

The day the railroad died

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It happened on a Friday. The trains idled to a halt and the docks grew quiet. A gloom settled over the town of Two Harbors. No one saw it coming, but everyone would remember the day the railroad died.

On Jan. 18, 1963, the iron ore docks of Agate Bay closed when the Duluth, Missabe, and Iron Range Railroad ceased operations in Two Harbors. Black Friday, as it came to be known, ended an 80-year tradition of Two Harbors' railroading and left a town's future in doubt.

Over the next three years, every aspect of community life would feel the effects of Black Friday.

"Ore Shipping End Order Stuns City," was splashed across the front page of the Two Harbors Chronicle and Times on Jan. 24, 1963. The announcement of the previous week left the town in shock, searching for answers.

"We had no idea this was coming," said David Battaglia, mayor of Two Harbors from 1963 through 1976. "It was a sad, sad day."

Two Harbors' economy revolved around the DM & IR Railroad. Fathers and sons rode the rails and worked the ore docks. Local businesses depended on the sailors that came through town and the tourist dollars that the lake freighters attracted.

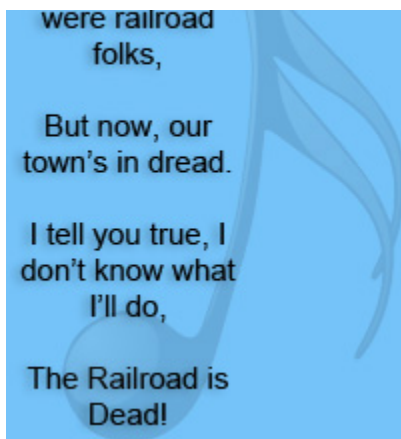
According to the Chronicle and Times, nearly 250 able men lost their jobs that day. The initial announcement stated that all iron ore from the Range would be shipped through Duluth for the entire '63 season.

The genuine fear those first few days was palpable. Chris Blanchard, a local singer, composed a song titled, "The Day the Railroad Died." The following verse illustrates the town's distress:

My kith and kin were railroad folks,
But now, our town's in dread.
I tell you true, I don't know what I'll do,
The Railroad is Dead!

It was written in the days following Black Friday as a tribute to her father and uncle, both of whom worked on the rails. Her family, like many others, had more than one member lose their job.

My kith and kin



Art Credit: Ethan Walker

“Railroading was a family affair,” Battaglia said. “If a family had five men in it, the odds were good that at one point or another, they’d each work on the rails or docks.”

In the decades leading up to 1963, Two Harbors experienced the ups and downs of a one-industry town; as the steel industry went, so too did Two Harbors. During World War II, the American steel industry was booming and Two Harbors saw its production rise to an all-time high. In 1944 alone, they shipped 19.3 million tons of ore to support the war effort.

By the mid-1950s, however, the demand for Minnesota ore was decreasing and the mines of the Vermilion Iron Range were depleted. For many who depended on the industry, this was particularly bad news for Two Harbors because nearly all of the ore from that range passed through its docks.

By 1962, the American steel industry was operating at half capacity. The DM & IR had cut its work force down from 5,000 to 2,500. Larger boats, longer trains, the automation of equipment and the dieselization of train engines all meant a lower demand for labor. Despite all this, Two Harbors’ ore docks shipped more than 15 million tons of ore during that year.

“It was close-knit community back then,” recalls David “Doc” Fuentes, whose father worked for the railroad. He was laid-off in 1958 after a serious back injury, but was aided by his co-workers during those tough times.

“I remember the guys (railroaders) would chip in a dollar or two a week to help us get by,” Fuentes said. “There was nothing they wouldn’t do for each other.”

Fuentes’ father found work shortly after with the Abex Corporation. However, due to cutbacks in the wake of Black Friday, he once again lost his job.

“Local businesses didn’t thrive like they used to. We lost clothing stores, jewelry shops—they simply disappeared,” Battaglia said. “That’s the way it went for a while.”

According to Mel Sando, director of the **Lake County Historical Society**, many of the men who’d lost their jobs were able to transfer to Proctor or Duluth DM & IR operations. The

hundred or so who didn't have seniority were able to find work at the Reserve Mining Company in Silver Bay.

Those who remained in Two Harbors set out to redefine a town that had only known one way of life. The finite resource of iron ore was projected to only last another 70 years, according to Sando, so if ever there was time to start fresh, she believed it was then.

The railroad returned to Two Harbors in 1966, but as a shadow of its former self. Today, some empty storefronts and dilapidated buildings remain and serve as a reminder of the day the railroad died.

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1

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