

## HISTORIC MINERAL FEATURE

# John Thorley Reeder: Gentleman Collector of the Michigan Copper Country

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## Introduction

*John T. Reeder, a Michigan mining manager, amassed the finest collection of "copper country" mineral specimens to be assembled in the 19th century. His collection is now preserved in the A.E. Seaman Mineral Museum, but prior to this article, little has been written of this connoisseur collector and his activities during the prime of the Michigan copper boom years. The accompanying photographs were made possible through the courtesy of Michigan Technological University Archives and Copper Country Historical Collections, Michigan Technological University Ed.*

In 1855, Edwin and Elizabeth Thorley Reeder immigrated to the United States from Newcastle Upon Tyne, Northumberland, England and lived for a short time in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Later they moved to Detroit, Michigan where John Thorley Reeder was born on 18 August 1857. He was educated in the Detroit public school system and graduated from high school in 1875.

Following graduation from high school, he enrolled in the Mayhew Business College and completed a business training program in 1877. He then entered the office of the Detroit & Lake Superior Copper Company as an assistant clerk where his father held the position of chief clerk. On 8 May 1879 he married Margaret Milligan Colville and their first son, Edwin Colville Reeder, was born on 1 October 1880. Two years later on 15 November 1882 their first daughter, Clara Margaret Reeder, was born and five years

later their second son, John Harry Reeder, was born on 20 January 1887.

Since 1850, the Waterbury and Detroit Copper Company, located on the Detroit River two miles south of the city, was smelting a large percentage of the copper produced in the Keweenaw Peninsula (Hyde 1998). As the copper mines became a stable industry, company managers realized that building a smelter nearer the mines would cut transportation costs, making their operations more profitable. Consequently, in 1860, local

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*"Reeder's collection is to the A.E. Seaman Mineral Museum what Bement's is to the American Museum, and Roebling's to the Smithsonian."*

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capitalists and mine owners constructed the Portage Lake Smelting works in Hancock, Michigan. In 1867 the smelter merged with the Waterbury and Detroit Copper Company and formed the Detroit and Lake Superior Copper Company which smelted most of the Lake copper between 1867 and 1887. By this time, copper mining had expanded by leaps and bounds and in 1885 the Detroit and Lake Superior Copper Company formed a joint-venture with Calumet and Hecla Mining Company to construct a smelting facility on the shores of Torch Lake. The new smelter went into operation in 1887, but the Detroit and Lake Superior Copper Company

continued to refine copper for the smaller mining companies at its Hancock facility. In 1888, the company decided to phase out the smelter at Detroit as it was no longer feasible to ship copper ore such a long distance. By 1892, Calumet and Hecla Mining Company was the largest producer of copper in the Keweenaw and bought out the Detroit and Lake Superior Copper Company's interest in the joint-venture smelter at Torch Lake.

When the Detroit smelter wound up operation in 1888, John T. Reeder had been with the company for 11 years and had probably risen to a high position. It is believed that through his connections with the mining companies that were smelter clients, he was offered the position of chief clerk with the Osceola Consolidated Mining Company.

In 1873, Edwin J. Hulbert, the discoverer of the famous Calumet and Hecla Conglomerate lode in 1864, organized the Osceola Mining Company (Stevens 1902). Six shafts were sunk on the southwest extension of the conglomerate lode and only met with limited success. In 1877 the Osceola lode was discovered and mining commenced in 1879. The Opechee mine, which was at the extreme southwest end of the conglomerate lode, was purchased in 1879 and the company name was changed to Osceola Consolidated Mining Company (Wilson and Dyl 1992).

In March 1889, after the Detroit and Lake Superior Copper Company concluded all of its financial affairs in





An 1892 photo of William E. Parnall (mine captain of the Tamarack mine), W.V. Keast, and John T. Reeder seated on the steps of the mine captain's office of the Tamarack mine. At this time Reeder was 35 years old and chief clerk of the Tamarack Mining Company.

Detroit, the John T. Reeder family relocated to the Copper County in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula. It must have been quite a trip to move the family and all of their belongings from Detroit to Calumet in the dead of winter by train. As chief clerk of the company, Reeder was supplied with a comfortable company house at Osceola Location, near the mine, which was under the direction of Mine Captain John Daniell.

Once settled into job and community, Reeder would now have the opportunity to start building his Copper Country mineral collection and expand on his other collections, as well. The Reeders were outgoing people and involved themselves in community and church affairs.

