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Bridge to past not too far away

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Ramsay, Mich. -

I left the highway between Bessemer and Wakefield and headed south toward what's left of the onetime lumber town of Ramsay in search of the historic keystone bridge and, suddenly, there it was.

Dennis McCann

[E-MAIL](#)

No, my mistake. That was the Keystone Bar and while there may be a bit of unprintable history a newspaperman could pick up there for the cost of a round of drinks it wasn't an official stop on the Heritage Trail I was following.

The keystone bridge, on the other hand, was on the tour and a moment later I found it, rising 57 feet over the surging Black River.

It was built by the Chicago and Northwestern Railway Co. in 1891 from limestone quarried in Kaukauna, Wis., and is billed as one of the tallest and largest stone arch bridges in Michigan.

More interestingly, it was built without mortar so that each of its series of arches has a center keystone at the top that locks the entire structure together.

Advertisement The rest of Ramsay should have been so lucky.

The onetime lumber town (for a while later it was operated as a company town by the wonderfully named Eureka-Asteroid Mining Co.) has largely withered commercially but that stone bridge in Ramsay and Bessemer Township Memorial Park is a survivor.

In a sense the Western Upper Peninsula Heritage Trail Network is a necklace on which most links are just that. Some sites on the trail - Porcupine Mountains State Park, Agate Falls - are included mostly for their scenic beauty, but many others represent moments in the U.P.'s long, rich and often against-the-odds history - mines that boomed and went bust, Indian cemeteries, big-shouldered buildings of native stone and strength, historic theaters that outlived their early purpose but which still entertain today.

The trail guide is arranged by county, from the copper country of Keweenaw and Houghton counties to Iron County near the Wisconsin border and Ontonagon County on Superior's lakeshore.

I was on the trail in Gogebic County, on the western U.P.'s westernmost corner, territory that should rightfully be Wisconsin anyway in my book if the early map-makers had had any sense, but it's too late to change the lines now. And as long as we can visit that's probably all right.

Ironwood has three sites on the tour, including the historic Ironwood Theatre (www.ironwoodtheatre.org) which, like most such show palaces in small towns in its day, was considered the finest in the Northwest. It was built in 1928 for vaudeville and silent movies, later became a regular movie house and eventually deteriorated like so many old theaters did until restoration rescued it 20 years ago and put its stage to life again.

Another direction

That makes it a survivor, just like the old railroad depot of Lake Superior red sandstone that houses the local historical society (in my opinion the best uses for old depots are for historical groups or visitor centers) along with the Memorial Building downtown that was erected in 1922 to honor war veterans. Historic tours of the theater and the Memorial Building are offered.

My tour took me in another direction, to the hulking and imposing Gogebic County Courthouse in Bessemer, also built of native red sandstone. The guide notes it was built in 1888, four years after the first trainload of iron ore was shipped from the Gogebic Range, back when trains and iron mines had a future instead of mostly nostalgic past.

My next stop couldn't so much be viewed as a survivor as a place where, if they were lucky, its ski-bearing visitors would survive.

Copper Peak was the site of copper exploration as early as 1845 so it's noteworthy for that, but it wasn't until 1970 that men of daring (which is politesse for fools) built the world's largest ski flying hill, a structure that rises 28 stories from a 360-foot rock outcrop. You know the Olympics? Wimps, those jumpers. Ski flying is ski jumping on steroids; there are only a large handful of sky fliers in the world and there have been no sanctioned events here for a dozen years but the hill (www.copperpeak.org) is still popular for its unmatched panoramic views.

Shrouded in fog

Of course, that requires a dizzying climb, but during the summer and especially fall color season the hill is open to visitors.

Unfortunately on the day I was there the fog was so thick the superstructure was almost invisible from the bottom of the hill - not that I had intentions of climbing - but there will be brighter days.

Drier would be nice, too. At this point a cold, hard rain that arrived to complement the spreading fog wiped away plans to check out Alligator Eye scenic overlook a half-mile hike above Lake Gogebic in the Ottawa National Forest, on the site where quartz was quarried for tools as long as 3,500 years ago. Little Girl's Point, where legend declares a young Chippewa maiden became lost in the forest on her wedding day, will likewise have to wait a better day, and of course here are all those other sites on the Heritage Trail, many that I've seen but also more that I mean to.

But that's the advantage of favoring the past over the present. With a little care, the good ones will be there tomorrow.

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