

AN ESCANABA & LAKE SUPERIOR HISTORY LESSON

The Escanaba & Lake Superior is one of America's oldest extant short lines, tracing its history to 1898. Begun as a logging railroad, the first 7 miles of track were constructed from Wells, Mich. to LaFave's Hill in 1897 by the Escanaba River Co., a subsidiary of the I. Stephenson Lumber Co. In 1898, the name was changed to Escanaba & Lake Superior Railway, and track extended west to Watson, Mich. Through the years, several branch lines were added, including one from Wells into Escanaba proper.

In 1900, E&LS was reorganized as the Escanaba & Lake Superior Railroad, and an agreement was reached to extend the railroad to a Milwaukee Road connection at Channing. The Milwaukee then used trackage rights over E&LS to move iron ore trains from Channing to the Milwaukee's dock in Escanaba. This arrangement lasted until 1935, when Milwaukee and Chicago & North Western entered into a pooling arrangement to move ore to Escanaba. Though the E&LS petitioned the Interstate Commerce Commission and the United States Supreme Court to be allowed to join the joint operations, it was blocked from doing so by the Court in 1938.

In the 1940s, Harnischfeger Corp. built a plant on the Escanaba Branch to manufacture large construction cranes, and the Escanaba Paper Co. built a large mill just west of the railroad's Wells headquarters. The last branch lines were lifted in the 1930s, and log trains ended in 1943 with the closing of the

Stephenson mill in Wells.

With the advent of taconite ore mining in the 1950s, Hanna Mining Co. was redeveloping its Groveland Mine near Randville on the Milwaukee Road into a taconite facility. In the early 1960s, E&LS was purchased by the Hanna as a "backstop" in case the Milwaukee and its partner C&NW began charging excessive rates.

In 1969, E&LS stopped serving Escanaba Paper during a strike at the mill, and in response mill owners built a new connection to C&NW and Soo Line at Escanaba, and cut E&LS traffic to a minimum. E&LS limped along through the 1970s with local business and some loads from Harnischfeger. The railroad came to the attention of railfans at the time because of its roster of Baldwin diesels; it remained all-Baldwin until expansion in the 1980s. On Oct. 21, 1973, Minneapolis businessman and railfan John Larkin helped organize a Northstar Chapter, National Railway Historical Society trip over the railroad. Intrigued, when Hanna Mining finally threw in the towel and filed to abandon the railroad in 1978, Larkin

and his father Wade stepped in and purchased it.

In 1977, Milwaukee Road filed for bankruptcy and was looking to unload its Michigan and northern Wisconsin lines. A major shipper, Champion Paper in Ontonagon, asked E&LS to step in, and in March 1980 the railroad finally reached its namesake Lake Superior when it purchased the Milwaukee line from Iron Mountain to Ontonagon. It leased the line from Iron Mountain to Green Bay and purchased it outright in 1982. Interestingly, E&LS then served Hanna's Groveland Mine after all. Through the years, E&LS purchased several other

branch lines in the area, with most used for car storage.

In the early 1980s, major traffic sources were the Groveland Mine and the Ontonagon mill, but both have since closed. The Ontonagon mill was demolished and E&LS pulled up 12 miles of track from Rockland to Ontonagon in 2011. Today E&LS survives on local business, car storage, and a well respected freight car rebuilding operation in the old Harnischfeger complex, also home to a large fleet of passenger cars and locomotives Larkin has collected over the years, including the last two surviving Baldwin Sharknose diesels. — *Steve Glischinski*