In January 1882 the Tamarack Mining Company was formed by the Osceola Consolidated Mining Company to mine the down dip extension of the Calumet and Hecla Conglomerate lode. The lode was exploited by way of five deep vertical shafts and the mine proved to be as rich as the famous Calumet and Hecla mine. The operation was a huge success and started paying dividends on a regular basis. As a result, John T. Reeder was transferred from the Osceola Consolidated Mining Company to become chief clerk of the Tamarack Mining Company. With this promotion he also moved to a large Victorian residence at 1 Second Street, Tamarack Location, which was situated on the western outskirts of Calumet and near

the Tamarack mine site. His second daughter, Margaret Helen Reeder, was born at this residence on 11 March 1897. The singular row of company houses on Second Street was built for upper-echelon personnel of the Tamarack Mining Company. The residence at 2 Second Street was the home of chief engineer Richard Mason Edwards (now owned by one of the authors, Stanley J. Dyl II) while Mine Captain William Parnell resided at 3 Second Street. In 1900, a fourth manager's residence was inserted between No. 2 and No. 3 Second Street for Captain Parnell's son William, Jr., a member of the first Michigan Mining School graduating class, who later served his father as Tamarack's Assistant Superintendent. The houses, beginning with Reeder's, were numbered 1, 3, 5, 7. This Tamarack Mining Company house numbering lasted an entire century, until this year, when five-digit house numbers replaced them, due to 911 service installation.

Available records indicate that, at about this time, John T. Reeder developed a keen interest in photography and constructed a darkroom in his home to develop glass negatives. He systematically photographed mining structures and town sites, some of which were already succumbing to the elements. He expanded his photographic interest to recording family scenes, daily activities around operating mines, and the flora and fauna of the Keweenaw Peninsula. These photographs became a timeless contribution to the way of life in the Copper Country at the turn of the century.

By 1901, Reeder's first born son, Edwin C. Reeder, had graduated from Michigan College of Mines and pursued a career in mining engineering on the Michigan and Minnesota iron ranges.

Reeder continued to expand his collections which included stamps, coins, minerals and Indian artifacts. In 1903 he authored an article titled "Evidences of Prehistoric Man on Lake Superior" The article was published in "Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections", v.30, pp.110-118. By this time his artifact collection numbered in the





*Above: The Reeder residence at 1 Second Street, Tamarack Location, Calumet, Michigan. Reeder's 6 year old daughter, Margaret Helen Reeder, is standing at the gate. Photo by John T. Reeder, 18 June 1903. Right: An interior view of the parlor of the Reeder residence. His wife, Margaret Milligan Reeder plays the piano while his daughter, Margaret Helen Reeder listens. Photo by John T. Reeder, 19 November 1902.*



thousands of pieces and was the finest collection of its kind in the Midwest.

In the summer of 1907 Reeder moved from his house at 1 Second Street, Tamarack Location to 318 College Avenue, Houghton. The residence was situated on the campus of the Michigan School of Mines. Shortly after the move, the house of a fellow collector burned to the ground, destroying his collection (Gabriel 1943). Reeder was sympathetic with the loss and became concerned with his collection, which by this time was one of the truly outstanding mineral collections in the Copper Country. A fireproof, windowless walk-in brick vault was built onto the outside of the Reeder residence to safeguard his col-

lections. The vault was accessed via a steel bank-safe door located in the parlor of the house.

The following year, in 1908, his second son John H. Reeder graduated from the Michigan School of Mines. "Harry" also pursued a career in mining engineering and early on held positions with the Quincy Mining Company and Calumet and Hecla Mining

Company. He later pursued his career on the Michigan iron ranges.

By January 1909, Calumet and Hecla Mining Company had bought out the Boston-based Bigelow-Clark management interest in the Seneca, Tamarack, Ahmeek, Isle Royale and Laurium mines. In August of the same year Reeder became chief clerk and purchasing agent for these mines. He



now worked for the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company and with this promotion his salary and power were increased. The position he now held put him in the top ten employees of the Calumet and Hecla empire.

