The County Historian

News from the Ontonagon County Historical Society

Dean Juntunen, Editor — Autumn 2025

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NOTE: If you want an article published in the newsletter, send it to Dean Juntunen, 11425 Aspen Lane, Mass City, MI 49948, or e-mail it to deanjunt@jamadots.com.

Greetings everyone. We had a wonderful, busy summer as always. Both our museum and Lighthouse were open 7 days per week from May 24 to October 19, 2025.

It takes a huge team of employees and volunteers to make a successful year, and we take this opportunity to formally thank the following army of magnanimous people:

Basile, Sue
Berg, Karen
Berman, Sally
Bishop, David
Brickner, Sue
Brickner, Dan
Brownell, Bob
Brownell, Mary
Burke, Laura
Chabot, Bill
Defoy, Dan
Domitrovich, Tom
Doyle, John
Doyle, Larry
Doyle, Pat
Duff, Shannon
Dykstra, Shirley
Eckloff, Jean
Evans, Matt
Fourez, Jon
Gardner, Ken
Graham, Linda
Guilbault Brothers
Hammer-Mueller, Robin
Johanson, Bruce
Juntunen, Dean
Juntunen, Duane
Kallunki, Deb
Kaikko Al
Koski, Jerry
Koski, Linda
Langlois, Ken
Malila, Fern
Menzemer, Jeana
Menzemer, Luke
Miller, Nathan
Oger, James
Ojaniemi, Kristin
Ollila, Gail
Pattison, Judy
Perry, Lyle
Pestka, Norman
Pharis, Robin
Reid, David
Ruutila, Bruce
Sells, Karen
Sells, Kate
Steiner, Brandi
Store, Kody
Thorson, Keefer
Trident Maritime Systems
Wardynski, Kathy
Webber, Lynette
Workman, Marie
Workman, Ralph

That's over 50 people in all — an awesome team effort. BIG THANK YOU to everyone.

MACC GRANT 2025

Fern Malila wrote a grant for us from the Michigan Arts and Culture Council (MACC) to build a wheelchair-accessible ramp and viewing platform system for the Sheryl-Dennis fish tug on the Lighthouse grounds. MACC partially funded the grant.

To make up the difference, Fern organized a very successful fundraising campaign, raising enough money to completely fund the project. Thank you to all the wonderful donors.

Also, Trident Maritime Systems donated and installed permanent cradles for the Sheryl-Dennis before our contractor constructed the ramp and viewing platform.

For next year's tourism season, we'll install interpretive signage at the Sheryl-Dennis, and display commercial fishing gear with more

interpretive signage inside the boat.

The Sheryl-Dennis was built for the Ostling Brothers fishery in Ontonagon in 1947 by Marinette Marine of Wisconsin. The brothers named the boat after their respective children, Sheryl and Dennis.

The Sheryl-Dennis plied the Great Lakes until September of 2013 when Norm Radtke sailed her from Houghton to Ontonagon, where she's found her final resting place on our Lighthouse grounds. Thanks go to heirs for donating the boat, Sheryl herself.

LIGHTHOUSE NEWS

Our lighthouse is in winter storage mode, but it saw an excellent summer, and now it even has a modicum of electricity thanks to a 100W solar panel system that we purchased in October. The solar power system includes a 600W power station that stores the power. It charges fully in about 5 hours on a sunny day.

The solar power allows us to operate LED lights in the lighthouse basement during tours, which brightens it up nicely.

John Doyle, Dave Bishop, and Ken Langlois teamed up on a shutter project, and we now have spiffy green shutters on the Lighthouse again.

Also, a descendant of James Corgan had some bedroom furniture from our Lighthouse, and the furniture had found its way to Utah. Corgan had been the longest-serving lightkeeper in Ontonagon — 36 years.

The current owner of the furniture offered it to us. Ken Langlois drove to Utah to retrieve it.

The furniture was very dry, so Dave Bishop and Ken Langlois disassembled and reglued it in Dave's workshop. Then they refinished the wood, which is primarily black walnut.

Next summer, our big project will be replacing windows on our Lighthouse.

