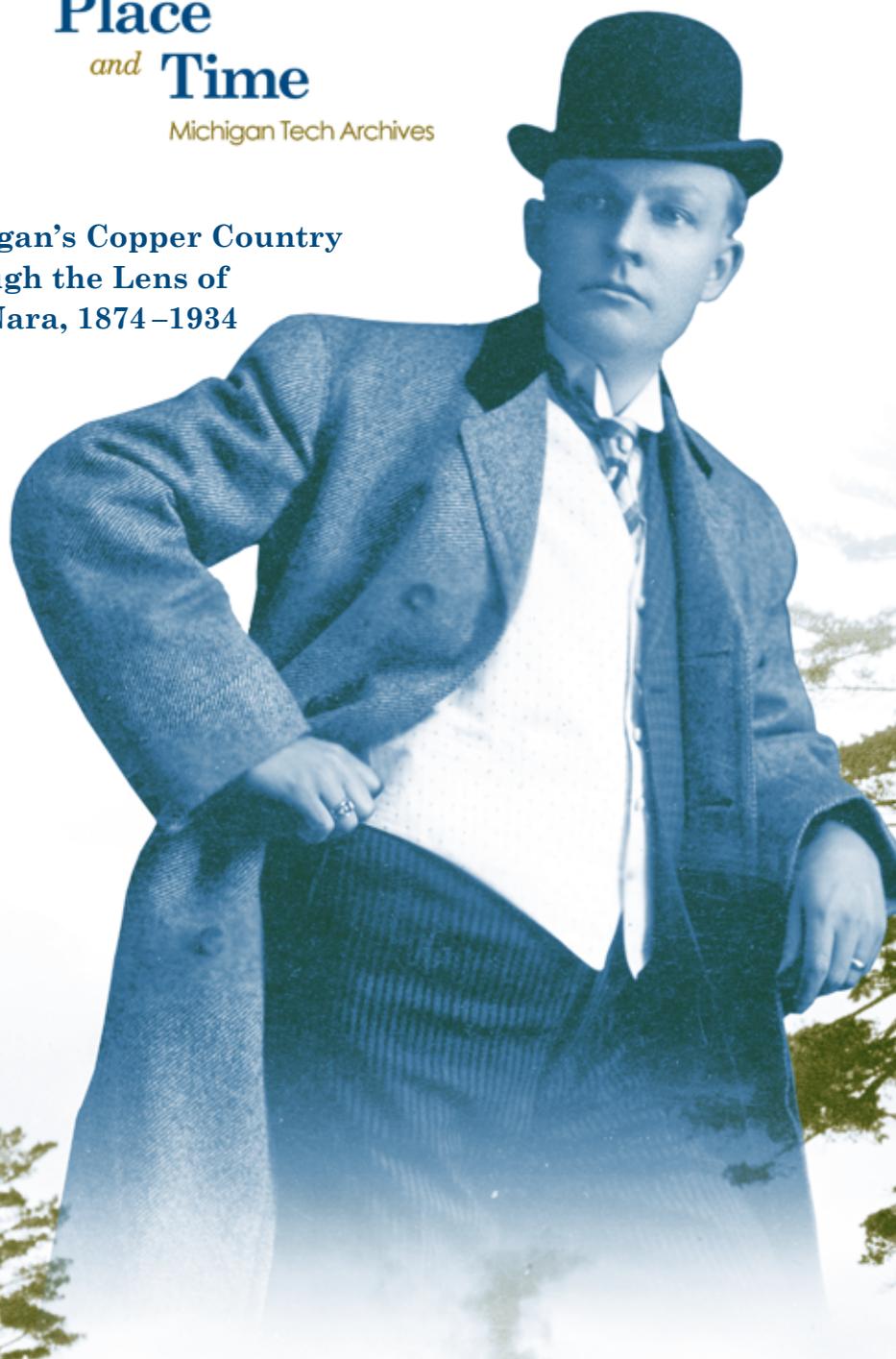


People, Place *and* Time

Michigan Tech Archives

Michigan's Copper Country
Through the Lens of
J.W. Nara, 1874–1934



History is a matter for memory and reminiscence. Rather than a series of documented events and facts, what we know of history often comes to us through the few clues retained in diaries, newspaper accounts, and public records. For instance, it was recorded that John William Nara was born in 1874 in the Tornio region of Finland. It is known that by 1892 he had established a photographic studio in Calumet, Michigan, in the heart of America's most productive copper mining region. Where he learned his darkroom skills is unknown and, like millions of immigrant stories, the specific reasons for his move from Northern Finland to Northern Michigan are not clear. Few historical facts survive for most people's lives; a birth certificate, a marriage license, perhaps an obituary tucked away on the inside pages of a defunct newspaper.

