and organization at the University of Minnesota. He has published two research monographs on interorganizational relations in urban settings: Exchange Networks and Community Politics (1979) and Social Organization of an Urban Grants Economy (1985). He and Wolfgang Bielefeld (assistant professor in social sciences, University of Texas at Dallas) are working on a third book which looks at the growth and decline of nonprofit organizations during the Reagan years and a fourth book which documents the changes in corporate contributions in the Twin Cities between 1980 and 1989. His research on nonprofits and the corporate grants economy has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the Program on Nonprofit Organizations at Yale University, the Northwest Area Foundation, and CURA.

Home on the Range

by Lisa Thornquist

The Iron Range of northern Minnesota has its roots in mining. The area was first settled by Europeans in the late 1800s for the express purpose of mining the deep pockets of iron ore. Although forestry and recreation also form part of the area's economic base, it is the mining that has dominated the economy and left an indelible mark on the landscape.

Mining towns in the United States are usually characterized by instability. Jobs fluctuate with the demand for ore and deposits are usually mined out quickly. As one site is depleted, the mining company moves on and the population moves with it. The Iron Range of Minnesota, however, is different. Although the Range has experienced the usual ups and downs of a mining economy, and working in the mines has meant that miners have endured many layoffs, the miners have developed a deep sense of commitment to the Range and have made the choice to stay rather than move on.

Miners on the Iron Range

There are several factors that have supported the miners' ability to stay on the Range. First, the mineral deposits were so vast and so accessible that they have sustained a century of mining. Job fluctuations have been associated with changes in the demand for iron ore, not its availability. Every recession has brought hardship but jobs have always come back. Even during the Great Depression, when 70 percent of the mining jobs were eliminated within three years, the miners stayed on. Instead of moving, they developed strategies to remain on the Range. After all, jobs always came back.

Another factor has been the strong tradition of socialist ideology, that took hold on the Range in the early part of this century. It is attributed to the Finns, who may have brought socialism from the old country. Along with socialist political thought came consumer cooperatives and a strong tradi-
tion of community solidarity—neighbors helping each other. During the labor strikes in the early part of the century, miners of all nationalities joined together to fight the common enemy—the mining companies, and U.S. Steel in particular. Labor unionism and pro-labor sentiment is still strong on the Range.

Third, the Range is separated from the rest of the state by vast areas of sparse population. The strips of towns that follow the veins of ore were connected by means of easy transportation, serving to knit the community together. Although transportation on the Range was well developed, many of the early miners left the area only for a rare trip to Duluth. As a result, they developed a strong tradition of being different from other Minnesotans and built an image of the Range as a world apart. After a hundred years of settlement, third and fourth generation Rangers still tell the stories of the early days: the friction between ethnic groups and the struggles of the early miners against cold weather and mine disasters. But what most clearly defines a Ranger is the strong collective memory of the ever-present animosities between miners and mine bosses. The Range identity is steeped in history and looks towards the past rather than the future for its source of strength. This collective memory helps Rangers cope with economic fluctuations even today.

The recession of the 1980s had a devastating impact on the Iron Range. Ore shipments were cut in half between 1981 and 1982. Unemployment rose from 8.2 percent to 17.7 percent in St. Louis County and from 12.1 percent to 17.9 percent in Itasca County. Employment in mining dropped and never recovered (Table 1). Though there had been economic swings of this magnitude before, for many miners, it was their first experience with long-term unemployment. Unemployment benefits were extended for over a year in some instances, but the length of unemployment lasted considerably longer. For the first time in the history of the Range, large numbers of people moved out. Between 1980 and 1990, the population declined by over 15 percent. In the smaller towns, more than 20 percent left.

Despite the large exodus, many of the long-term unemployed decided to stay and many who had left, returned when the economy brightened. How they managed during long periods of unemployment and considerably lower incomes was the focus of my research in 1990.

