

The History Corner
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Alger-Smith Rail Line

I nosed the car into an open grassy area and turned off the ignition. Grabbing my hat and sunglasses I exited from air conditioned coolness and entered once again into the heat and humidity of another August day. Slipping the car keys into my pocket, I quickly surveyed the small parking area and headed directly towards the lake. Clearly, from the number of vehicles scattered around, I was not alone in my endeavor. The heat had driven others to Knife River Beach as well. People were gathered in small groups both up and down the shore. A few of the braver ones were in the water but most were not. After all this is still Lake Superior. I passed a group of adults sitting on blankets, and worked my way among their children, who were mostly throwing rocks or involved in a game of "tag". I watched them as they ran between waters edge and the bordering woods, chasing each other, laughing and screaming as only children in the sheer joy of play can do.

Someone waved at me. As I got closer, I realized it was a neighbor of mine who lived just down the road. I waved back. We yelled quick hellos to each other before he turned to run and dive back into the lake. His determination impressed me but didn't tempt me. I hadn't come to swim but to do a little exploring. I continued on until the beach turned from cobblestones to boulders. The hiking here was not as leisurely, each move requiring a more concentrated effort as one hopped from rock to rock hoping not to make a misstep. Occasionally, broken pieces of concrete, wave washed and smooth, appeared along the shore giving me hints that I was getting closer to my destination. I worked my way a few hundred yards further. Boulders had now given way to bedrock. In places blue harebell and common yellow tansy poked upward through cracks providing a brief brushstroke of color to the backdrop of grayish stone. I walked to the edge of the water and sat down. Across from me, not more than a couple hundred feet out in the lake, lay the rock and concrete island that my daughter Kali calls, "the old railroad bridge". To her and her friends it is a destination to canoe to, and to swim off from. To me it is the last vestige of an incredibly unique piece of our history, the concrete dock marking the southern terminus of the old Alger-Smith Rail Line.

In 1898 Russell Alger, a former Governor of Michigan and eventual United States Senator, along with M.S. Smith, a prominent Detroit financier announced their plans to build a new railroad (officially called the Duluth and Northern Minnesota) inland from Knife River to harvest the then mostly inaccessible tracts of timber along the North Shore. Within a year seven miles of rail line had been built, much of it concentrated along the eastern edge of Duluth Township near where today's Shilhon, Korkki and Homestead Roads run. By 1901 the main line had extended to over 46 miles with countless secondary lines crisscrossing through much of French River and Clover Valley country. For the first ten years trainload after trainload of prime white pine logs arrived daily in Knife River, were transferred on to the Duluth and Iron Range Line, and then hauled to Alger-Smith's main sawmill facilities on Rice's Point in Duluth. In 1909 the company decided to expand operations into the pulp trade and it was then that the concrete dock was constructed. Pulpwood was in demand by eastern paper mills and the dock was built to permit trains direct access to boats as they docked and loaded before heading east across Lake Superior. It also allowed for the unloading of goods such as eastern coal that was distributed locally. Eventually Alger-Smith's operations would extend to the Canadian border, consist of over 400 miles of track, and have under it's hire more people than any other employer in Duluth but for all its

accomplishments there is little tangible that remains today to tell us of its glory days. That's why I came to sit and gaze at the concrete dock. It's one thing that time has not yet been able to take away.

I looked down to see two ladybugs crawling up my arm. I watched them for a while and then carefully brushed them off onto the rocks. It was time to start back. I decided on my return to forego the shore and instead headed inland. Here the tansy, which had struggled to find a foothold in the bedrock, grew in abundance, marking the line of the old rail bed. As I parted a path through the nearly shoulder high flowers I uncovered a few hidden raspberry plants and stopped to pick a handful of ripe berries. As I ate them I looked back towards the lake. There were no sounds of pulp being loaded, no smoke of steam engines in the air, no trains to rumble the ground beneath me. But just beyond the tansy and the trees and the waters edge, lay a battered island of concrete that will probably outlast us all.