

The
History
of
Ottertail City
By
Terry Keskitalo

I'm going to show how the history of Ottertail City has changed from the 1860's and 1870's to what it is now.

- I. What was the past history of Ottertail City like?
 - A. What were some of the businesses present during this period of time?
 - B. What caused the decline in the population of Ottertail City?
 - C. What were some of the events that helped cause the decline?
 - D. Where did the people go?
- II. What saved Ottertail City from total emptiness?
 - A. What businesses were established to help save it?
 - B. Who were some of the people who helped save it?
 - C. What were some of the things the people did to try and save it?
- III. What are some of the important aspects of present Ottertail City?
 - A. What are some of the businesses that helped it to stabilize?
 - B. Who are some of the important people of the present day Ottertail City?
 - C. Has the town expanded at all during the last few years?
 - D. What were some of the things established to bring people to Ottertail City?

According to an Indian legend, Otttertail City (the lake and the county) got their name because of the sand bank dividing Otttertail Lake on the northeast end of the lake. This sand bank protruding between the waters looks like the shape of an otters tail. So the Indians called it Otter Tail as have the other settlers.¹

The old Otttertail City, which was located on the eastern shore of Otttertail Lake, was the county seat provided by the act of 1858 boasted of five log houses in 1858, and Hon E. Corliss, the first county attorney states that these same five houses were still standing when he first saw the "city" in 1870. The authority for stating that five houses were in Otttertail City as early as 1858 is furnished by a sketch made by Manton Marvel, of the New York World, who at the head of a party of explorers passed through Otttertail City in the summer of that year. This sketch was published by Harpers Magazine in 1860.² Two of the men who lived in the log houses were Donald McDonald and Duncan McDougall. There also was an Episcopal missionary service headed by Reverend James L. Breck.³ But at about the time of the civil war there was an Indian uprising in which the Chippewa Indians destroyed the missionary service. Due to this uprising all the settlers left except the two men, McDougall and McDonald. They remained and married Indian squaws. McDougall was an old man at this time, while McDonald was only 32 years old and had five children.⁴ These two men

*Incorrect.
McDonald was 61 at the time of the 1860 census. he was already married in 1860 + had 3 children. One of the children was married to McDougall*

¹ Janet Keskitalo, Researched old buildings of Otttertail City and surrounding area (May 3, 1973).

² John W. Mason, History of Otttertail County Minnesota (Indiana: B. F. Bowen and Company, Inc., 1916), p. 96-97.

³ Ibid. p. 84.

⁴ Ibid. p. 85.

then set up the trading post. This turned out to be a very important post on the fur trade route from St. Paul and Crow Wing to the Red River Valley.⁵

By 1860, Ottertail City had a population of 208 people. From there it climbed steadily until the city reached its height in 1870. At this time the population was estimated to be around 1200 people. The city at this time had a weekly paper called the Ottertail City Record, a saw mill, flour mill, five hotels, 37 saloons, many general stores, three lawyers, and three mail stages to White Earth, Chippewa in Douglas County, Parkers Prairie and Osakis. At this time William R. Atkinson served as proprietor of the village caravansary. Other occupations which were reported by the census taken were as follows: ship carpenter, surveyors, blacksmith, farmers, laborors, teamsters, nurses, mail carriers, servants, housekeepers, lumber men, coopers, carpenters and stage drivers.⁶ The U.S. Land Office, which was located in Ottertail City, was moved there from Ojibwa, Minnesota. George B. Clitherall was the register and William Sawyer was the receiver. There were many other types of businesses in the city, examples of these were the advertisements found in the Fergus Falls Advocate. Some of the advertisements are as follows:

Thos. Cathcart and Co.
Real Estate Dealers
Ottertail City
Thos. Cathcart W. Harry Williams⁷

Chas. E. Fuller
Attorney and Counsellor at Law
Real Estate and Collecting Agent
Ottertail City, Minnesota

G. W. Holland
Attorney and Counsellor at Law
Ottertail City, Minnesota

⁵Historical Marker (for old Ottertail City),
One mile west of present Ottertail.

⁶Mason, op. cit., p. 85.

⁷Fergus Falls Advocate (Fergus Falls, MN, April
29, 1871), p. 3.

⁸Ibid. p. 9.

⁹Ibid. p. 14.

General
Land and Insurance
Agent

Ottertail City, Minnesota

Lands bought and sold on commission. Taxes paid for non-residents. Will pay particular attention to the prosecution of claims before the U.S. General and local Land Offices. Pre-emption and all other papers prepared for claimants. Will locate and survey Government lands for parties wanting homes.

Having been in this business for four years, he feels confident that all business entrusted to him will be promptly and satisfactorily transacted.¹⁰

Union House

Ottertail City, Minnesota

M. Anderson Prop'r.

Boarding by the day or week at reasonable rates.¹¹

During the 1870's there were many news making events, they dealt with a jail, school, big bill of sale, proceedings of the Board of Commissioners and a fire.

A proposition from citizens of Ottertail City requesting the county commissioners to build a jail at said place. Above proposition was considered, committee was appointed to examine and select a sufficient lot to build a jail on. And said commissioners to be requested to make report to Board of Commissioners when in next session. Following persons were appointed: J. H. Sanders, J. S. Cowell, C. H. Meyers.¹²

District No. 15 Ottertail City

School was taught by Mrs. S. D. Daggett. "Whole number of pupils in attendance 27, present at visitation 20, wages \$40 per month, school house worth \$60, as convenient as could be expected." Mrs. Daggett is a graduate of the First State Normal Schools, experienced teacher, uses great skills in teaching primary reading. The district voted a tax of \$400 for school purposes.

¹⁰ Ibid. (July 15, 1871), p. 14.

¹¹ Ibid. (January 27, 1872), p. 39.

¹² Ibid. (April 15, 1871), p. 1.

Their energy in this respect speaks volumes for Otttertail City.¹³

A Big Bill-R. S. Frazee of Otttertail City, made a big sale of a few days since of 100,000 feet of pine lumber to Thomas and Bracket, which they started for Georgetown, and got as far as this place on its way. A few days after he made a sale of another bill of 100,000 to Mr. Colwell. Mr. Frazee, is a man of remarkable vim and euterprise, and deserves the success which is crowing his efforts.¹⁴

Proceedings of Board of Commissioners

Regular Meeting

Meet at hour of 9 A.M. People organized themselves as County Board of Equalization, and examined assessments on personal property returned to the County Auditor by the several township assesors.

For general school taxes 2 mills on the dollar.

For county poor purposes 2 mills on the dollar.

One bill of \$20 from S. Whittney, deputy sheriff, for money expended in search of one criminal P. Shoneburg. The commissioners rejected the bill on the grounds that they believed the sheriff had know right to charge the county for expending money on that travel.¹⁵

Fire-Last Wednesday, the 24th inst., Stones hotel, in Otttertail City, took fire, and in spite of the utmost efforts of the citizens to extinguish the flames, it was burned down to the ground. Some of the was saved, but a majority of it together with a bale of new blankets, were a total loss. We are unable to state the origin of the fire at this writing. Insured for \$1,500.¹⁶

On the whole, the first settlers lived reputable lives. Even ththrough most of the mothers were Indians they still had Christian names. Some authorities still

¹³Ibid. (July 22, 1871), p. 15.

¹⁴Ibid. (July 22, 1871), p. 15.

¹⁵Ibid. (October 21, 1871), p. 28.

¹⁶Ibid. (January 27, 1872), p. 39.