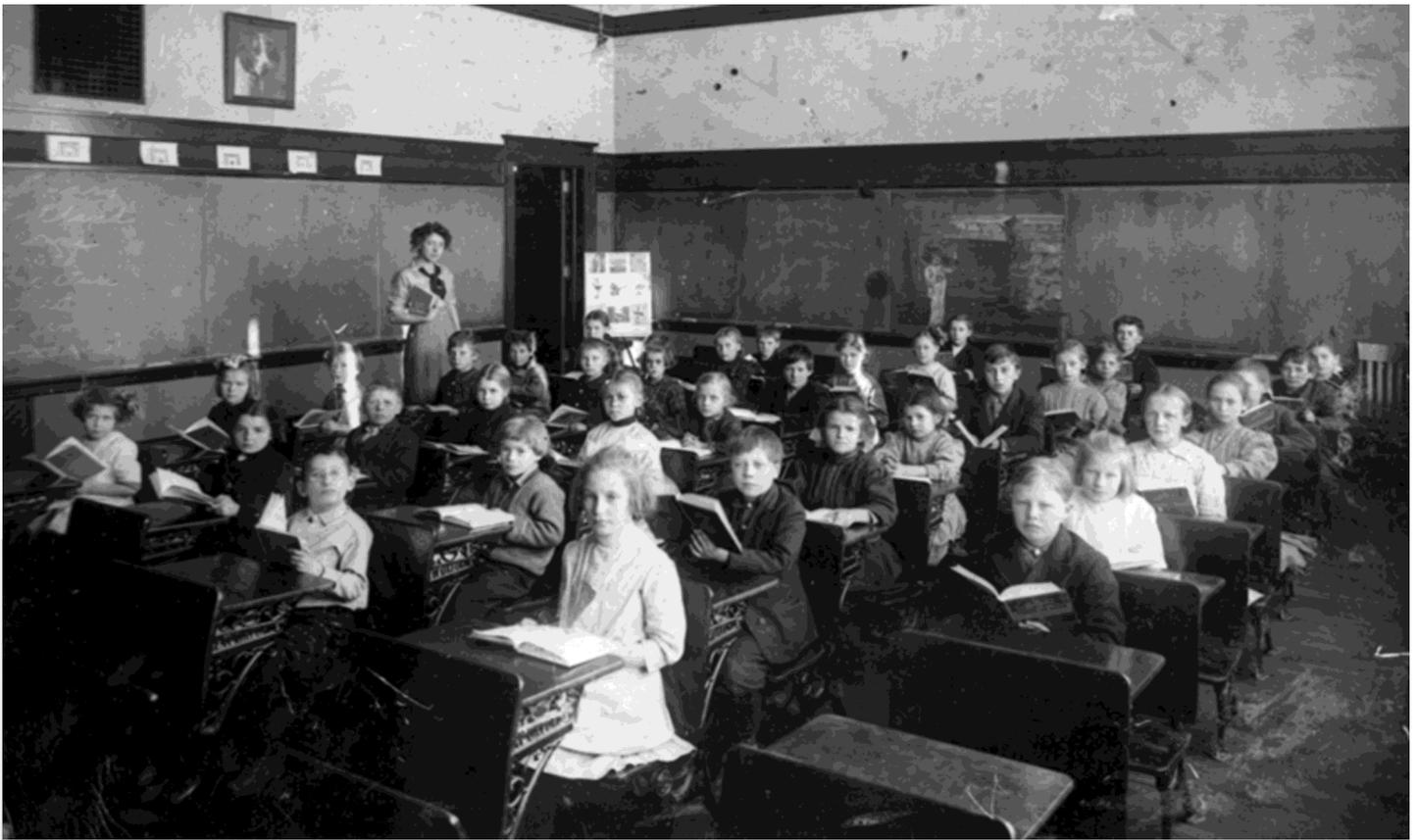
Mining changed the landscape of the Iron Ranges, and mining taxes created one of the finest education systems in the United States. Education served three purposes. First, to provide alternatives to employment in the mines; second, to transform a polyglot immigrant culture into a new Iron Range identity based on American values; and third, to provide a path to citizenship for thousands of immigrants in the first decades of the twentieth century.

