

Ottertail City

Once upon a time, it was a lakeside village that envisioned a flourishing destiny as the Otter Tail County seat.

Today, Ottertail lies more than a mile from the lake of the same name, and its vision of conducting the county's business is a chapter in history.

Because the town of 239 is in the midst of lakes and resorts, summer makes life more lively. A grocery store, bar, restaurant, bank, laundromat and post office serve residents as well as visitors at the city near the junction of Highway 78 and County Road 108. A bait and tackle business operates nearby, and north of Ottertail on Highway 78 is a supper club and motel as well as a marine, lawn and garden business. Just five miles south of the city lies the Boardwalk mini-mall and Balmoral Golf Course, named after an early settler of the area. A volunteer fire department serves the city and outlying area, and there are two churches that bear Ottertail addresses.

Businesses in Ottertail also reflect another aspect of the area: farming. Several agricultural businesses serve the vicinity's crop and dairy farmers.

Though it's a tiny town, Ottertail officially consists of nearly five full sections. The area of about 3,200 acres was platted in days when pioneers anticipated growth. It reaches to the shores of Otter Tail Lake, the area where only a few reminders of the original Ottertail settlement can be found.

On the west side of Highway 78 near the 108 junction stands a large, rectangular, white, two-story building known as the St. Paul House. It was a hotel in Ottertail's early days, built by stagecoach driver John McNellis in 1885.

McNellis was a native of St. Paul, and he established the first coach route between Brandon (then called Chippewa) and Ottertail. His hotel catered to visiting hunters and fishermen. Later, it was a farm house and now it is privately owned.

Ottertail began as a trading post built in 1849 by Donal McDonald. Eight years later, a land claims office opened there, and in 1858 the territorial legislature named it the county seat. Before the Indian uprising of the mid-1860s, a census showed 208 people lived in the town with a post office, three stores and other businesses.

But battles between Indian tribes scared the residents away. The county business was handled at the Clitherall settlement and briefly at Tordenskjold Township before Ottertail's courthouse resumed activity in post-uprising days.

By 1869, the village was booming again. Ottertail earned a reputation as a "wild town," with its 37 saloons, five hotels, three lawyers, a brewery and a newspaper. About 1,200 people came to live there, primarily due to speculation. There was talk of a railroad coming through town; after all, the

company's surveyors had been there in the summer of 1870 to design a prospective route. Several hotels were built, and many residents were employed at R. L. Frazee's flour mill north of town. There was a jail and there was a school in the young city. From the post office, three mail routes reached to the outside world via White Earth, Brandon (Douglas County) and Osakis on a weekly or even more frequent basis.

But the boom busted when, in 1871, the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad announced its routing decision. The line crossing from Perham to Frazee would not go through Ottertail, at least partly because one owner of a large land area would not grant the railroad the easement and half-interest that they demanded.

Slowly, the historic town once again became deserted. The post office moved eastward in 1894 to the area where the Soo Line Railroad was placing track. By 1904, old Ottertail had disappeared and the Soo Line to the east was complete.

That's not to say memories of the town have gone by the wayside, however. Otter Tail County natives still tell stories — sometimes with a bitter twist — of the midnight theft of courthouse records from Ottertail prior to the designation of Fergus Falls as county seat. In recognition of old Ottertail's role in history, a monument was placed near the St. Paul House in 1933 by the county historical society.

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