

THE QUINCY IRON CO. IN BRANCH COUNTY, MICHIGAN

1976

The little that remains of the Quincy Iron Mine furnace can be found on a hillside on the Jonesville Road, just one half mile east of the junction with the Clarendon Road, on the north side, in Butler Township. To the south lies Quincy Township, in the center of which is the village of Quincy. At the foot of the hill containing the furnace flows the Hog Creek River, a small but rapidly flowing stream.

Fifty years ago there was a mass of ruins. The remains of the furnace were then scattered about, including wheels and pulleys of cast iron, some scraps of slag, gray and brown in color, and as a key to this whole effort, several heaps of pig-iron, rusting by exposure to the weather. As far as known this was the first and perhaps the only effort to extract iron from the potentially rich find of the Shooks Prairie area located just a mile north of the furnace.

It should be remembered that in this period just before the Civil War that many small businesses were started by ambitious young men anxious to get a foothold in this new land of Southern Michigan. If their new businesses would have prospered, then they would have been settled for many years to come; but if they failed, as many did, then there was the matter of closing up affairs and moving on to somewhere else. Many a sawmill was started, some by waterpower and others by the use of the new steam power. In the same manner, this area was served by the new flouring mills and grist mills, nearly all of which were busy filling the needs of this growing population.

Early in the 1850's John More came to Branch County from the Eastern States, having worked in various shops and foundries there; but being of a restless nature had journeyed to Detroit for a brief time. Then took the new railroad westward. Liking the appearance of Branch County, he worked in several shops in Coldwater and Quincy.

In much the same way did Alpheus Saunders come up from Ohio and become a timber buyer for a Branch County sawmill, a duty that took him over much of the county. It must have been on one of these trips that he first saw the possibilities of this Shooks Prairie area. At this point, it might be wise to say a few words about the Shooks Family, who were early land buyers of this tract of prairie in Butler Township and who were busy afterwards in selling off parcels to eager buyers, for this area was clear of any standing timber and so could be plowed at any time.

The Shook family was active in the local politics, often battling against bitter rivals for the county offices and helping put the new state government on a firm footing. Further, they were all outdoor men, skilled in deer hunting and in trapping. At a time when the family seemed on the verge of gaining power in politics, the elder Mr. Shooks was killed in a hunting accident by his own gun while chasing deer. Thereafter, the younger ones lost interest in political matters.

The Shooks must have realized the possibility that their soil bore iron ore, but with their father's passing, they seemed to set such developmental ventures aside. One wonders, if the father had lived, what strides the Shooks might have taken in developing their own holdings.

It was these events that brought John More and Alpheus Saunders together in the year of 1854 and set them to planning of their iron mine. At this time the country was crying for iron; the railroads, farms, shops, and forges across the land all had uses for it. So the future of this mine looked promising.

In addition to the Shooks property, the two partners set about securing leases on adjoining properties, and on the nearby farms which would entitle them to mine and remove any suitable ore to the furnace works. This particular area for the furnace was selected because of the presence of some hardwood trees there and for the creek with its never-ending supply of water. The furnace built was of the charcoal type which used fans and blowers to create blasts of air that reduced the ore to iron.

Orders were placed at Detroit and Pittsburg for the necessary machinery. Most of the year of 1855 was spent in getting the signed leases and permits in order. These were recorded in the Branch County Clerk's office October 20th of 1855. The exact entries are mentioned in Liber One - page 263.

Next came the problem of raising the capital funds needed. Already the sums needed proved sobering, for there would be needed teams and drivers to hire, a crew for digging, a crew of woodcutters to fall and split the logs into ricks for burning, still another crew to construct the huge furnace, and a furnace-master to supervise the burning.

While John More was on hand to direct the mill operations, it was necessary for Mr. Saunders to visit to various towns to raise more money. In his pockets he carried choice samples of the ores, each displayed in a glass bottle, but often this was not enough. "Let's see your iron first" was usually the answer. But enough funds were gained to move the operations forward. In the year of 1856 the work moved along steadily. Trees were cut up into 8 ft. lengths, split and piled for curing, later to be burned for the charcoal. By now the wagons of ore were arriving each day, coming from the Shooks fields, dumping their loads and returning for more. In this working crew were various members of the Lampman families, two of the Cusik family a few of the Lindseys and a scattering of others. For any one who has the patience to search, these names can all be found in the census records of those times. Perhaps it was just as well in those days that the young men then had no idea that in a few years they would be wearing a blue uniform and involved in the grim Civil War.

At last, much of the machinery did arrive at the station in Quincy and was loaded into wagons for hauling to the furnace site. There followed many days spent in erecting the furnace and installing the new machinery, then it was discovered that certain parts were missing. Instead of re-ordering with the long wait to follow, a local blacksmith was put to work, after being furnished drawings of the missing parts. After the furnace was erected, a truly imposing structure, it drew people for miles around to view its size. A water-wagon was pressed into service, drawing water from the nearby creek, and from this creek the horses would be watered and the men would sit on its banks to eat their lunches. A circular sweep was built for a team of horses to pull, walking in an endless circle, and by this means generating power to operate the blowers.

At last all was ready and on a summer day in 1856 the fires were lit, the horses started the sweep to turning and even a handful of spectators stood nearby. After some time the furnace master stopped all operations - the sweep was not giving out enough power to turn the blowers properly. So there were more delays while the disappointed spectators wandered homeward. It was not a simple matter to step up the speed for the blowers, requiring days of labor and more calls for the blacksmith's services. All the while expenses continued and all the men looked forward to their Saturday pay. There were more attempts to find money, but the hard times of 1857 were now upon the country and not enough funds could be found, and so almost at the time it was to begin operations, the Quincy Mine enterprise was halted, deep in debt. The furnace master, with a wife and children to support, left for his home back East.

John More, sick at heart, lingered a while, then left for the northern part of Michigan to at last connect on to the big mines up there. Mr. Saunders settled up the business matters to the limit of his ability then. It is thought that he left for the western gold fields of Colorado and some accounts did drift back of his having done well.

There was some attempt to revive the mines again at the beginning of the Civil War, but much of the machinery had been removed by the creditors and at that time labor was hard to come by. They did use what stock or ore remained at the furnace site and it was reported to be of good quality. For many years the circular pathway where horses trod remained and visitors would stare and wonder at it until it finally became grassed over.

For years to come the great furnace stool alone, while the cows grazed around it and Sunday visitors would muse and ponder on what might have been.

So the old Quincy Mine remains an intriguing part of Quincy's local history.

There is just this one last footnote to this story. Shortly after the World War II, two men, using modern electrical equipment, set up a small test set at the mine site which they ran for less than a day. Using some of the best ore, they brought forth some samples of a good grade of iron which later went on display in Coldwater.

So the possibilities are still there, and who can tell what the future may yet reveal.