

The French River Section House  
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Duluth Township had within its borders two Duluth & Iron Range Railroad section houses. One was located at French River and the other at Palmers. The French River section house was the older of the two dating back to May 1887 and generally not as well known. It became section # 3 since it was the third section house from the start of the D&IR line at Endion. Peter Norman became section foreman at French River until 1899 when Peter Johnson replaced him.

The number of men stationed here fluctuated over the years, but for much of the time it was home base for a foreman and six laborers. In September 1900 Foreman Peter Johnson complained to his boss that the handcar they had was in such bad shape and was so dangerous that the men were considering quitting if they had to continue riding on it. Johnson went on to say that they could not get any gravel for the track and that he had only three men, which resulted in little work being accomplished. Unless things improved soon, he too would quit along with his men. Apparently all of these were legitimate complaints since the railroad immediately set about correcting the shortcomings.

Laborers had the option of living in the section house if they wished and paid a small fee for room and board. For the single men this was a pretty good deal since the price was much less than what they would have paid elsewhere. In many cases the section foreman's wife did the cooking and cleaning. The groceries and other sundry items were ordered and arrived sometime later on the train. In 1910 the railroad allowed Matt Johnson, the French River section foreman, a half tariff rate for items in less than carload lots (called LCL) that were intended for servicing the section house. This special rate was also extended to Mrs. Sanberg at the Palmers section house. The practice continued for three years until 1912 when the railroad assumed that items not intended for use on the railroad were being sold to or by private individuals. Whether this was fact or just rumor is unknown, but the railroad stopped the half-rate service anyway. Perhaps it was simply an excuse for the railroad to get out of their half-rate policy.

The French River section house not only served the purpose of boarding the section crew, but also served as a passenger depot. The west end of the building contained a waiting room with 6 settees for people to sit on while waiting for the train. This service continued for 72 years until the depot closed permanently on March 11, 1959. Other buildings also located here were a freight depot built in August 1912, a handcar & tool house, outhouse, and icehouse. A two-story barn built in 1923 had four stalls for cows and an indoor chicken coop. In August 1927 a 17- year-old girl with a 6-month-old baby had been hired as caretaker. At this time there was one cow and two pigs that were kept in the barn.

During the winter months of 1916 foreman Matt Johnson had only Sam Lahti and Matt Lahti working with him. This was a normal procedure for the winter months during this period in time though. Some big changes were about to happen soon at French River starting in the next year.

In 1917 the Duluth & Northern Minnesota Railway. (The Alger – Smith Line) decided to take up the rails on its Greenwood Lake branch. It was along this branch that the State of Minnesota had its fish hatchery. Since no roads existed to access the hatchery, it would therefore become totally isolated with no way to get the fish out. An immediate search for a new hatchery site was begun after which the state selected French River as its new home.

In early June 1918, at the request of E. W. Cobb Superintendent of Fisheries, a new 325-foot siding was put in across from the section house. This track was intended for use during the construction of the hatchery complex and then later for routine fisheries operations. This plan worked well at first, but soon forest products began to accumulate next to the siding. This prompted the railroad to extend the siding in 1920 to provide more space for the fisheries. A road was considered from the hatchery to the freight house, but amazingly the old French River Mining Company was still in existence and owned the land where the road needed to go. Before very long the new highway 61 would be built adjacent to the hatchery.

As the stock market crash approached in 1929 there was one foreman and six laborers working out of French River. By 1930 things were starting to deteriorate rapidly. The railroad began to look at ways to save money by eliminating as much as they could. In June 1933 the French River section house was retired from service in this cost cutting strategy. The crew from section house # 2 at Lester Park was then assigned to handle all of the French River track maintenance duties.

On December 7, 1940 Lester Park foreman Charles R. Swanson ran his speeder into the wreckage of the derailed Ely local freight train.

Sadly, he was totally and permanently disabled as a result of this terrible accident. Gilford Axelson, who was also onboard the car, was badly injured as well. This was the climax of the Lester Park section and it was afterward consolidated with the Endion section crew. All of the track work between Duluth and Two Harbors was now the responsibility of the crews from Endion, Palmers, and Two Harbors. The former sections working out of Lakeside (London), Lester Park, and French River had vanished forever. At its peak there were almost 400 men working in the track department on the Duluth & Iron Range division alone. Today there are roughly 35 men covering what's left of the division. I wonder what Peter Johnson would have thought about that?