

WHERE DID NORWAY GET ITS NAME?

*A study of history about
Norway, Michigan
by local resident, and
author, Judy Carlsen*

It's a mystery! And who doesn't love a mystery?

The origins of the naming of the city of Norway have long been an object of conjecture. In 1901, Walter Nursey published "The Menominee Iron Range", which has remained to this day an authority on the mining history of our area. When writing about Norway he says:

"The origin of the name is a matter of some dispute, whether it was called in honor of the nationality of the founder, or out of respect for the monarchs of the forest from out of the shades of which it was hewed, remains undetermined."

Yet recent tourist publications tend to ignore the possible "Norwegian connection" and flatly state, "Norway is named for its abundance of Norway pines."

During the 1990's, after our Centennial, we as a city sought to capitalize on the romance of our name. We spent some money, and even more effort, in creating three spectacular Viking Ship gateway signs to contribute to the Scandinavian atmosphere that our name naturally evokes. Our Leif Erickson Fall Festival, our Scandinavian Holiday Celebration, our City of Norway logo on flags, signs, vehicles, etc., all lend themselves to this same ambiance.

Do we have a right to claim a Viking image? Yes, indeed it appears we do have such a right. There are interesting, and logical, explanations for our city's name which point to a Norwegian link. These take some digging in the history of the Menominee Range, along with a little bit of knowledge about how things were done in the early days of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

Actually, the naming of our city is not a great mystery after all! We can be certain that our city was not named for the tree, or for the Country, but for the Norway Mine, and for the mining location that arose, almost overnight, around this mine. So the question is not so much who named the city, but who named the mine? Can we find this out? Do we have any evidence of who usually named the mines of our Menominee Range? Yes, we do have such evidence.

The owner of our local mines in the early 1870s was the Milwaukee Iron Company. Their chemist, Dr. Nelson Hulst was instrumental in discovering several of these mines, and in proving their commercial value. Unfortunately, the Milwaukee Iron Company went bankrupt during an economic recession, resurrecting itself almost immediately as the Menominee River Mining Company. The president of this company was J. J. Hagerman.

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In the Marquette Mining Journal of August 4, 1877, and repeated in the Dickinson County Centennial Book, page 29, we read:

“Mr. Hagerman, president of the company, from Milwaukee, and A.C. Brown, a stockholder, were here (Vulcan) last week...they visited all three of their mines, (the Vulcan, Breen and Quinnesec). They selected a town site while here, and I believe settled on “Vulcan” as the name of both town and mine.” Here we see Mr. Hagerman, the president of the mining company, naming the new Vulcan mine, as well as the town that arose around it.

Again, in “The Menominee Iron Range”, page 39....“In August (of 1878) the Norway Mine, section 5, township 39, range 29, was opened up by the Menominee River Mining Company.” Here we see that one year after Mr. Hagerman named the Vulcan Mine, the Norway Mine was opened by Mr. Hagerman’s Company.

In a letter dated December 15, 1879, from James John Hagerman, to Mrs. Florence Hulst, she is praised for her willingness to leave her home in Milwaukee to live with her husband Nelson Hulst on the northern frontier. Speaking of Florence, Wisconsin, Mr. Hagerman writes, *“We wish to call the new town and the mine Florence, in honor of the first white woman who had courage to settle in this rugged country. Will you permit your name to be used?”* (The Wisconsin Magazine of History, Volume VII, pages 406-416)

Can we not assume that Mr. Hagerman, and his officers, named all of their mines, and the towns that rose around them, just as they did Vulcan and Florence?

The mines of the Menominee Range were not named by chance or caprice. They could not have been named by city councils or governments, which did not as yet exist. They were not named by unschooled miners. Look at the names of the mines in the Norway area:

- Vulcan: named for the Greek God of Iron.
- Aragon: named for the region in Spain from which a superior strain of iron was mined.
- Cyclops: named for mythological blacksmiths who crafted armor and weapons for the gods.

(Curry, Perkins, and Stephenson were named for mining captains or officers in the mining company.)

It appears that these mining executives liked to display their intelligence and learning. The evidence is very convincing that the officers of the Menominee River Mining Company named the mines of the Norway-Vulcan

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area. This was the custom of the day. Actually, they alone had the power and the authority to do so.

The first mine located and operated in the area we now call Norway, as we have seen, was the Norway Mine, whose test pit was sunk in July of 1877 by Anton Odill, a valuable employee of the Menominee River Mining Company. J.J. Hagerman, who was not Norwegian, as his name implies, but of German-English ancestry, may have named this mine as he did because its location at the top of our “Norway Hill” was reminiscent of Norway, Europe. His family history shows that he was widely traveled in Europe, and would be familiar with Norwegian terrain. However, another factor may well have entered into the decision:

Walter Nursey’s “Menominee Iron Range”, p. 36, states: *“The iron ores of Norway and Sweden are popularly supposed to be the purest in the world. They suffer, as indeed do all the ores of the world, when placed in comparison with those of the Menominee Range.”* Mr. Hagerman was no doubt familiar with international mineral resources, as this was his passion and livelihood. How likely that he would name the Norway Mine with every hope and confidence that its ores would prove rich and bountiful, as were those of its namesake. (The Aragon Mine was later named for the rich Spanish mine fields in just this same manner.).