Meanwhile, if you are interested in being a lighthouse philanthropist, we still have the following sponsorships available:

27 Spiral Steps $300 ea
Master Bedroom $5,000
1st-flr 1890's kitchen $6,000

Last, every item in the Lighthouse has now been photographed, and Collections Manager Brandi Steiner has cataloged all of them. This work was funded by the Keweenaw Heritage Site grant.

Ken Langlois with a Corgan bedroom piece in the Lighthouse.

Corgan bedroom furniture in Dave Bishop's workshop.

BOARD NEWS

At our annual election in August, incumbents Sally Berman, Dave Bishop, Bill Chabot, and Robin Hammer-Mueller were reelected to 3-year board seats.

Currently, your board members are Sally Berman, Dave Bishop, Bill Chabot, John Doyle, Jean Eckloff, Robin Hammer-Mueller, Dean Juntunen, Jerry Koski, Ken Langlois, Fern Malila, Jeana Menzemer, and Kristin Ojaniemi.

Board officers for 2025/2026 are President Dean Juntunen, Vice President Fern Malila, Secretary Sally Berman, and Treasurer Dave Bishop. If you are interested in future board service, please contact Dean Juntunen.

A squadron of lightkeeper James Corgan's descendants swarmed our Lighthouse on October 4, 2025. In all, 38 Corgans were present for some family reunion photos. Our photographer, Nathan Miller of Chassell, organized the chaos of Corgans. Each person in the photo held up a large number from 1 to 38. We had them write their names on the backs of the numbers so that we could make a control sheet identifying all 38 Corgans in the photos.

Note the spiffy new green shutters on the Lighthouse — painted by John Doyle in his garage — hung by Ken Langlois and Dave Bishop. Also note the Sheryl-Dennis fish tug in the background on the right.

RIEGER PROJECT QUINQUENNIAL SURVEY

Thanks to a foundation established by sociologist Jon Rieger from the University of Louisville, Kentucky, we have a perpetually funded photo project that repeats every 5 years. When he was alive and well, Jon Rieger himself photographed every business in Ontonagon County, documenting social change through photographs taken every 5 years from the exact same geographical spot with the exact same focal length.

For the 2020 photo shoot, and now again in 2025, our photographer, Nathan Miller of Chassell, completed the project in short order. Over the years, interior photos have been added in places, and municipal buildings have been added, too.

Nathan also photographs unfolding events in Ontonagon County between the 5-year shoots. For example, when the former Gil's Auto Exchange in Bruce Crossing burned, Nathan grabbed photos prior to the cleanup. Likewise for the destruction of Tulppos Motel and Restaurant.

Nathan will present his 2025 project at our OCHS dinner meeting in March of 2026. As a special treat, he has interior shots of remaining White Pine Mine buildings.

Jon Rieger had taken all of his photos with film cameras. The University of Louisville did scan his old photos and converted them to jpegs, but they aren't high-quality digital photos. Meanwhile, starting in 2020, Nathan Miller switched to all digital photos, which we receive as tiffs, which are archival-quality.

OCHS VISITOR STATISTICS

Operations Manager Karen Sells keeps track of our visitorship, and we noticed that our June, July, and August numbers were down about 15% compared to last year.

In looking through our visitor logs, we also noticed that we had practically no visitors from Ontario, Canada this year. We usually have a pretty good tally from Canada.

Our visitorship did pick up in September, matching last year. October was very busy right up until we closed on the 19th. Our October numbers were actually better than June.

In the end, we had 6,340 total visitors this year. Last year was 7,267. As is typical, July and August were the busiest months.

OPEN HOUSE

Come one, come all. Our museum at 422 River Street is hosting an Open House in conjunction with Ontonagon's Hometown Christmas weekend on Saturday, December 6, 2025 from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

PAST PROGRAMS

June — Dean Juntunen presented on the American Northwest, starting in Montana and circling counterclockwise through Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Northern California, and Nevada. This photographic presentation included Makoshika State Park in the eastern Montana badlands, Sluice Boxes State Park on Belt Creek which includes a historic limestone mine, and Giant Springs State Park in Great Falls which is one of the largest springs in the US at 243 cubic feet per second and is between a series of waterfalls on the Missouri River which made a difficult portage site for the Lewis & Clark Expedition in 1805.

