

Iron Center Museum tells story of Moriah mines & mills

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, October 24, 2003

PORT HENRY — Adirondack visitors familiar with the region's remote hiking trails, secluded canoe carries and wooded camps might wonder why a village in the Adirondack foothills, overlooking Lake Champlain, hosts a museum called the Iron Center.

Many lovers of the pristine Adirondack Park don't know that here, in the hills looking east toward Vermont, is one of the largest deposits of iron ore in the country and the home of dozens of the 19th century's most important iron-producing communities in America.

Port Henry was the "capital" of the small iron-mining kingdom of Moriah township between the mid-1800s and 1971, when Republic Steel closed down the last of its working mines in the North Country.

"For a long time, all we had going here was International Paper and the mines at Mineville," said one of the volunteer docents at the 5-year-old museum this summer, explaining why it was important that the Iron Center exist.

Mineville, about 4 miles inland from Port Henry, was where the actual mines of Moriah were located. Port Henry was where the early owners of the mining companies lived, where they loaded their ore onto waiting canal

barges and railroad cars, and where they built their corporate headquarters.

Park Place

The hub of operations for the Witherbee, Sherman Company — and, later, for Republic Steel — was at Park Place, on the southern end of Port Henry.

Today's Park Place is a historic district established to preserve Port Henry's past. Park Place includes three beautiful 19th century buildings — the former Witherbee, Sherman office building, the large carriage house next to it, and the community railroad station — along with a few

restored cars from the old Lake Champlain & Moriah Railroad and the hulking remains of a tremendous concrete trestle.

The trestle was one of the largest in the world when it was built in 1916. It supported a huge steel cantilever bridge crane that moved ore from the LC&M cars onto waiting barges.

The LC&M itself was a historic part of Port Henry and Moriah's iron industry. The railroad served one purpose: to carry iron ore down the steep, 7-mile-long mountain passage from the Moriah mines to the processing and port facilities in Port Henry.

Before the construction of the railroad in 1869, the incredibly heavy iron ore was carried down the 7-mile stretch from Moriah by horse-drawn wagon on a plank road. According to one local history, written by Charles Warner and Eleanor Hall, "The teamsters had to sit on the brake handle so that the 'hind wheels' could not



The Iron Center museum, formerly the Witherbee Sherman carriage house, c.1891.



This incredibly detailed diorama in the Iron Center museum depicts 15 acres of the Mineville mining works, about 4 miles northwest of Port Henry.

turn, as all the horses could do was to steer the seven- or eight-ton load.”

The first of the three historic buildings on Park Place to be built was the three-story brick building that now houses the offices of Moriah’s town government. It was originally the Witherbee, Sherman Company office building. Built in 1875 for the bargain price of \$20,000 (a little over \$300,000 in today’s currency), this French Second Empire structure was built to impress.

According to Park Place’s nomination for the National Register of Historic Places, prepared by Jessica Roemischer Smith, the iron company’s office building “is architecturally significant as the most impressive [but by no means the only] example of French Second Empire style in the town of Moriah. ... (It is) historically significant for reflecting the central role the iron-mining industry

played in the historic development of the town.”

Below the former Witherbee, Sherman office building is the second Park Place structure to be erected, Port Henry’s 1888 Richardsonian Romanesque train station, now used as the community’s senior center.

When the train came through Port Henry from Ticonderoga on its way toward Montreal in the mid-1870s, it played a key role not only in supporting the iron industry but in Port Henry’s summer tourism. The station was “live” through the 1950s, when Republic Steel started the long process of reducing its expensive Moriah mining operations. With the accompanying downturn in the local economy, Port Henry became a less attractive tourist destination, and passenger rail travel slumped.

The third of the historic buildings on Park Place was certainly

the least significant of the three when it was built in 1891. Back then it was the humble carriage house for the former Witherbee, Sherman office building next door. Over the years it was adapted to serve several different purposes, most recently when it was refurbished in 1998 for use as the Iron Center museum.

The Iron Center

The main portion of the Iron Center museum is contained in the large room that used to be the garage bay. A series of large graphic displays and lovingly restored mining artifacts line the walls, leading you around the room.