The Survey of Unemployed Miners

Workers who had been laid off between 1980 and 1982 from either Butler or National Steel taconite plants in Itasca County were identified through the “call back” list from the local union of the United Steelworkers of America. There were 146 names on the list; 120 listed addresses on or near the Iron Range. Of these, 45 were unreachable and 26 refused to be interviewed. The remaining 49 formed the basis of this study.

Each miner completed a standardized survey consisting of questions about the strategies they had used to manage financially while unemployed, how they went about looking for a new job, and whether their new jobs paid as much as their jobs with the mines. The survey also asked about the number and types of social contacts they had on the Range, the amount of travel they had done outside the Range, and whether they had been born and raised on the Range.

Personal interviews were conducted with each of the miners to supplement the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Persons Employed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>15,353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>6,317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>6,275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Minnesota Department of Jobs and Training.

Survival strategies included relying more on hunting and fishing for food.
The most common cutback, used by three-quarters of the miners, was to limit social activities. As one miner explained:

"Basicly your entertainment is having barbecues and everybody would bring their own stuff to barbecue. You'd get together at people's houses instead of going out. Which is kind of what our social life consisted of anyway. Everyone was in the same boat."

There were differences, however, between older and younger workers, married and single. The older miners were much more likely to cut out social activities altogether. The younger, single workers, with fewer financial responsibilities, were more likely to only limit social activities. The younger, married miners still went out, but they spent less money. As one younger miner explained, "he still went to the bars on weekends, but instead of bringing $20 to spend, he would bring $10."

Other cutbacks included spending less on clothing, limiting vacations, relying more on hunting and fishing for food, and using utilities less. They talked about chopping their own wood or hanging their clothes in the basement to dry in order to save money. They turned off lights. They spent more time hunting and fishing and turned these leisure activities into ways to supplement the dinner table. Again, the older miners were much more likely to cut back on expenses in all aspects of their lives. Younger miners cut back less and were more likely to skip loan payments as a way of cutting back. Living a frugal life was part of being a Ranger. Most of the miners talked about how their parents and grandparents did the same thing. They lived "close to the bone" and didn't spend money needlessly.

In addition to limiting expenditures, miners supplemented their incomes by working odd jobs for cash or drawing from their savings. Nearly two-thirds of the miners who supplemented their incomes tried to find cash jobs. This was by far the most popular strategy. They relied on friends and neighbors to steer jobs their way. As one younger, married miner explained:

"I used unemployment for almost two years, then working odd jobs for cash that I didn't claim. You almost have to learn how to cheat... I did a lot of welding work out of my garage, for cash. I trapped a little bit. Everything for cash, nothing by check. I did some wallpaper work, a lot of things strictly by cash."

One man raised rabbits, another grew Christmas trees, another raised walleyes in a pond outside his back door. This tradition goes back to the turn of the century, when many miners owned land outside of town that they could farm during layoffs or strikes. Many present-day miners owned equipment, such as trucks and logging skidders, that they could use to hire out for jobs. When money got really tight or they couldn't find jobs, they sold their equipment to raise cash.

Commitment to the Range

The strategies the miners used to stay on the Range show two things. First, that a knowledge of how to ride out periods of unemployment has been passed down from generation to generation. These miners remembered their parents telling them stories of layoffs. Now they know what their parents went through. But second, their strategies reflect the commitment they have to the Range. Their commitment is demonstrated by the sacrifices they are willing to make to avoid leaving the Range.

When asked why they stayed and put up with low paying jobs or no jobs at all, the miners' answers were very clear. The Range is their home; it is where their family and friends are. And they talked about the land. They couldn't imagine living in a place where you couldn't hunt and fish near your home. They pointed out the slower pace of life, that one doesn't have to put up with traffic congestion or crime. One miner talked about living in the city and how he hated driving on "all tar" roads. Another talked about how he loved to walk in the woods through waist-deep snow and that one couldn't do that in "the Cities" because they are always plowing everything. But in particular, they talked about their children and how they couldn't bring themselves to take their children away from the Range. The miners felt that their children wouldn't be able to cope off the Range, an illustration of a Range identity that is different from mainstream America.

