

OLD OTTER TAIL CITY

by

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The old city of Otter Tail had a short but colorful history. The first person to settle there was Donald McDonald. He was born in Canada and was a voyageur for the Hudson Bay Company. He came to Otter Tail Lake, at the site where the river entered the lake, about 1850 or 1851, and started to trade with the Indians of the area. "Old Mac", as he later became known, seems to have been quite a character as he was arrested at the age of 94 for selling whiskey to the Indians. When he was taken before the judge and asked if he had sold to the Indians he said, "Yes; thousands of barrels have I sold them." When the judge told him that he must not sell them whiskey he replied, "You divils do worse not that; whiskey will not harm an Indian any more than it will you." Besides this he once lost \$9,000 in a poker game, and he would go to John McNellis's when it thundered at night and sleep on the floor wrapped in a blanket.

In 1857 a young surveyor named Sewell took a party into Otter Tail County in search of plots of land for future townsites. Another young surveyor, Caleb W. Iddings, age 24, went with the party. Sewell and Iddings plotted out several townsites, one of these was Otter Tail City. The original townsite was plotted with 222 blocks, each 300 feet square with streets 66 feet wide. The site was nearly square, with 15 blocks each way and a few extra blocks around the curve of the lake.

The North-West District branch of the U. S. Land Office was ordered moved to Otter Tail City on August 18, 1857, from Ojibawa. George B. Clitheral was the first Register and William Sawyer was the Receiver when the office opened on July 25, 1859. In December of 1862 the Indians attacked the office and scattered the records,

the men in the office managed to get away before the Indians got there and the Indians did not get anything of value. 16 men under the leadership of a Major Brunson were sent from Fort Ripley to collect the records. On the 9th of March, 1863, the Land Office was moved to St. Cloud.

By 1860 the city had grown to a population of 208. There was an Episcopale mission and three stores. One of these stores was run by Donald McDonald, another by Duncan McDougall, who was McDonald's son-in-law, and the third store was run by Francois Belleair, who was a half-breed. At this time there also were carpenters, surveyors, blacksmiths, nurses, lumbermen, and many other professions. There also was a post office started of May 14, 1859, with Wm. Sawyer as the postmaster. These people all left at the time of the Civil War and the Indian outbreak, only McDonald stayed during this time.

Otter Tail City was the first county seat when the Territorial Legislature made it so in 1858. Due to the resettlement after the Sioux outbreak, the county seat was moved to Tordenskjold in 1870, where it remained for less than a year. It was then returned to Otter Tail. At this time Fergus Falls decided that it should have the seat. The eastern half of the county, which wanted to keep the <sup>seat</sup> at Otter Tail, was then more populous than the western part. Because of this the western part decided to secede and form a new county. The county was in quite a turmoil over this, and in a vote on the proposal, the idea was turned down. Otter Tail won out and the county remained a whole, however, this victory was soon lost. Fergus Falls tried to have the seat removed, and in

1872 the county seat was changed to Fergus Falls.

Otter Tail was just an Indian trading center untill about 1869, when it's boom begane. At this time the city was still the county seat and there was talk of the Great Northern Rail Road coming through the town. When the boom started the town became quite rough as most of the men who came at this time were men who had lived their lives in the wilderness and when they went to a town they would go to a saloon and drink whiskey untill they could hold no more. The boom soon broke in 1871 when the rail road decided to go west of the city. This is said to have happened because the land speculators were charging to much for the rail road right of way. After this, the city began to decline and soon there was nothing left.

During this short period of time much was happening. The population reached a height of approximatly 1500 people. There were many buisnesses in the bustling town. There was a sawmill, run by R. L. Frazee; a weekly paper, the "Otter Tail City Recorder", edited and printed by W. F. Ball; five hotels; three lawyers; a flour mill, also run by R. L. Frazee; many general stores; and three mail routes and stages.

One of these stages was run by Wm. McDougal, this stage ran to White Earth. John McNellis, ran one which went to Chippewa in Douglas County. The third stage was run by George Rots, this stage went to Osakis by way of Parkers Prarie. The round trip took him four days to complete.

Besides these buisnesses there also were 37 saloons; a whole-sale liquer store; a brewery; "hurdy gurdy" houses; and many

gambling houses. At these gambling houses the wives of merchants were even known to "invest" their money in "keno" or some other game. These ladies, who were then living in one of the hotels, would pool their money and give it to a friend or brother and have him "invest" it for them. Most of these buildings; the saloons, gambling houses, and even the houses, were only made out of wood shells or canvase, so they were easy to be dismantled and moved when the boom busted.

Several of the men who came just before the boom helped build up the city. Two of these men were John McNellis and R. L. Frazee. John McNellis came to Otter Tail in 1869, he became a hotel keeper and later ran a stage line. He made quite a bit of money and was one of the last persons to leave the city after the boom busted.

Frazee came to Otter Tail in September, 1868. He was looking for a place for a sawmill and when he saw the area he liked it so much that he immediatly set out to bring back what he had and start a mill there. The mill was built in April, 1869, and it was first put into use in May of that year. He built a flour mill in November, 1871, but people were already leaving the town and the mill failed. He moved out in the summer of 1872, and went to New York Mills, which was then called Frazee Mills, and later moved to the present town of Frazee.

Once it was known that the Great Northern would not pass through the city it did not take long for the city to become deserted. "Old Mac" was the last white man to leave the city. He lived there for many years with only Indians for neighbors, untill he moved to the White Earth Indian Reservation where lived his

last years with his Indian wife. With "Old Mac's" leaving, the history of old Otter Tail City was closed forever.