One picture shows the “cages” in which men traveled down nearly a mile into the mines, the shaft boring at a 32-degree angle into the earth. The picture illustrates the key reason for the mines’ closing in 1971: It simply took too long to get from the surface to the work site underground and back again for the works to be profitable, when open-pit mines were taking ore straight out of the ground.

At the far end of the room, a 1950s Republic Steel film shows the Moriah mining operations as they were at their peak. The movie is far from being a thriller, but it does give visitors a sense of the kind of work that was done so far underground just a few miles away. It only takes about 25 minutes to watch the whole thing, and it’s worth that, at least.

Volunteer docents like former hoist operator Archie Rosenquist and retired mining chemist Jack Brennan are on hand at the Iron

Center to lead visitors through the displays and tell them what the old days were like.

Brennan pointed out a photo of a man standing atop a ladder leaned along the side of what looked like a stalactite extending from top to bottom of a cave. The “stalactite,” Brennan explained, was actually one of the iron-ore pillars left to hold up the inside of a mining chamber within the ore body. Iron ore had been cut away around this pillar — and now, in the photo, a miner perched on top of a ladder was preparing to drill a hole where an explosive charge would be placed to bring the pillar down. With its 68-percent iron content, even the pillar was to be milled and processed for its iron.

“I remember that fellow,” Brennan said. “Someone once asked him how he handled that heavy drill, standing on top of a 400-foot ladder.

“ ‘Very carefully,’ was all he replied.”

Farther around the room, Rosenquist drew our attention to a scale model of an unusual railroad bridge built in 1871 across Bulwagga Bay from Port Henry to Crown Point, the first rail line connecting Port Henry with the outside world. In the middle of the three-quarter-mile span was a “floating bridge” or “drawboat,” a boat that worked kind of like a drawbridge. The 250-foot-long barge, with iron rails running its entire length, was meant to be moved when boat traffic needed to pass into Bulwagga Bay.

According to the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum, the drawboat was used throughout 1871 until the winter. When the



The former Witherbee Sherman Company headquarters, a Second Empire structure built in 1875, now the Moriah Town Hall.

ice broke the following spring, however, operators found that it had lifted all the trestles off their footings. The Bulwagga Bay bridge was abandoned, the drawboat was stripped of its rails — and the barge was sunk.

The drawboat was found in 1999 by a sonar survey that mapped the bottom of Lake Champlain. Virtually intact, the drawboat is believed to be the most complete shipwreck found in the entire lake.

Mineville diorama

As remarkable as the old drawboat was, even more remarkable is an 8-by-8-foot diorama on display in its own room at the Iron Center museum. This incredibly detailed scale model depicts 15 acres of the Mineville mining works, about 4 miles northwest of Port Henry. The diorama contains 15 buildings, three motorized displays (in cutouts behind glass) showing underground operations, and a working HO model of the

LC&M railroad route around the mineheads.

The diorama was built over the winter of 2001-02 by modeler William Kissam, of Westport, and miniatures builder Brian Venne, of Moriah, with help from James Kinley. The hands of the model makers were guided by the photographic memory by Floyd Robinson, a retired miner and assistant superintendent of the Moriah works, with help from Rosenquist and Brennan.

A mural covering the walls of the diorama room, depicting the surrounding communities and geographic features, was painted by Elayne Sears, of Crown Point.

A grant that paid for the project — \$16,000 for the model, \$4,000 for mural — was worth every penny.

Directions, info

Port Henry is located on Route 9N, south of Westport, north of the turnoff to the Champlain Bridge, and north of Crown Point and Ticonderoga. The Iron Center is located on Park Place, just south of downtown. It is clearly marked from Route 9N, and there's plenty of parking.

The Iron Center museum is open to the public from mid-June through Mid-October on Thursday, Friday and Saturday from noon to 3 p.m. Tours for

school groups can be arranged, free of charge, from May through November by appointment.

While you're visiting Port Henry, be sure to pick up the brochure that will guide you on a historic walking tour of the village's significant architecture. The brochure is available at the Iron Center, the Sherman Free Library on Church Street, or from the Moriah Chamber of Commerce.

For more information about Port Henry and the Iron Center museum, visit the Moriah Chamber of Commerce Web site at porthenry.com, or call the Chamber office at (518) 546-7261.



Port Henry's Richardsonian Romanesque train station, built in 1888, now the Moriah Senior Center.