



John Burt, left, and his brother Dick, stand in front of a solar compass invented by their great-great-great-grandfather William Austin Burt who discovered iron ore in Negaunee while surveying

land in 1844. John has written a book, edited by Dick, about William Austin Burt and his five sons, who were all surveyors. (Journal photo by Jenny Lancour)

Burt's many firsts detailed in book

By JENNY LANÇOUR
Journal Staff Writer

MARQUETTE — William Austin Burt was a man of many firsts. He not only discovered iron ore on the Marquette Iron Range in 1844, he invented the first solar compass and the first typewriter.

These achievements, as well as the history of his five sons, will be explored in a book compiled by three of his great-great-great grandsons who now live in California.

Two of these descendants, John and Dick Burt, were in Marquette Wednesday as they concluded their task of researching their famous ancestors.

"We now will know what the true story was to pass on to our children," said Dick, who edited the manuscript written by his brother John. John's twin brother, Jim, was responsible for preparing the book's illustrations.

The manuscript, titled "They Left Their Mark, William Austin Burt and His Sons, Surveyors of the Public Domain", is expected to be released in six weeks.

Dick said the family history had been passed down by word-of-mouth and was always sketchy. "John got the inspiration to pull it all together."

John explained, "I recognized there was a fascinating story to be told." John began his project with files stored in a cabinet in his garage. Dick found old diaries and other correspondences. Jim used his photographic skills to reproduce old photos and illustrations.

After eight years of research, obtaining information from relatives and a number of other resources, John was able to put the history together on William Austin Burt and his five sons.

"The Marquette Historical Society was the single most valuable location for my research," said John. Many of the original papers from the Burt family are located at the museum as well as an example of the solar compass William Burt invented in conjunction with his accidental discovery of iron ore while surveying in Negaunee.

The book begins with William Austin Burt's family and his birth in 1792. In addition to being a discoverer and an inventor, Burt was a surveyor, farmer, postmaster, and judge.

All five of his sons — John, Alvin, Wells, William, and Austin (of whom John and Dick are descendants) — were surveyors.

William Burt's son John was Marquette's first elected surveyor, owner of the area's first newspaper, manager of the Lake Superior Iron Mine, the first superintendent of the Sault Canal, and the first president of the U.P.'s first railroad, the Iron Mountain Range.

The book concludes with the death of William's sons in the 1900s. The publication's forward was written by local author John Voelker.

"This book is the fulfillment of an enormous pride at having learned about my ancestors," said John. "It has been the most enriching experience of my life and I have acquired an enormous appreciation for Michigan, the surveying profession, and my ancestors."

John is a certified medical representative in Orange, California. Dick is a lawyer in San Diego.