

Many come back to relive UP era

By Anthony Man
of The Journal Staff

Central, Mich. — A century ago, this town in the rolling hills near the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula in northern Michigan was a thriving center of mining activity with about 1,200 residents.

Today, if it were not for the sign at the side of Highway 41 between Phoenix and Delaware, about 20 miles north of Calumet, someone driving by could easily miss what remains of the hamlet.

Not much is left. A handful of stone foundations overgrown with vegetation, half a dozen houses and a church are about all that remains of more than 230 homes and stores.

But this hamlet is not extinct, as are many of the other communities that sprang up around copper mines during the last half of the last century. To prove it, Charles Stetter, who organizes most Sunday church services, might point to the last service, which drew more than 300 worshippers to the Central Mine Methodist Episcopal Church.

It is the church sitting on top of a hill that has prevented the town from becoming a complete ghost town. For the last 76 years, hundreds of

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Reunion

Historic church keeps abandoned hamlet alive

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people have come north one Sunday each summer for services at the church.

The church, which is listed on the National Register of Historic places, has a powerful pull. The annual Sunday service gets people who have never lived there to travel hundreds of miles to attend, putting them in touch with the people who were there in the 1800s.

When a mine agent discovered an Indian digging at the site of what was to become the Central Mine in 1853, the spot was on its way to becoming one of the most prosperous mining communities in the Keweenaw Peninsula.

The mine, which eventually became the third largest producer of copper in the area, made money in its first year of operation. Miners were not easy to find for the fledgling UP community, but it found a ready supply of workers from Cornwall, England, where the copper and tin mines were about becoming depleted.

There was relatively little contact with people from other places, leaving the population of Central to fend for itself when times were tough. The common heritage of the people and the isolation of the community

encouraged the bond that developed among the residents of the close-knit community.

In their free time, the miners built the Methodist Episcopal Church at their own expense in 1868. At one point, its Sunday school had an enrollment of 300. Gary Bryant of Wauwatosa, Wis., one of those who regularly makes the 350-mile trip to attend the reunions, said the isolation meant work centered on the mine and the social life centered on the church.

But prosperity did not last forever. The mine started to decline and was finally closed in 1868.

Although the end of the mine strained the bonds that were formed in Central, they were not broken. Twenty years after it shut down, the Keweenaw Central Railroad started operating from Calumet to Mandan. After transportation became available, the first reunion service was held in 1907.

The descendants of those who established and lived in Central will attend the 76th reunion service next Sunday.

When the bell rings for the 9 a.m. service, Bryant said there will be a special feeling in Central. "It kind of brings the town to life for a couple of hours once a year."

There was a large photo in the article
but it has been cut out of the paper.