

## Remembering World War II

# Iron County Mines Supply Critical Wartime Needs

by Jay M. Jones

*Seventy-Five years ago marked the concluding events of World War II. This is the sixth in a series of articles highlighting some of the contributions of Iron County to the successful execution of the war.*



**Aerial photo from the SUU Special Collections identifies some of the open pit mines near Iron Mountain that were operated during World War II and afterwards. From left: the Duncan, Burke, Red Cloud, Pinto, Black Hawk, and Blowout pits. State Highway 56 between Cedar City and Newcastle crosses the lower part of the photo.**

Iron ore has played an important part in the history of Iron County since the first Euro-American settlers arrived in Southern Utah in 1851 to start an iron mining and manufacturing industry in Utah.

During World War II, the local iron ore deposits contributed great strategic value to the United States' war effort.

One of the great success stories during the war was the dramatic American shipbuilding effort. Nazi submarines had inflicted large losses to Allied shipping in the early years of the war. Both merchant ships and war ships were needed in great numbers to supply Allied needs throughout the world and to combat enemy threats. A key to building these ships was steel, and iron mining activity in Iron County ramped up to meet part of the demand.

Although there had been pioneer efforts to mine and refine iron locally, the first large scale mining of iron ore in Iron County began in the 1920s. Of major importance was the building in 1923 of a railroad branch line to connect Cedar City and the iron mines to the railroad running between Salt Lake and Los Angeles. The Columbia Steel Company built a smelter south of Provo (known as Ironton) which was completed in 1924. Columbia Steel contracted with the Utah Iron Ore Corporation to supply 500 tons of iron ore per day, which was supplied by a mine at Desert Mound in Iron County.

In 1936, Columbia Mining Company, a subsidiary of Columbia Steel, started supplying the Ironton plant with ore from the Black Hawk mine, newly opened on the south side of Iron Mountain. Annual shipments steadily increased from 175,000 tons of ore in 1936 to over 350,000 tons shipped in 1942.

With the coming of World War II, plans were made to build a large integrated steel mill in Utah to supply steel plate to the Pacific Coast shipyards. The federal government, through the Defense Plant Corporation (DPC) allocated \$200 million for the construction of the Geneva steel plant near Orem, Utah, which was operated by U.S. Steel (who had acquired Columbia Steel). Also, a blast furnace from Illinois was dismantled and moved to Utah to increase the capacity of the Ironton facility.

The additional blast furnace at Ironton began production in July of 1943. The Geneva plant started producing steel in January of 1944.

The new Geneva mill and the increase in production capacity at Ironton brought a large increase in the demand for iron ore from Iron County. New equipment was purchased, roads were built, overburden was stripped, and the Pinto Pit was opened to mining to supplement the output from the Black Hawk mine. Columbia Mining employment went from 20 in 1940 to over 200 in 1944. Ore shipments by Columbia Mining totaled 1,235,000 tons in 1944.

Although Columbia Mining was the dominant mining company in Iron County at the beginning of World War II, other companies also moved ahead with plans to utilize local iron during the war years.

In 1942, Utah Construction Company began work to open up an iron mine for Colorado Fuel and Iron (CF&I) at what became the Duncan Pit on the southwest side of Iron Mountain. Iron ore from the Duncan Pit was shipped to a CF&I plant near Pueblo, Colorado, which produced large amounts of munitions for the war effort.

Two years later in 1944, Utah Construction began mining at the Blowout Pit on the southern slopes of Iron Mountain. One large customer for the iron ore from this location was Kaiser Steel in Fontana, California, which milled large steel plates used in constructing Liberty and Victory Ships at shipyards on the Pacific Coast.

Some of the earthmoving equipment used by Utah Construction at Iron Mountain was transferred from the construction site of Davis Dam on the Lower Colorado River. The Davis Dam project was put on hold during World War II due to other wartime priorities.

Steel production in the United States reached a peak of 90 million tons in 1944. Scrap metal and imports provided a portion of the raw materials that went into the total output.

Although iron mines in the Great Lakes region provided vast quantities of ore for the massive steel making enterprises in the Eastern United States, Iron County mines were the largest in the Western United States and provided an important amount of ore that was refined and used for the shipbuilding operations on the Pacific Coast.

Iron mining was not without its hazards. Howard H. Leigh of Cedar City was killed in a mining accident in 1943 at the Columbia mines.

Following the war, both Columbia Mining and Utah Construction expanded their iron mining activity in Iron County. As the United States steel industry declined in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the iron mining activity in Iron County slowed dramatically, although large iron ore deposits remain in the area.

More information about the history of local iron mining can be found in the book "Iron Mining and Manufacturing in Utah" by Evan Y. Jones and York F. Jones.



**SS John W. Brown, one of four surviving Liberty Ships. Over 2,700 Liberty cargo ships were constructed by the United States during World War II to supply food and materials to meet Allied requirements around the world. Six shipyards on the Pacific Coast were among 18 nationwide that were dedicated to building Liberty Ships. Iron County ore provided steelmakers part of the raw materials needed to build the ships. Photo courtesy Project Liberty Ship.**