For many Iron Range children, an education became a ticket out of the mines. Mary and Anton Perpich, told their sons: “Get a good education. Get out of the mines.”¹ Education was vital because working in an iron mine was backbreaking and dangerous. Frequent layoffs added to the uncertainty of life: children knew if “father’s lunch box was home on the shelf” that he was out of work. When miners were working, they spent up to twelve hours a day in the mine for monthly wages that fluctuated wildly. Danger from falling rocks, cave-ins, collapsed timbers, premature explosions, and electrocutions awaited miners especially underground. At least 213 men died in the mines in Ely, and between 1906 and 1916, ninety percent of the 700 men who died in Mesabi Iron Range mines were immigrants. The worst year was 1910 when 78 miners died.² Because the struggle to survive was never-ending, mothers feared for their sons and dreaded the whistle’s shriek during a shift. The sound meant that there had been an accident; someone was hurt or dead. No mother wanted her sons to work in the mines, but sometimes there was no alternative.

When a flood of water filled the Milford Mine on February 5, 1924, Frank Hrvatin, Sr. was one of the victims. His fifteen-year old son, Frank Jr., the first to see the water rising from below, yelled out a warning and ran for his life. He and six others reached the ladder in the shaft and frantically climbed to the surface. The boy knew his father was dead; he was too far back in the mine to get out. In those terror filled moments, Frank, Jr. became the head of his family. As the only boy, he had to support his mother and seven sisters.³ Frank Hrvatin, Jr.’s story is not unique. Because of a tragedy many boys and girls ended up working too young instead of going to school.



Photo courtesy of Minnesota Discovery Center

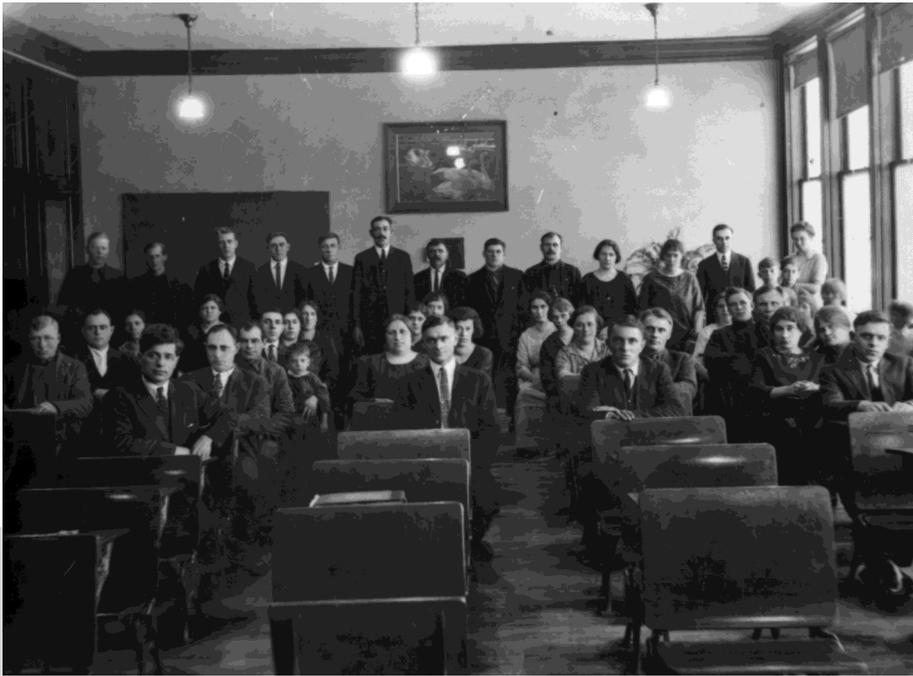


It is not surprising then that mothers especially wanted their sons to avoid the dirty and dangerous work in the mines. According to Lynn Marie Laitela, “mothers recognized the schools as the best hope for their children, even though they knew that, in many cases, it meant the end of old values... The schools offered what parents from many national backgrounds could not: a common language and specific well-defined common values.”⁴ The transformation of children into Americans began as soon as they walked through the doors of their neighborhood school.

The polyglot of languages spoken by students provided unique challenges for teachers in Iron Range schools. Polly Bullard who taught a third grade class at Adams School in Eveleth in 1908 wrote: “Almost every child was foreign born—Russian, Finnish, Cornish, Italian, Scandinavian, Austrian—which included many different eastern Europeans [including] Czech, Polish, Bohemian, Jugo-Slav, Serbian, etc. The newcomers often knew no English. They sat in silence, listening, watching.”⁵

Even though the children lived in two cultures, everyone knew they had to learn the common language and values of America. Sirkka Tuomi Holm grew up in Virginia and attended “a special course... for children of immigrants. It was a four-month class... and we were taught to speak English. The teacher must have been a genius, because at least twelve different nationalities were involved, and none of us spoke English.”⁶ Forty-three different ethnic groups lived and worked together so English by necessity became the *lingua franca* of the Iron Range.⁷ Children then helped their parents learn English.

