

Sept Iles, 1965

Fred Landon

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Title: Sept Iles

Date of first publication: 1965

Author: Fred Landon (1880-1969)

Date first posted: Sep. 7, 2023

Date last updated: Sep. 7, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230911

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Sept Iles, 1965

By FRED LANDON

Inland Seas, Volume XXI, #3, 1965

The name “Sept Iles,” even in its translated form “Seven Islands,” has a romantic sound that conjures up the thought of some remote locality in the South Seas or of an association with the tales in *The Arabian Nights*. It is, however, a Canadian port on the north shore of the lower St. Lawrence River, and received its name from the French explorer Jacques Cartier who passed that way in the Summer of 1535 as he sailed westward in search of a route to the Indies.

Until about fifteen years ago Sept Iles was but a small French-Canadian village mainly dependent on fishing and having little communication with the outside world. Today, it is one of Canada’s newest cities with a population approaching 25,000 and, as a port, one of the busiest in Eastern Canada, coming close to Montreal in the volume of tonnage handled. The reason for this sudden growth lies in the discovery and exploitation of enormous resources of iron ore in northern Quebec and in neighboring areas of Newfoundland-Labrador.

The municipality of Sept Iles lies along the shore of a great bay bordered by the islands which give it its distinctive name, and which afford safe anchorage to the largest ocean-going ships without icing up in winter to stop navigation.

We anchored in the bay just at dusk on the second evening after passing Montreal. First sight of the town was a surprise. We had expected to find a crude pioneer town, lacking the facilities and amenities of a modern community, but here before us was an area a mile and a half wide, brilliantly illuminated and with various public buildings standing out clearly. The lights of automobiles could be seen moving about the streets, and vessels at the mooring and loading docks were equally visible by their own lights. The next day we learned that in addition to its modern schools and handsome churches Sept Iles has an up-to-date and well equipped, 225 bed hospital, a recreation centre with an Olympic-sized pool and a public auditorium.

Elsewhere is a golf course and tennis courts for those desiring outdoor recreation.

Opportunity to visit this remote Canadian port and gain some idea of its economic importance to the Great Lakes region and its industries came through the courtesy of the Scott Misener Steamships company of St. Catharines, Ontario, one of the shipping companies carrying iron ore from the Quebec area to steel plants about the Lower Lakes. We boarded the 685-foot *Scott Misener*, flagship of the fleet (Captain J. W. Sharpe), on her passage through the Welland Canal with a record cargo of wheat, which was discharged at the Montreal elevators, after which we proceeded empty the remaining 450 miles to Sept Iles.

The iron ore mined in the Knob Lake area of northern Quebec is brought to the bay port of Sept Iles by the Quebec, North Shore and Labrador Railway, over a distance of 356 miles built through as rugged an area as exists on the continent. Current mining operations are centred about the town of Schefferville, 320 miles to the north where there are known deposits of more than 400 million tons which can be extracted by open pit mining methods.

Ore production normally goes on between May 1 and November 15, approximately 200 days, and with an average daily production of 60,000 tons, which is often exceeded. From seven to ten trains move daily to Sept Iles, hauled by powerful diesel engines. The mountains of ore at the port stand out conspicuously on the landscape. A system of endless belts conveys the ore to the loading docks and to the holds of the waiting vessels. As fast as one vessel is loaded and moves out, another takes its place. During our brief stay, when 21,000 tons of ore went into the holds of the *Scott Misener*, eight other vessels were waiting their turn or were on their way out of the bay. Some of these cargoes were going overseas. The *Scott Misener's* cargo on this particular trip was destined for Cleveland.

The story of this new Quebec-Labrador iron empire is, for the most part, so recent that it can be told briefly. Between 1892-95 A. P. Low, as a geologist for the Geological Survey of Canada, discovered large areas of iron formation and published reports on the subject. In 1936 the Labrador Mining and Exploration Company acquired a concession which seven years later passed into the hands of Hollinger Consolidated Gold Mines (Canadian). An additional area was later acquired from the Quebec government.

The year 1947 was an important step forward when the Quebec, North Shore and Labrador Railway was chartered. Within seven years it built 357 miles of mainline railway through the wilderness, as well as the terminal facilities at Sept Iles, to receive the ore. Over this wilderness was operated and maintained the largest civilian airlift in history.

In 1949 Hollinger and M. A. Hanna, American interests, joined with a group of American steel companies to form the Iron Ore Company of Canada. Besides the initial financing by these partners, 19 American and Canadian insurance companies agreed to loan \$145,000,000.00. Thus was born one of the greatest enterprises in all Canadian history and one of the greatest mining ventures ever recorded.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Sept Iles* by Fred Landon]