Montana's Beartooth Highway which runs from Red Lodge to Yellowstone National Park is one of America's top ten scenic highways. Meanwhile, the crown of Montana, and perhaps the crown of the entire US is Glacier National Park, home of Going-To-The-Sun Highway, which is the most scenic paved road in the US. You won't see motorhomes, travel trailers, or big trucks on this road because of strict vehicular size limits. Glacier National Park also includes a couple of America's top ten tallest waterfalls. The mountains in Glacier are extremely steep-sided because they've been glaciated on both sides. Some peaks are triangular pyramids, glaciated on three sides. One of these, Triple Divide Peak, sheds water to three different oceans: One face drains to the Columbia River and Pacific Ocean; one drains to the Missouri River and Gulf of Mexico; and one drains to Hudson Bay via the St. Mary River and Lake Winnipeg.

The history of the Lewis & Clark expedition is a key part of the early American Northwest, and the expedition had been saved by a band of Nez Perce on the Clearwater River, just upstream from the Snake River. The Nez Perce called themselves the Nimiipuu.

Juntunen's presentation continued through the upper reaches of the Salmon River in Stanley Idaho,

Salmon River and the Sawtooth Mountains in Stanley, Idaho.

Hells Canyon on the Snake River between Oregon and Idaho.

surrounded by the rugged Sawtooth Mountains; then on to Hells Canyon, deepest in the US at 7,993 feet, between the Wallowa Mountains of Oregon and the Seven Devils Mountains of Idaho; next was Joseph, OR, home of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce or Nimiipuu. In 1877, generations after the Lewis & Clark Expedition, the US Army forcibly removed the Nimiipuu from the Joseph Valley. Chief Joseph and his men chose to fight with the US Army as they chased him for well over 1,000 miles all over the Northwest. Chief Joseph won the first 17 fights, but for the 18th fight he was cornered in the Bearspaw Mountains

of northern Montana, and it was clear that no matter how many battles he had won, the war was lost; and so he gave his famous surrender speech which ends with, "I will fight no more forever." This marked the practical end of the war between the US Government and Native Americans in the Northwest.

North Cascades National Park actually has more glaciers than Glacier National Park, and State Route 20 offers a very scenic paved tour through the North Cascades. A ferry ride across Puget Sound brings you to Olympic National Park, which boasts a temperate rain forest that receives 150 inches of rain per year.

In the southwest corner of Washington at the Columbia River mouth, you'll find a Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center at Cape Disappointment, where the expedition had reached the Pacific Ocean in November of 1805. South of here, the Oregon coast offers a long string of State Parks. Then on to Crater Lake National Park, which holds the deepest lake in the US at 1,949 feet. It is also the clearest water in the US, which leads to the deepest shade of blue. Lake Superior is 1,333 feet deep (4th deepest in US) and in places, you can see 100 feet through Lake Superior Water. In Crater Lake, you can see through more than 300 feet of water. The super-clear water reflects no red or green – nothing but blue, reflected from the water molecules themselves.

Redwood National Park in northern California holds the tallest trees in the world, with a tree named Hyperion topping out over 380 feet. The giants of the forest make humans feel insignificant.

Lassen Volcanic National Park in northern California includes all four types of volcanoes, Shield, Plug Dome, Cinder Cone, and Stratovolcano. Lassen Park includes the most geothermal activity that you'll find outside of Yellowstone National Park -- boiling mud pots, fumaroles, and hot springs. Lassen also includes one of the most scenic paved drives in America, and like so many of the roads of the Northwest, it is closed in winter. Lassen Peak is the southernmost volcano in the North Cascades chain.

