

WONDER WHERE THE COPPER WENT

Joe and Ira Bloom

The past presents many unanswered questions. One of the great archaeological mysteries of the North American continent is found in the Keweenaw Peninsula of Michigan. Here is found 5,000 or more copper pits left between 7,000 and 4,000 years ago by an unknown group of miners. Authorities differ as to the antiquity of the extensive mining operation. Observing the remains of a few of these ancient pits, one wonders how those miners of long ago could have taken between 1/2 to a million pounds of copper from this region. Who were they? What happened to all this metal?

In the pits themselves may be found a few of the answers. Hammer stones of varying sizes and weights are still to be found while digging in the piles of traprock which surrounds the old pits. They weigh from a few pounds to more than fifty. Many are grooved, which shows that they might have been fastened to wooden handles or a small tree could have been used to make a crude stamping mill. Charcoal is always found in the pits. Thus, the copper bearing rock must have been heated, then cold water poured on to help crack away the stone from the metal, and the stone hammers used to further separate the copper. This must have been a slow and tedious process which became more difficult as the pits became deeper. Some of them were as much as sixty feet deep.

Where did these miners come from? Again authorities disagree. The lake levels have changed many times from 5000 B.C. to 2000 B.C. as the glaciers came and went or the land rose as the great ice sheets receded to the north. Could this difference in the water level have affected the mode of travel to this region or even the origin of the miners? Many answers have been attempted. China, Europe, Egypt, South America, Phoenicia, and local Indians have been suggested.

Why the mining was suddenly stopped is just as much a mystery as the origin of the workers. Many pits show tools arranged at the bottom ready for the next day's work. A huge copper nugget on oaken skids was found in one pit.

To locate and mine this great amount of copper and then transport it would suggest a well developed civilization. Some doubt that natives of the area would have been capable of such an extensive mining operation. Others believe that the Indians of the time were responsible for removing the copper. However, few clues as to the culture of these ancient people have been found. In this particular area, around Rockland, Michigan, a few copper tools have been picked up, but no pottery, carvings, or other artifacts have been discovered.

The biggest mystery of all is the question, what happened to this enormous amount of copper? Could it have been used for tools, for trade, or for ornaments by the local inhabitants?

This natural copper in this area has some silver which distinguishes it from natural copper found elsewhere. This fact may one day serve as a clue to trace its journey from this continent to be used in a bowl, a tool, or an ornament in a far distant place. With new devices, techniques, and further study, we may one day learn "where the copper went".

FROM: THE MICHIGAN GEM NEWS
Jackson, Michigan, December, 1972

VIA: OZARK EARTH SCIENCE NEWS

Mich. DNR - Geol. Surv. Div.
GGS Repro. Mat 73-2