Yet unlike thousands of immigrants to the Keweenaw Peninsula, J.W. Nara's life is also illustrated through the lens of his camera. Family is central to his personal journey, as evidenced in the many photographs of his wife, the former Mary Piehi, daughter of another Finnish immigrant. The two married in Calumet's Bethlehem Lutheran Church in March 1904 and the couple's only child, William Onni Nara, was born a year later. As the child of a professional photographer, the life of the young "Onni" is particularly well-documented. For most people, posed studio portraits are all that survive from the days before stop-motion photography; for the Nara family those formal images are augmented by a variety of snapshots of both indoor and outdoor family life.

J. W. Nara's lens also captured the people, place, and time he experienced in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula. The stories of copper mining and industry are given prominence as Nara's life spans the most productive decades in Michigan's copper district. Urbanized downtown Calumet is documented at its zenith, surrounded by the shaft houses and smokestacks of the mighty Calumet & Hecla Mining Company. The lives of working folks are also captured – working underground in the mines, socializing at weekend picnics, and mourning the dead during Michigan's bitter 1913 copper miners' strike.

Conversely, through Nara's lens we also experience the Keweenaw's rural landscape. As his photography business grew, so did Nara's other business interests in timber, farming, and home construction. Purchased tracts of land in Bootjack, Michigan, became sources for massive log drives, with the cutover lands providing newly-arrived Finnish immigrants an opportunity to farm and raise families. J. W.

Nara provides some of the only photographs of these early agricultural Keweenaw landscapes, along with some beautiful images of the area's shorelines, lighthouses, and pastoral back roads.



Marriage Announcement, 1904



Torch Lake Scene





J.W. Nara Photograph from the Keweenaw Digital Archives

Calumet's Fifth Street compared favorably with most Midwestern cities, offering everything from a grand opera house and fine restaurants to barbershops and saloons. J.W. Nara was adept at capturing the varied population of Calumet, even the few African-American and Chinese workers who completed the region's complex ethnic and racial conglomerate.

Image # Nara 42-149

Find more Nara photographs at www.digarch.lib.mtu.edu



J.W. Nara Photograph from the Keweenaw Digital Archives

Religious, ethnic, fraternal, and social clubs were imported by settlers to the developing copper mining district as early as the 1840s. The Calumet Club offered "discerning men the opportunity to enjoy club house amenities and other privileges."

Image # Nara 42-150

Find more Nara photographs at www.digarch.lib.mtu.edu



J.W. Nara Photograph from the Keweenaw Digital Archives

Although photographs of the Copper Country's urban, rural, and industrial settings help historians, J.W. Nara relied on studio portraits for an important part of his income. In addition to traditional family and wedding sittings, Nara often showed a playful side in his studio work by staging vignettes with his subjects dressed in costumes or formal wear.

Image # Nara 42-117

Find more Nara photographs at www.digarch.lib.mtu.edu



As a commercial photographer, J.W. Nara relied on studio portraits for an important part of his income. Thousands of his studio prints survive in private family collections, originally purchased by immigrants to Michigan's historic copper district and shipped to family and friends all over the world. In addition to traditional portraits and wedding sittings, Nara often showed a playful side in his studio work by staging vignettes, such as this bartender training a dog. Nara also took many portraits of his family and friends, including several self-portraits.



Throughout his career, J.W. Nara was fascinated by the ways people spent their time outside of the workplace and home. Photographs of picnics and social outings, automobile caravans up the Keweenaw Peninsula, and visits to favorite swimming holes each tell an important part of the Copper Country's social history.

As Nara's photographic business grew, he invested in timber property in the Bootjack area outside Lake Linden. In addition to selective harvesting and milling of lumber, Nara leased cutover lands to Finnish immigrants for small farms. Often overlooked behind the prominent stories of copper mining and urban Calumet, Nara's images of farm families and life in these nearby rural settings document otherwise unseen aspects of the region's history.



At its zenith, the population of the Calumet area reached 88,000, including a broad mix of immigrants and first-generation descendants from more than 20 nations. Calumet's Fifth Street compared favorably with most Midwestern cities, offering everything from a grand opera house and fine restaurants, to dozens of shops and saloons. J.W. Nara was particularly adept at capturing the varied culture of urban Calumet, with its

multistoried sandstone buildings, bustling streets, and complex ethnic population.