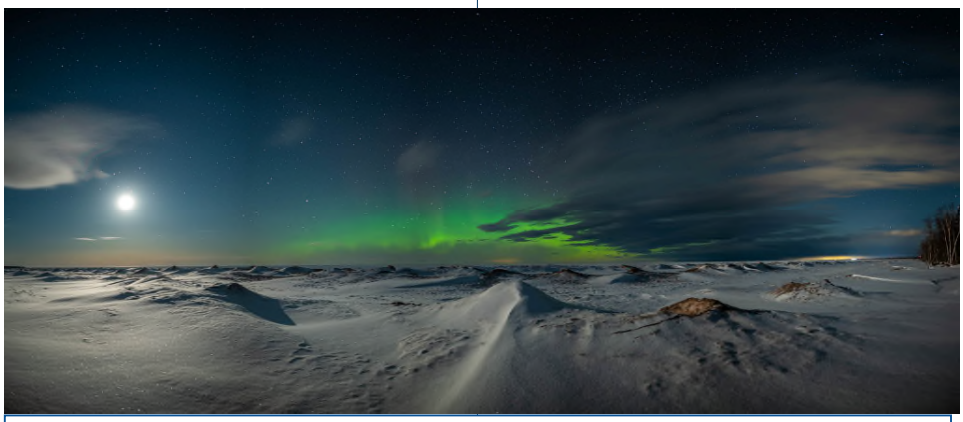
To get back to the UP from Lassen, the Loneliest Road in America is the obvious choice. It's a 400-mile section of US-50 across Nevada with miles and miles of seemingly nothing as you cross shallow basin and range country. In recent years, its emptiness has become a tourist attraction. As you enter the small town of Eureka, a sign says, "Welcome to the friendliest little town on the loneliest road in America."

Overall, any trip to anywhere in the American Northwest is most worthwhile.

July — Photographer Dave Braithwaite presented his Northern Lights of Ontonagon County. Dave has been shooting the Northern Lights for years, and he keeps whatever odd night hours are dictated by the shows. In particular, his Northern Lights shots on moonlit nights are absolutely other-worldly.

One of Dave's favorite locations is the mouth of the Halfway River in Green. Due to the long exposures needed to capture the auroras, one can also see a glow on the horizon from the lights of Thunder Bay, Canada; and, to the east the glow of Ontonagon is distinct.

Dave's photos also captured some of the attendant light-phenomena



A moonlit night near the Halfway River with weak Northern Lights, and the light of Ontonagon on the right horizon. Northern Lights over Lake Superior below. Photos by David Braithwaite.

which occurs on rare occasions with the Northern Lights. Dave had a good shot of STEVE. That's Strong Thermal Emission Velocity Enhancement, wherein a purple ribbon of light appears to the side of the aurora, sometimes with green "picket fences." It's an ionospheric phenomenon caused by fast-flowing plasma, not directly by solar wind particles like the auroras themselves.

Dave also captured some SARs, or Stable Auroral Red arcs. These are pure red arcs during strong geomagnetic storms when heat from Earth's ring current enters the upper atmosphere. SARs can sometimes become STEVE ribbons.

Mostly, Dave Braithwaite is out by himself capturing digital images of the Aurora Borealis, enjoying a deep solo connection with a magical aspect of nature. However, on occasion he has a fellow enthusiast accompany him on a shoot; and on rare occasions, a random person happens to be in the same place at the same time, partaking of the magic of digitally capturing Northern Lights scenes.

Dave posts many of his photos on Facebook, so if you look him up, you'll see some otherworldly photos of the Northern Lights on Lake Superior. The winter shots with ice ridges in the foreground are stunning.

August — Robin Hammer Mueller was responsible, and she told us about the ancient miners, focusing on the Minesota and Aztec mines. Our copper-bearing hills saw ancient miner activity starting around 7,000 years ago, up until the 1600's. It's a safe bet that the forest development 7,000 years ago was minimal following the retreat of the glaciers, so the earliest ancient miners could find copper masses more easily.

Robin had an extensive display of ancient miner tools and copper artifacts set out on two tables. These included rock hammers of course. Many of the diabase and basalt rocks have grooves which indicate that handles were attached.

Many of the copper mines developed in the early days of the State of Michigan started out on the sites of ancient miner pits. Some pits can still be found on the hills today. Our most profitable early mine, the Minesota, started in 1847 and developed at the site of an ancient miner pit which was 26 feet deep with a large mass of copper still sitting at the bottom. The Aztec Mine was also developed on ancient miner pits. Later, the Aztec site was re-developed as the South Lake Mine.

