

MONDAY, MAY 10, 1926

Leonidas J. Merritt, 82, Discoverer of Iron Ore In Minnesota, Is Dead

Mining Genius, Indian Fighter, Legislator Helped
Build City of Duluth—Lost Fortune in
the Panic of 1893

Leonidas J. Merritt, discoverer of iron ore in Minnesota, is dead today at 82, in Duluth, the city he built.

He died suddenly there Sunday morning.

He was renowned not only as a prospector and mining genius but as an Indian fighter, woodsman and legislator.

His career was one of the most picturesque in Minnesota, including as it did a financial crash that forced him to rebuild his fortunes after the panic of 1893.

Born In New York

Born in Chautauqua county, New York, Feb. 20, 1844, he was a resident of Minnesota from his eleventh year, having made the trip to Duluth with his father on the first upbound steamer that locked through the Soo canal.

As a boy in the frontier Head of the Lakes settlement which is now the Zenith City, he gained his schooling in the haphazard fashion by which education was dealt out in those pioneer days.

With lumbering the largest industry in Minnesota then, he took to the woods.

He roved the woods as a cruiser. Then came the Indian wars. Leonidas was chosen scout of the military leaders for his uncanny knowledge of woodcraft.

Merritt, the youth, was convinced there was valuable iron ore in the northern part of the state and against the sincere advice of the "experts" who claimed no iron could be there, began his search that made Minnesota the largest iron reservoir in the world and built up the foundation for scores of fortunes then considered to be fabulous.

Five years he scouted the wilderness—five years of persistency and doggedness undeterred by the "experts." Then early in November, 1890, he located what he believed to be a bed of ore. After a hurried trip to Duluth to get drilling tools he returned with his brothers to the spot.

Red Dirt Comes To View

The drills were set into action and day after day they watched the "color" come to the surface. Then on Nov. 16 the long sought "red dirt" came to the top.

Leonidas Merritt had won!

Now the Mesabe range outships any iron range in the world and the ore tests are exceptionally high in iron, the percentage being slightly better than 60.

For nearly three years the Merritts developed their properties. Miners and prospectors rushed to the new find and the ore began to be removed in quantities.

Leonidas, forever a booster for Duluth, gave that city the opportunity to have the docks if it would permit him to build his railroad through the city.

Superior Welcomes Magnates

But the city council refused and, desperately in need of a rail outlet for his ore, the Merritts then aimed for Superior, Wis. Here the city council was more farsighted and welcomed the iron magnates.

When the railroad began pushing its way past Duluth, the citizens put so much pressure on the city council that it made an about face and invited the Merritt road through the city to the dock sites on the Minnesota side of Lake Superior.

Leonidas, loving his foster city deeply, switched the plans, even though it did mean a tremendous outlay and headed his construction gangs toward Duluth.

Then burst the financial bubble of 1893 that made "Black Friday" for so many financial structures all over the country.

Eastern capitalists were importuned for aid. Railroads, banks and other huge financial structures toppled and crashed and Leonidas Merritt, bruised and beaten, borrowed money to pay his fare back to Duluth.

The lands pledged for loans to build the railroads and docks, the mining equipment and mining towns, were sunk. The start the Merritt boys had in the race for wealth was lost and they all began over.

Drafted for Legislature

Leonidas was drafted in 1884 as a member of the Minnesota legislature because of his explorations and knowledge as a woodsman. Because of his persistence he forced the state to purchase ore lands which have since enriched the state treasury millions of dollars.

After the panic wave had swept the Merritt brothers into bankruptcy, Leonidas, by his knowledge of the country, located other ore properties and by his own efforts paid off the nearly \$1,500,000 debt they still owed.

But even after he had retired from

business, Leonidas could not refrain from aiding his adopted city to expand. His was the foresight that was the cause of much of the advancement of Duluth and because of his unflagging zeal he was elected commissioner of finance in 1921 and served four years until April, 1925, when he retired.

Walked Far to Volunteer

One of his exploits and perhaps the one of which he spoke the least, was when he walked from Duluth to St. Paul to join Company B of the Minnesota Volunteer cavalry at the outbreak of the Civil war.

Since his retirement from business and politics, Mr. Merritt had spent his time at either his Florida home in the winter or Duluth in the summer.

Mr. Merritt is survived by a daughter, Mrs. Ruth Merritt of Duluth, and two sons, Lucien Merritt and Harry Merritt, both of Minneapolis, besides three brothers, Alfred of Duluth, Louis J. of Pasadena, Calif., and A. R. of San Jose, Calif.

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