It is, of course, possible that Mr. Hagerman named his mine for the Norway Pine, which has long been the assumption. However, in research with the U. S. Forest Service and study of the records of the logging companies we find that, in the 1870s, the Canadian Red Pine was not widely known as the Norway Pine. This misnomer was applied to the Red Pine because early loggers coming to the Midwest from Maine thought the Red looked like the pines they cut “back home.” Indeed, walking the hill upon which the Norway Mine is nestled, one finds very few Red, but, rather, a large abundance of the mighty White Pine. The Red Pine that is prevalent in our area now was to a large degree planted by our schools at the time our village was being moved to the lowlands at the beginning of the 20th century. The Red is a fast growing pine, does well in the sandy soil on the plains of Dickinson County, and is not susceptible to some of the diseases that the White Pine was succumbing to at the turn of the century. So our school’s foresight established this hardy tree, yet added to the confusion about our town’s name.

It’s quite likely Mr. Hagerman had a mixture of sentiments and associations as the above in mind, when he named the Norway Mine. It is only certain that he and the small group of his executives named the mine which was the basis for our city.

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The Norway Mine did not prove to be one of the super producers of the Menominee Range, yet it was an important mine to the Menominee River Mining Company. The company thought enough of its prospects to install in the Norway Mine the very first electric light system in the Upper Peninsula. This was in January of 1880! Consider how advanced these entrepreneurs were, when Edison had just produced the first incandescent lighting in 1879! (Menominee Iron Range, p 72.)

A time-line of events might clarify the history of Norway:

1. The City of Norway was not incorporated until 1891.
2. Before that, the township of Norway was organized in 1881.
3. Preceding that, the town of Norway was platted by C. L. Wendell, in the fall of 1879.
4. Before that, "the Norway mining location consisted of a settlement at the summit of the hill around the Norway Mine". (The Menominee Iron Range, p. 69)
5. And the Norway Mine, as we have seen, had its origins in its owners, J. J. Hagerman and his Menominee Mining Company, its test pit sunk by employee Anton Odill in 1877.

Finally, a comment that is often heard is, "There are no Norwegians in Norway". I beg to differ. We have many Norwegians. They have been here since the very beginning, as any perusal of the earliest City Directories will reveal. It is pure conjecture, but in line with "the way things were done", that the mining company may have sponsored experienced Norwegian miners to work the Norway Mine. The city is not named for these early settlers, nor did they name it. The facts are clear and historical, nevertheless, that these early Scandinavians had an important role in creating our village.

Two early newspaper excerpts suggest the connection of earliest Norway with our Viking heritage:

From the Menominee Iron Range, p. 69. *"Within this well drained basin and partly on the ascent, rests the business portion of the town and the Swamp Mine, whilst on the hillside and summit are the dwelling houses of the Norwegians."*

Another quote, from the "Menominee Iron Ranger", July 31, 1880, and quoted in the Dickinson County Centennial Book, p 50. "Mr. Wendell expects to see the hardwood lands north of Norway taken up and cultivated by the Norsemen now engaged in and about the mines, their places being filled with newcomers."

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From these eyewitness accounts, it is apparent that among the very earliest miners were Norwegians. They came here with the express purpose of earning enough money to buy good land and settle on their own farms. They established the Norwegian Lutheran Church and their family names have melded into the Norway community for generations:

Andersen, Aune, Belsvick, Belsvig, Bensen, Bergquist, Blomgren, Carlsen, Dahl, Frende, Graff, Guldswog, Handberg, Hansen, Hammer, Heim, Igeland, Jacobsen, Johnsen, Kallin, Kyarem, Knudsen, Lindahl, Mickelsen, Nilsen, Nystrom, Olsen, Pedersen, Pettersen, Ramberg, Rasmussen, Rikstad, Rosenborg, Sethney, Solheim, Stromquist, Svendsen, Thompsen, Thoresen, Wollum.

These names are from the original membership roll of the Norwegian Lutheran Church held by Bethany Lutheran Church. By the 20th century these Norwegian families had lost much of their identity. Most of them married into the much larger contingent of Swedes, and seemed quite content to be called Scandinavians. Soon, they all but vanished into the melting pot that is our community. They were among the first to gladly become “just Americans”.

In conclusion, may we reiterate that we did not create a “marketing tool” when we determined to emphasize our Norwegian and Viking roots. We have reclaimed a heritage to which we have every right. The name, Norway, has many pleasant connotations. We intend to make every possible effort to fulfill the expectations of those who, ever more frequently, go out of their way to visit our city. Those of us who live here feel it is an honor to be a “Norwegian”, no matter what our ethnic background!

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