Not only was this man an aesthete and connoisseur, but regarding technology, he was an "early adopter." A 27 April 1910, an article in the Daily Mining Gazette, Houghton, Michigan, lists John T. Reeder as one of the few men in Keweenaw Peninsula that owned a automobile; a 1910 Buick. Reeder was again mentioned in a 10 September 1912 article in the same paper which noted that he was the chairman of the Copper Country Automobile Club; with other club members Reeder even published a short pamphlet on "Road Rules for the Copper Country."

Reeder took an active interest in



*An official 1897 company photo of John T. Reeder at the age of 40.*

civic and community affairs; from 1913 to 1922 he served on the Portage Township school board and was president of the organization from 1914 to 1919. He was a devotee member of First Congregational Church of Hancock and served for over 20 years on the board of trustees.

He was very active in the Keweenaw Historical Society. He was made a life member and became its president in March of 1913, an office which he held until the time of his death. For many years, he was the body, brains, and enthusiasm behind the organization. Under Reeder's leadership the society "had accomplished a notable work for the district in the gathering of valuable information, documents, letters, records and reports, all of historical significance and on the whole comprises an interesting collection of great value so far as the history of



*A 1903 view of the timber yard at the Tamarack #2 mine. A tremendous amount of timber was consumed for ground support in the mines. Photo by John T. Reeder.*





*John T. Reeder at his desk at the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company office. At this time he was chief clerk and purchasing agent for the Tamarack and Isle Royale mines which Calumet and Hecla controlled. Photo taken 20 October 1910.*

*the Keweenaw Peninsula is concerned*" (Daily Mining Gazette 1937).

On 31 May 1919, Reeder at the age of 62, retired from the Calumet and Hecla Mining Company. Following his retirement he continued to expand his collections and spent much of his time photographing the Keweenaw Peninsula.

In 1928, Reeder was featured in an article that appeared in *The Detroit News* and was titled "*Orchid Hunter Glories in our Northland*" (Gore 1928). Reeder was now 71 and devoting most of his time to year-round photography of Houghton and Keweenaw Counties. He was still doing considerable black and white photography but his interest had also turned to color photography. He specialized in lantern slides that were taken on Lumiere plates and made into the color slides. During the long winter months of the Keweenaw winter he

would hold impromptu exhibitions in his home. Friends were invited over for an evening to socialize and view his beautiful slides taken the summer before.

Many of the lantern slides featured orchids that were native to the Keweenaw Peninsula. For a number of years Reeder and Professor James Fisher, who was head of the mathematics and physics department at the Michigan College of Mining and Technology (Fisher Hall is named after him) roamed the peninsula in search of the small and elusive plants. Reeder was credited with identifying 35 varieties and Professor Fisher just a few less. A renowned authority on orchids, Raymond H. Torrey, who was field secretary of the National Conference on State Parks, was on a visit to the area to consider the possibilities of the island of Isle Royale becoming a park. On an automobile trip to Cop-

per Harbor the conversation turned to orchids and Torrey mentioned to Reeder that he had searched in vain for the elusive *Calypso* orchid over the past 20 years. Reeder informed him that within five minutes of stopping the auto he could show him the rare species. Reeder drove to Fort Wilkins, an old military fort that had been restored, and as promised, Torrey was staring at a *Calypso* within a few minutes.

At the age of 80, John Thorley Reeder passed away at 9:30 am at the family home on 21 December 1937. He was one of the Copper Countries outstanding and highly respected citizens, who was prominently identified with the mining industry of the district. At the time of his death, he was survived by his widow, two daughters, and one remaining son, J. Harry Reeder. John T. Reeder was laid to rest in the Houghton Cemetery.

The collections that were housed in the vault at the time of his death were stupendous. The coin collection alone contained all but two of every issue of silver dollars minted by the United States Government since 1792, while the stamp albums spanned 70 years of collecting. The disposition of these two collections is unknown. His Indian artifact collection was the finest in the area and consisted of over 450 Indian pipes and thousands of copper implements from the Upper Great Lakes region. Part of the extensive artifacts collection was donated to the Cranbrook Institute of Science but the whereabouts of the rest cannot be traced (Martin 1999). In later years Reeder was deeply involved in black & white and color photography. His collection of over twelve thousand glass negatives, color negatives and color lantern slides were acquired by Michigan College of Mining and Technology. The entire collection is now housed in the Michigan Technological University Archives & Copper Country Historical Collection located on the third floor of the J. R. Van Pelt Library. His superb mineral collection was also acquired by the university and is housed in the A.E. Seaman Mineral Museum.