Faint Path Is All That Remains Of Old Thompson Lumber Co. Railroad

By Bob Rotberg

MANISTIQUE—A green swath 30 miles long cuts through the Hiawatha National Forest south from Big Murphy Lake and Eagle Lake to Indian River, then makes its way towards the town of Thompson.

The green swath, overgrown with vegetation of 30 years, is all that remains of the Thompson Lumber Company railroad. Representative of logging roads of its day, the Thompson line served a mill in Thompson owned by the now extinct Delta Lumber Company.

This faint path through the forest, and photographs, are all that remain of the railroad for a former engineer, Frank Voisine, of this city, and Charles Faulkner, also of this city, once a night-watchman on the road.

Crosses Line

Crossing the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Sault Ste. Marie line at a junction, the Thompson road first extended 12 miles to Indian River. In the early Upper Peninsula logging days the softwoods come down the river to this terminal.

After the turn of the century loggers began to lumber hardwoods and the railroad extended its lines north about 20 miles. One branch went past Thunder Lake and ended on the west side of the Big Murphy. The other crossed the Murphy and terminated at the Northwoods Club near Eagle Lake.

Oxen skidded the hardwoods from the forests to clearings where horse-powered sleighs would load and cart the logs to the trains. The sleighs would often carry more than a large logging truck hauls today.

During softwood days the engines pulled three cars of white pine. The men had to make so many trips to the mill during their day and haul a certain number of cars each day.

No Schedule

The trains did not run on a schedule. The men usually labored from 4 a. m. to midnight in order to complete their work. Pay amounted to $2.10 per day.

Two long days were required to make the hardwood round-trip after those operations began during 1905-06.

Five locomotives, at first using wood for fuel, drew the carloads of logs. The first engine bought to start the road was a nine-ton wood-burner. In 1882 an 18-ton H. K. Porter model was shipped to Thompson by schooner from Mackinaw City after making a trip from Philadelphia.

The Porter was a switch-type engine, last to be sold after the line was abandoned in 1923. It was reduced to scrap cars later.

Two Ba... ... on and a 35-ton, w... ...ed in the road's inve... ...ime. The heaviest locom... ...on the

THOMPSON ENGINE—Pictured in 1904 when it served the Thompson logging railroad, the above locomotive was an 18-ton H. K. Porter. It hauled car-loads of softwood to and from Indian River for the Delta Lumber Company. Leaning out of the cab is engineer Louis Hugh while Frank Vosine, Manistique, stands behind him as fireman. To the rear right is conductor Charles Estelle while Andrew Smith stands in the rear-left.

tracks was a 45-ton Manchester Blood.

Steel Tracks

Varrying in weight, the standard-gauge steel tracks were set on ties that had a base of sand. No grading was done to prepare the road. The tracks were scrapped in 1923.

An engineer's crew on the line consisted of a fireman, two brakemen and a conductor. The Thompson had crossing rights over the Soo line at the junction when the conflicting trains were in an equal class.

In effect the Thompson road had precedent whenever both lines were hauling freight of any kind. If a Soo passenger train was due the Thompson freight had to wait, however.

At times the tracks would be laid on snow and the timber would have to be hauled before the spring thaws. Voisine remembered one time when he drove the Porter north from Thompson in the morning only to run into a blizzard north of the junction.

Deep Snow

The snow became very deep, he recalled, and then the locomotive became stuck in the snow. The men took turns watching for another locomotive due on the tracks later that night.

When the crew awoke the next morning snow was bigger than the engine. Eventually the other train was seen belching black smoke down the track, and the blizzard was still raging.

Voisine feared that the other engine would wreck the lighter Porter. Before the oncoming locomotive reached the first train it too stalled in the snow. Both were forced to wait until the blizzard stopped and then shoveled their way clear.