During World War I, Americanization programs in the public schools were created by the Minnesota Commission of Public Safety “to defuse the potential threat of foreign values undermining the American way . . .”⁸ The war heightened patriotic feelings and suspicion of “aliens.” By 1919 immigrants were threatened with deportation if they “refused to become qualified for citizenship and to assume the duties and obligations of citizenship.” The Crosby school district issued a warning: “If you plan to remain in this country and are not a citizen, you had better commence night school at once.”⁹



Night school classes were offered to immigrants in English and civics. Depending on their level of education, adults attended classes for two to four years until they passed the citizenship examination. Some Iron Range schools like Hibbing had sophisticated programs.

Three full-time teachers worked for the “Americanization Department.” They held “home classes” for women unable to go to night school. Teachers taught English and offered “instruction” in “child training and parenthood.” About 125 immigrants per year from the Hibbing area graduated with their citizenship papers and a night school diploma, and in 1928-1929 people from

22 “nationalities” attended Americanization classes. “Promotion and certificates [were] granted to men and women because of their right attitudes toward school, home, and community responsibilities as well as ... their knowledge of law and government.” Adults could also take courses in basic mathematics, business, bookkeeping, stenography, and sewing.¹⁰

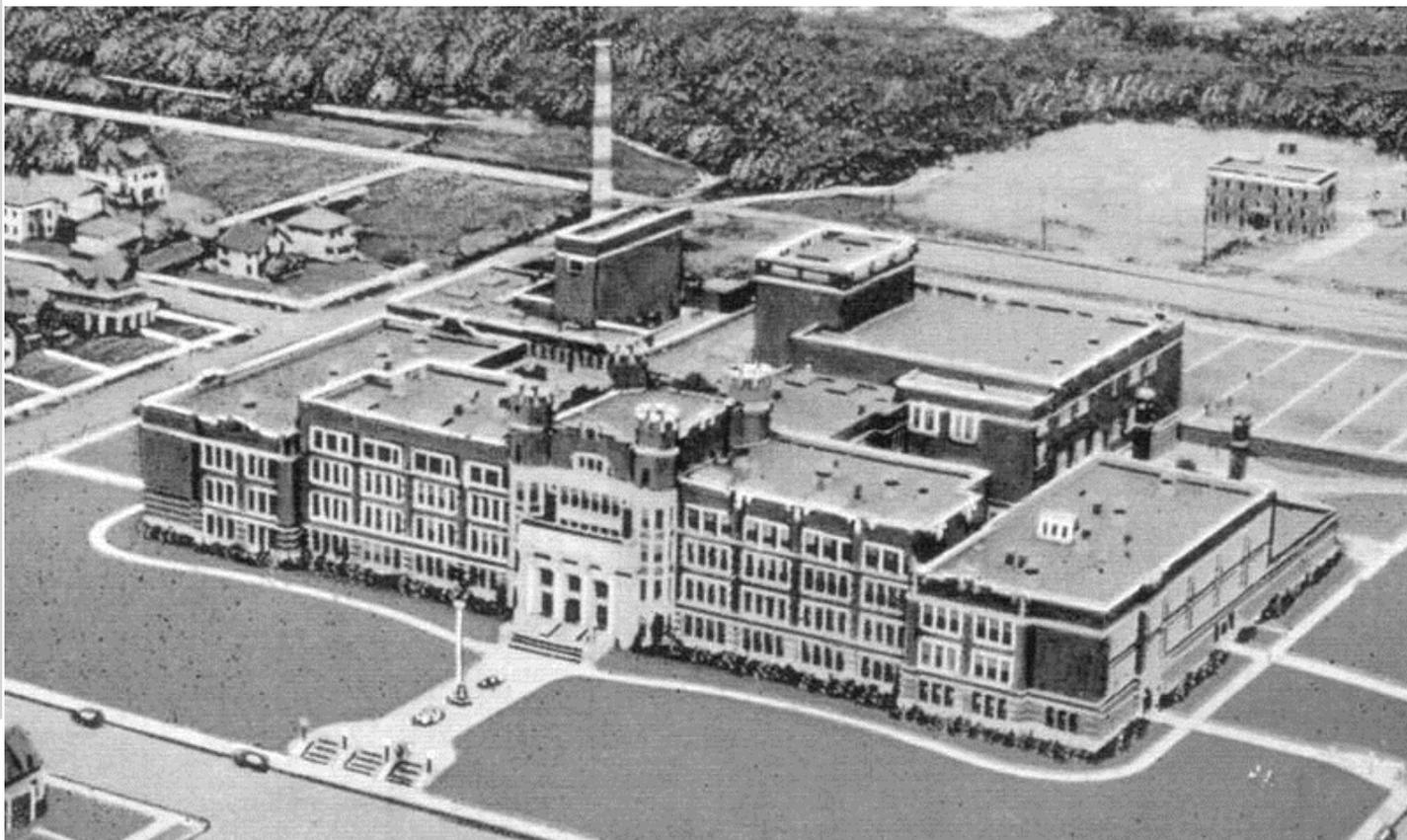
Even though the programs often had a patronizing undertone, immigrants took advantage of the opportunity to become citizens. Veda Ponikvar, publisher of the *Chisholm Free Press*, commented that “[Father] would sit at the dining room table and read all the newspapers—the Slovenian ones and the English ones.