Ancient miners were skilled at shaping and annealing the copper, and they fashioned it into hooks, knives, chisels, awls, axes, scrapers, beads, and other ornamental items or useful tools.

Modern seekers of ancient miner pits utilize LIDAR, a relatively new technology that is able to "peer through the vegetation" to see the lay of the bare land; and in the LIDAR images, the miner pits show up like tiny craters on the lunar-like surface.

Robin closed by saying that studying the ancient miners and finding artifacts has been one of her main passions in life. She has become renowned in the field. There is a Facebook group of course: www.facebook.com/groups/329350223815305/

September — Lynette Webber told us about the people of the Evergreen Cemetery, which was established as early as 1856 when the Village of Ontonagon was very young. James K. Paul, founder of Ontonagon, is buried there.

You'll find Asa Parker's tombstone there, too. He was an accomplished, long-lived early resident of Ontonagon in the new state of Michigan. In November 1830 at the age of ten, A. A. Parker was sent to his uncle, Reuben A. Parker, at Little York (now called Toronto) to complete his education, where he graduated seven years later as a surveyor. He spent the following year in Buffalo, NY. In the spring of 1838 Mr. Parker took the old *Anthony Wayne* (a steamer) for Chicago, walking from there to Lockport, Illinois, where the engineer's office of the Illinois and Michigan Canal was located, and there he found employment as flagman and chain-bearer, receiving $6 per week.

In 1840 he moved to Milwaukee, and from 1843 to 1851 he was engaged in building telegraph lines in Wisconsin and Illinois. In 1851 Mr. Parker came to Ontonagon and operated the first sawmill on the Ontonagon River until January 1854. He then fitted up a dog team and went to the head of Lake Superior along the south shore, a distance of 160 miles on ice, but the journey was made principally on snowshoes. He pre-empted 160 acres of land, paying for the same at the land office in Willow River, or Hudson, Wisconsin, and in the following spring he returned to his land and commenced to lay out the town of Superior City, in company with Robert Slaughter of St. Paul, and Benjamin Brunson, of Prairie du Chien. Mr. Parker drove the first stake at the head of Lake Superior for townsite purposes on March 1, 1854.

In the following summer he sold his interest in Superior City and began work for the Canada & Liverpool Silver Mining Company, their land having been located on the north shore of Lake Superior. He remained with this company for four years. Returning to Ontonagon, Judge Parker built and conducted a small grocery store until 1867.

During the time he was with the Canada & Liverpool Mining Company, he secured a piece of land at the mouth of the Pigeon River on the Minnesota Side and in 1867 he moved with his family to that place, where he was engaged in farming, stock raising, fishing and the fur trade. In 1875, with the help of Indians, Mr. Parker built a twenty-ton schooner, and in the same year moved all his effects back to Ontonagon, securing the position of bookkeeper with the Rich Brothers. He served as Postmaster of Ontonagon for four years, was appointed Probate Judge of the County in 1888, and was elected to the office in 1892 for four more years.

Another interesting character buried in the Evergreen Cemetery is Dr. Jenner Lewis Sweeting Pratt, who died at the age of 29 in 1854. He was a physician for the Minesota Mine. Pratt and four others in a canoe left Portage Lake for Eagle River on August 5. Upon reaching the big lake, they found a gale blowing, but they were determined, so they shed their clothes and with difficulty launched their canoe through the surf. The wind dropped off a bit and they made good time with a tailwind for about 6 miles.

The wind freshened, and they neared an offshore reef with breaking waves. A big breaker washed into the canoe, causing a capsize. Two of the men didn't know how to swim, and they quickly drowned. Dr. Pratt, a strong swimmer, was confident that he could swim a mile and a half to shore. The two other men stayed with the canoe. Robiscault, who was elderly, followed the directions of the last man, John Revere. Mr. Revere was none other than the grandson of Paul Revere.