J.W. Nara maintained a strong commitment to family. A brother, Frank, emigrated with him from Finland and assisted him in his photographic studio. They were later joined by cousins Isaac and Charles, and were known collectively as "the four Nara brothers" by many in Calumet. J.W. Nara not only documented the Keweenaw's mighty world of mining and industry in his photographs, but through family photos of wives, children, and extended families and friends, his lens also captured the everyday lives of Copper Country people. His spirit lives on in generations of Nara descendants, some of whom work the same timber lands J.W. Nara walked more than a century ago.



Strike 1913

On July 23, 1913, Keweenaw miners went on strike against the region's copper companies in what would be remembered as the most volatile chapter of Copper Country history. The strike marked a ten-month long period of violence and conflict in the copper mining district. At least 84 people lost their lives in the violent acts that occurred during the strike. Mine workers, their families, the community, and the copper companies were drawn into a conflict that would push the geographically remote region into the national view as a battleground between union and corporate interests.

Calumet photographer J.W. Nara documented many aspects of the strike through its end in April 1914. In addition to photographs of mines, soldiers, and strike parades, Nara also captured life in the affected communities along the copper range. Perhaps most somber were photographs relating to the tragic events at Calumet's Italian Hall on December 24, 1913. Reacting to what many claim was a false fire alarm, families of striking miners at a Christmas party clogged an exit stairway in the building. In the ensuing crush, more than 70 individuals lost their lives, most of them children.

This was not the first time miners challenged the companies over wages and working conditions, nor would it be the last. In 1913, miners rallied for higher wages, unionization under the Western Federation of Miners, and a return to the more familiar two-man drill. Although mining companies provided housing and medical services, copper miners worked long hours underground in harsh and dangerous conditions. Deadly accidents were commonplace, averaging more than one a week just two years prior to the start of the strike. The new one-man drill meant a man worked without a partner to keep an eye on him, even if it did increase production.



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Local communities, business owners, and residents outside the mining company payrolls were torn by the conflict. On one hand, the copper companies were the foundation of a stable local economy. On the other, miners and their families spent their hard earned wages at local businesses and were vital parts of church, school, and civic organizations. The community-based Citizens Alliance spoke loudly in support of the companies, Houghton's newspaper, *The Daily Mining Gazette*, decried the corrupt influence of union organizers, while *The Detroit Free Press* reported that Copper Country women were "the heart and soul" of the strike. It was a complex and conflicting time for all involved.

In response to local fears of rioting and vandalism by striking copper miners, Michigan governor Woodbridge Ferris assigned Michigan National Guard troops to the embattled northern mining district on July 24, 1913. Troops encamped throughout Houghton and Keweenaw County, ordered by Ferris to "protect the life and property of the employee along with the employer." During their six-month stay in the Copper Country, the Michigan National Guard was not involved in a single fatality. On January 12, 1914, Governor Ferris ordered the last of the troops home, leaving the district in the hands of local law enforcement.

Mine managers, led by James MacNaughton, general manager of the Calumet & Hecla Copper Mining Company, were implacable in the face of striking mine workers. As the strike unfolded, he declined all offers by the governor to arbitrate the matter. To MacNaughton's mind, there was nothing to negotiate, and he steadfastly refused to recognize the right of the Western Federation of Miners to speak for the miners. He told WFM president Charles H. Moyer that he would see grass grow in the streets of Calumet before he would negotiate with the union. After nearly nine months, a majority of miners voted on Easter Sunday, April 13, 1914, to end their strike. The defeat of the Western Federation of Miners had lasting impact on labor-management relations in Michigan's copper district and across the nation.



John W. Nara

Emigrating from Finland in the 1890s, J.W. Nara became one of the Copper Country's first commercial photographers. His images of the rural, urban, and industrial life of Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula represent one of the best documents of the growing copper mining region. Nara translated the success of his studio into a growing portfolio of timber lands in the region, becoming one of the first advocates for selective logging practices.



William O. Nara

The only child of the professional photographer, William Onni Nara's childhood is particularly well-documented in photographs. Known as "Onni" to his family and childhood friends, William eventually resettled to lower Michigan and served as a professional fire fighter for the City of Detroit for more than 20 years. Upon his retirement back to the Copper Country, he was instrumental in forming the Bootjack Fire Department. William Nara was responsible for preserving many of his father's original photographs and entrusting them to the care of the Michigan Tech Archives.

Dr. Robert and Ruth Nara

Growing up on the lands of his father and grandfather in Bootjack, Robert Nara completed his schooling at Lake Linden High School, undertook dental training, and operated a dental practice in Houghton for several decades. Founder of Oramedics International, an organization promoting preventative dentistry, Dr. Nara and Ruth, his wife of more than 50 years, continue to work the family's forest lands near Bootjack. The couple practices "catalyst philanthropy" through the Nara Foundation, providing funding to local heritage organizations, recreational trail systems, and animal protection agencies.



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