He'd come home from the mine, his boots and clothes covered with ore dust . . . He'd finish eating, change clothes and leave for night school” Ethnic organizations promoted the naturalization process. In Crosby a one-act play, “Naturalization Court”, was put on at the Croatian Hall to help members learn how to become citizens. A Franco-American club organized in 1918 to “make its members better Americans, to better their social conditions and instill in them the high ideals of true and thorough American citizenship.”¹¹

The extensive night school offerings and social welfare programs provided to children were made possible because of mining taxes. The *ad valorem* (value added) tax was levied on mining property including ore that was still in the ground “at its real value” within the city limits. The high-grade iron ore was “an amazingly valuable natural resource that [could] never be replaced, and which does not renew itself in any way.” Taxes kept some of the mining wealth on the Iron Range. The revenue was used to “[build] public facilities seldom equaled in settlements of similar size elsewhere in America.” Communities invested in heating plants, hospitals, recreational facilities, and schools.¹²

In 1920 Hibbing built one of the most beautiful schools in the United States at a cost of four million dollars (around \$54 million today). The school included an auditorium modeled on the Capitol Theater in New York City, a swimming pool, gymnasium, modern science laboratories, and a library with a ten by 75 foot mural of the iron mining and steel industry painted by David Tice Workman. The ten-acre school campus is on the National Register of Historic Places. Visitors are welcome to tour the building.¹³



But Hibbing High School is not the only exquisite school on the Iron Ranges. Almost all of them included beautiful auditoriums, swimming pools, gymnasiums, libraries, and state-of-the-art equipment. Veda Zuponic, who graduated from Aurora-Hoyt Lakes High School in 1964 and teaches piano at Rowan University in New Jersey, hosts the international Northern Lights Music Festival in Aurora. She marvels at the high school auditorium and “how intelligently it was designed—its size ensured that even small attendances in a small town made the productions look successful.” She stated that: “Aurora has its own architectural treasure, one that can stand with nobility next to some of the great theatres in the world. One hundred years ago, someone [made] a statement about permanence and about stability.”¹⁴

School districts provided stability for students by hiring doctors, nurses, dentists, and social workers, and giving out school supplies so even the poorest students could learn. Clothes and shoes were sometimes purchased for very poor children. The help students received left a lasting impression. Stories about the school doctor setting broken bones or school employees buying poor children clothes are common. Communities cared for their children by showing that education mattered more than anything else. Iron Range children benefited (and still do) from world-class educations.



Iron Rangers also built six junior colleges that opened between 1916 and 1937. Hibbing was the first and was followed by Eveleth (1918), Virginia (1921), Ely (1922), Itasca in Coleraine (1922) and Crosby-Ironton (1937). Eveleth and Virginia became Mesabi Range Community and Technical College. Ely Junior College is now Vermilion Community College, and Itasca relocated to Grand Rapids. Crosby-Ironton closed in 1943 and is served by Central Lakes Community College. The Iron Ranges once had six of the fourteen junior colleges in Minnesota. Higher education was a priority then and is today.

Graduates of Iron Range community colleges can earn bachelors degrees from three universities and one private college without leaving their hometowns. Iron Range Engineering students are earning bachelors degrees from Minnesota State University-Mankato by working with industries on collaborative projects. Students can also earn master's degrees in engineering, education, environmental health and safety, and engineering management from the University of Minnesota and University of Minnesota-Duluth. Since 2006 the five community colleges that make up the Northeast Minnesota Higher Education District (NHED) have worked with seventeen Iron Range high schools through the Applied Learning Initiative to provide experiential education opportunities in fields such as nursing, industrial technology, advanced automotive, carpentry, and natural resources. The Advanced Learning Institute is a partnership with the Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board (IRRRB), the Minnesota Center for Engineering and Manufacturing Excellence (MNCEME) and the Range Association of Municipalities and Schools (RAMS).¹⁵