Among the forty-nine miners we interviewed, almost one-third had moved from
the Range for a period of time. They were very clear as to their reasons for moving and for returning. They left to find work. They returned because they love the Range.

"Once you fall in love with the country up here, you don't want to leave it. I was gone for ten years and I came back."

"Seems to me I'm always coming back for some reason. Maybe family ties or friends or seems like this has always been home."

**Commitment to Each Other**

One result of the recession on the Range is that its people are even more committed to the Range. Some miners view the recession as an event that helped unite the communities.

"I think through the layoffs it brought people closer together. People have learned to help one another more, more so than what they had been. It almost became a closer knit group of people, from a sociological standpoint, people rallied around each other."

In fact, the whole history of the Range has been built on adversity and struggle.

The Range succeeded as a place and as a community because of its ability to pull together against common enemies. For those who lived through the recession and hung on, it has allowed them to add to the legacy of the Range by writing another chapter on the strength and character of Rangers.

"I think the past ten years is a testimonial to the fiber and the character of the people of the Iron Range. That was demonstrated to me, to see first-hand, what I was only told about as I was growing up. How the people pulled together and worked through tough times, and weathered the storm and still maintained a good quality of life in terms of placing importance on strong values and strong education....I think having lived through that and having seen how people adjusted and coped with diversity and made it work and made it happen is a statement to the quality of the area."

The commitment is taken to its extreme by a few miners, who talked about refusing to ever leave the Range, "I would rather die here, and I probably will."

**Lessons from the Range**

At a time when families and communities are under increasing stress and politicians are decrying the decline of values and commitment, much of public policy debate focuses on how to stabilize families and communities. Debate also continues over whether government has an obligation to bring jobs to people or people to jobs. The lesson from the Iron Range is that communities do have strategies for surviving; that people who have a strong commitment to a place will find ways to stay there. The challenge to public policy makers is to find ways to build on the strategies people fall back on and the history of a particular area rather than imposing new solutions that are out of step with the values of a place.

The Iron Rangers interviewed for this project were able to hang on by working a variety of odd jobs and by cutting back their spending to match their reduced incomes. Local governments responded in kind, by dividing up public jobs among as many of the unemployed as possible and by keeping property taxes down through the use of a taconite relief tax. This lowered the cost
of living on the Range. The local communities recognized that people are their most valuable resource and that giving aid to as many people as possible might allow those people just enough to stay on.

These solutions may not work in other communities. After all, the Range communities have socialist roots and a long history of labor union activism. The legacy of the Iron Range is a legacy of pulling together as a community to help everyone. But clearly local solutions to local problems have worked on the Range. Neither the local government nor the state of Minnesota have much power to influence the international demand for steel or the use of Minnesota ore in place of Venezuelan ore. But local governments do understand their own history and can build effective solutions to their own problems.

New CURA Publications


The University of Minnesota offers many courses related to aging. This is a listing of those courses in which aging is a primary focus. Courses are listed by campus (Twin Cities and the coordinate campuses) and by department. Listings are complete with course name, number, quarter offered, teacher, credits granted, prerequisites, and course description. Only the time and place are not given. Contact persons and phone numbers are listed for each department.


Courses relating to environmental studies at the University of Minnesota are listed by subject area and by department. Course descriptions are included. This publication is intended to be a guide for faculty and students and is supplemental to official University bulletins. An additional section describes special centers, services, and libraries that deal with the environment. A new section on academic programs that offer a major, minor, or concentration in environmental issues has been added this year. These programs are offered at the bachelor, master, and doctoral levels.


This is a much expanded and more inclusive directory than Nonprofit Organizations of Color in Minnesota, published last year by CURA. It includes all non-for-profit associations, organizations, mutual assis-

Lisa Thornquist recently completed her Ph.D. in geography at the University of Minnesota. She is currently Director of Research and Education at the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry, conducting research on workplace safety and the workers’ compensation program. She has also been a site analyst for Dayton Hudson Corporation. Lisa has been traveling to the Iron Range several times a year for the past decade and has always been impressed by the commitment of the people there to the Iron Range.

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