

The Alger Line — Part 3

Todd Lindahl

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By the year 1915 the Duluth & Northern Minnesota Railway had become a strong little railroad with operations in all three of the counties that make up the arrowhead region. Its mainline now extended 100 miles from its terminus at Knife River all the way into central Cook County. A major branch line ran through Duluth Township and nearly back to Lester Park. Other branches led to the base of Molde tower hill and Alden Lake on the Cloquet River. Farther up the mainline numerous branches and spurs radiated into the virgin timber tracts. Possibly between 400 and 500 miles of branches and spurs snaked their way through the timberlands. There were stories of connecting to the Port Arthur Duluth & Western Railroad at Gunflint Lake and gaining access to the Canadian port on Thunder Bay. Rumors circulated that Alger - Smith was going to build a giant sawmill at Knife River, which would again be the largest in the world.

These were exciting times in 1915 and the future looked very promising. In reality, it was becoming very expensive to ship the logs 100 miles and then pay the Duluth & Iron Range Railway to haul them 20 more miles from Knife River to Endion. There they had to be transferred to the Northern Pacific to be taken to one of the two sawmills, again for a fee. Fuel for the 13 locomotives, track maintenance, wages for all of the train crews, logger's wages, and other overhead began to erode profits. Worse yet the timber in Cook County was of poor quality. There were more lakes to load logs from during the summer in Cook County, but the terrain was hilly and rocky making spur building difficult and expensive. Yet in spite of these many persistent drawbacks, General Manager John Millen still believed his railroad would overcome these hardships and prevail for decades into the future. He had been with the Alger Smith Lumber Company since before their first logging railroad was built back in 1868. John Millen was the heartbeat of the Alger Line and when he died suddenly at 2:00 P.M. July 22, 1916, the railroad began to die as well.