Education opened up a world of opportunity for Iron Rangers. Rudy Perpich, whose family was part of the poor working class on the Iron Range, became Minnesota's education governor. He wanted all students to benefit from marvelous Minnesota schools. When Governor Perpich died, former state Senator Doug Johnson said: "[G]rowing up in poverty in a mining location, shaped who Rudy Perpich was. But he got a great education in Hibbing. He was always Rudy from Hibbing. But he also always appreciated that a good education allowed him to get out of that poverty and make it on his own." Tens of thousands of Iron Rangers made it, too, because of a "good education."¹⁶



- ¹ Betty Wilson, *Rudy! The People's Governor* (Minneapolis: Nodin Press, 2005): 10
- ² "Ely miners who died research is completed," *Ely Echo*, 17 April 2010, 5; Arnold R. Alanen, "Years of Change on the Iron Range" in *Minnesota in a Century of Change: The State and Its People Since 1900*, ed. Clifford E. Clark, Jr., (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989): 180-181; D. J. Tice, "Iron Lady: The Voice of the Range," *Minnesota's Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 130; Pamela A. Brunfelt, "An American Communist: Karl Emil Nygard." Master's Thesis, Minnesota State University-Mankato, 2000, 83.
- ³ Berger Aulie, *The Milford Mine Disaster: A Cuyuna Range Tragedy* (Virginia, MN: W. A. Fisher Company, 1994): 36; Tice, "The Milford Mine Disaster, 1924," *Minnesota's Twentieth Century*, 55-61.
- ⁴ Lynn Maria Laitela, "Carrying the Burden: An Historical Reminiscence of Vermilion Range Women" in *Entrepreneurs and Immigrants*, ed. Michael Karni, (Eveleth, MN: Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation Board, 1991): 42
- ⁵ Polly Bullard, "Iron Range Schoolmarm," *Minnesota History* 32 (December 1951): 197.
- ⁶ Sirkka Tuomi Holm, "Facing Two Worlds," in *In Two Cultures: The Stories of Second Generation Finnish Americans*, ed. Aili Jarvenpa (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press of St. Cloud Inc., 1992): 14.
- ⁷ *Hibbing Minnesota On the Move Since 1893*, (Hibbing, MN, 1991): 33.
- ⁸ Laitela, "Carrying the Burden," 42.
- ⁹ "Attention Aliens!," *The Crosby Courier*, 7 March 1919, 2.
- ¹⁰ Minnesota, Independent School District No. 27, *The Hibbing High School, Hibbing Minn. Booklet*, "Interesting Facts About Independent School District No. 27 and the Hibbing High School," 5. Iron Range Research Center folder Hibbing High School, binder 1.
- ¹¹ Tice, 126; "To Present Plays at Croatian Hall," *Ironton News*, 29 March 1929, 1; "Franco-American Club Organized," *Crosby Crucible*, 13 March 1918, 1; Ivan Čizmič, "Yugoslav Immigrants in the U.S. Labor Movement, 1880-1920," in *American Labor and Immigration History, 1877-1920s: Recent European Research*, ed. Dirk Hoerder (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 183
- ¹² Frank L. Palmer, *Spies in Steel: An Expose of Industrial War* (Denver, CO: The Labor Press, Inc., 1928), 44. Alanen, "Years of Change," 155, 165; Rhoda Gilman, "The History and Peopling of Minnesota," in *Minnesota, Real & Imagined: Essays on the State and Its Culture*, ed. Stephen R. Graubard (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 201), 7; Daniel J. Elazar, "A Model of Moral Government," *Minnesota in a Century of Change*, 335.
- ¹³ *The Hibbing High School, Hibbing Minn. Booklet*, 34
- ¹⁴ Veda Zuponcic, "Aurora grad grateful for gift from the past," *Mesabi Daily News*, 13 November 2005, D3.
- ¹⁵ Minnesota State Board for Community Colleges, Office of Planning and Research, *Minnesota Community Colleges Fact Book, 1987*, Table 3 (St. Paul: Minnesota State Board for Community Colleges, December 1987): 3.
- ¹⁶ For more information go to the Northeast Minnesota Higher Education website <http://www.nhed.edu/district-initiatives.html> and "Advanced Minnesota. Five Colleges. One Training Solution." website <http://www.advancedmn.org>
- ¹⁷ Theresa Monsour, "'One of the really good guys': Education reform was a priority," *Duluth News Tribune*, 22 September 1995, 7A.
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