

Kane Siding on the Alger Line

Todd E. Lindahl

September 2003

Frank Kane arrived in Knife River in 1898 when the Alger-Smith Lumber Company moved its logging operation here from Michigan. During the summer of '98 he was put in charge of part of the construction crew building the Duluth & Northern Minnesota Railway north towards the timber stands. The company had expected to build about 15 miles of track that year, but finished the construction season with only 7½. The mosquitoes and flies were so bad that workers quit their jobs in large numbers, which slowed the work to a crawl. A good portion of this first part of the mainline is within Duluth Township. This included the important site that became known as "Kane Siding" 2¼ miles north of Knife River. Today, the Kane siding site would be almost a half-mile north of the West Shilhon Road on the old abandoned grade. The siding tracks were on the east and west side of the mainline track. A wye track enabled locomotives to be turned when necessary. The grade going north from Knife River was steep and difficult for trains headed up the line. It was common practice to "double" every northbound train between mile 1 and Kane Siding. At mile 1 the train would be cut in half and the forward section taken to Kane Siding. There, the front half was set out on one of the siding tracks. The engine alone then backed down the grade to mile 1 to retrieve the rear section of the train. Arriving back at Kane Siding, the train was reassembled and continued on to its destination in the north woods. All of the southbound trains stopped at Kane Siding to set up their brake retainers before descending the hill into town. In the peak years later on, loaded cars were stored on the sidings and wye when the yards at Knife River filled to capacity. Before starting down the hill the conductor had to call the dispatcher on the company telephone to get clearance.

Kane spent many years working as a logging camp foreman during the winter months. During the summer of 1900 he was given the task of building 20 miles of new track. Eventually he became superintendent of the Duluth & Northern Minnesota Railway, and was instrumental in laying out many of the numerous spur lines that radiated into the timber. His skills were legendary when it came to selecting the best route. In spite of his considerable skills and his high positions in management, Frank Kane never learned how to read or write.

In 1919 the Alger-Smith Lumber Company ceased its logging operations in northeastern Minnesota. By this time the railroad was well over 100 miles in length and north of Grand Marais in Cook County. The official end of track was at 99.8 miles, but in reality the track continued on past that point.

The Minnesota Railroad & Warehouse Commission forced the railroad to continue passenger service until July 21, 1921. On that day the last D&NM passenger train, pulled by engine number 3, passed through Kane Siding on the final run. The Alger-Smith Company ultimately sold the D&NM to the Cloquet Lumber Company in 1923. They started pulling up the rails at the north end in May of that year. On November 14, 1923, while working in the rain, the wrecking crew removed the rails at Kane siding. By the 30th they had finished picking up the last of the rails in the Knife River yards. It was the final curtain for the Alger line and the most colorful logging railroad in Minnesota.

March 31, 1903 - a D&IR train hit a logger named Smithfield on the Sucker River trestle. The force of the impact knocked him off of the trestle causing him to drop 80 feet to the riverbed below. The train was stopped and backed to the trestle where the crew descended the riverbank and found Smithfield very dead in the water. The man had stolen two "turkeys" (a logger's knapsack) from a nearby logging camp and was attempting to make his escape by running down the tracks. It was later found that

Smithfield had been drinking heavily prior to the accident, which undoubtedly contributed to his bad taste, bad morals, and bad timing.

Historical note by Todd Lyndahl