Pratt went down about a half mile from the canoe. Robiscault repeatedly gave up hope, and he said that Mr. Revere's persuasions saved his life. Robiscault said that he held onto one end of the canoe, while Revere grabbed the thwarts on the other end and swam on his back with undeviating course to land, where Revere dragged him to the beach. Robiscault said that he was barely conscious at the time. The bodies of Pratt and the two other drowning victims were later recovered. Pratt's wife, Bathsheba Minerva Pratt, ordered a Free Mason's tall monument for Dr. Pratt's grave at the Evergreen Cemetery.

Sophia Johnson, a prominent woman in the early days of Ontonagon in the new State of Michigan, was also buried in the Evergreen Cemetery.

October — Doug Karttunen provided a very detailed account of the silver mines of Silver City. In November of 1865, a farmer, Austin Corser, discovered significant silver ore on the Little Iron River. He kept the information to himself and filed a Homestead Act claim on the property in 1869. The Ontonagon & State Line Railroad had a claim to the land as well, but that claim depended upon actual completion of a railroad. The railroad was never completed, and their statute of limitations ran out by 1872. Corser then became the official owner of the silver-bearing land, and he went public with his find of silver ore.

He had the ore assayed, and the estimate was $200 of silver per ton of ore ($5,500 today). Meanwhile, the famed Comstock Lode in Nevada kicked off a major silver rush out West in 1859, resulting in numerous fortunes. The high content of silver in Corser's find had people speculating that Ontonagon County would see another silver rush to rival the Comstock Lode.

Captain Daniel Beaser had purchased significant tracts of acreage along the Big Iron River in the 1850's and 1860's, but in 1870 he moved to Ashland, WI to seek his fortune. With Corser's revelation of silver in 1872, Beaser moved back to Ontonagon County, and he platted Silver City on his property at the mouth of the Big Iron River.

A brief silver rush ensued, with as many as 49 attempts at silver mines. The silver-bearing strata of Corser's find was a mere one to five-foot wide layer of black shale at the underside of the Nonesuch Shale. The various strata had been folded and tilted geologically, resulting in a sinuous line of silver-bearing ore near the earth's surface. Corser had found an exposed piece of the black shale.

The biggest mining attempts started in 1873: The Ontonagon Mine, The Superior Mine, Ontonagon & Lake Superior Mine (called "Collins Mine" to delineate from the others), The Mammoth, and The Scranton (this on the Corser location).

The Ontonagon produced 86 pounds of silver. Superior produced 50 pounds. The Collins and the Mammoth produced none. The Scranton came in at 11 pounds.

To make extra obstacles for the Silver City mines, just as they were forming in 1873, a financial crisis hit the United States. Fundraising was difficult at best. By 1876, the silver boom was a bust.

In the 1880's, the Milwaukee & Lake Superior Mining Company made another attempt at mining silver in Ontonagon County, producing a mere 4 pounds.

Silver ore did remain at the base of the Nonesuch Shale though, and the 3rd and greatest of the White Pine Copper Mines, which closed in 1995, produced a total of 2.8 million pounds of silver as a side-benefit. It's an odd bit of history, but the most productive silver boom of Ontonagon County was in a copper mine.

If you'd like to see a visual reminder of the silver rush of Ontonagon County, go to the OCHS Museum and find an ingot mold from the Superior Silver Mine on display in our mining exhibit. The mold was donated by the Watt family.

Editor's Note: The following local history tidbits were taken from the late Andy Hendrickson's local history calendar which was published for the Mass City Centennial in 1999.

Andy writes that on July 7, 1877, Linus Stannard founded what is now the Ontonagon County Telephone Company, initially connecting Rockland, Ontonagon, and Greenland. His son George became the first president of the company.

— On July 8, 1965, ninety-five children registered for the Mass/Greenland Chamber of Commerce swimming program at Courtney Lake. Pat Monnette of Mass City was the instructor.

— Circa July 9, 1935, The Greenland Township Park Commission named the new park in Greenland – Stenson Park.

Note: The US Forest Service still maintains a swimming beach at Courtney Lake; and Stenson Park is still going strong today, hosting the annual Greenland 4th of July celebration.

Ontonagon County Historical Society

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ONTONAGON COUNTY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
MUSEUM & LIGHTHOUSE
TOURS AVAILABLE MID-MAY TO MID-OCTOBER

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