

Booming Ottertail City Boasted Of 36 Saloons 85 Years Ago

(James Gray)

Eighty-five years ago a booming city at the northwest corner of Otter Tail lake boasted of 36 saloons. The only vestige of the settlement today is the old St. Paul house which was built years after Ottertail City faded.

Ottertail City was designated the county seat when the county was organized by the legislature in 1858. That year the village consisted of five log houses and was visited by tourists who made an excursion to Winnipeg.

In 1860 population of the county was listed as 240. Ottertail City was the postoffice for most of the settlers. Only other postoffice was Waseata where Dayton Hollow is now.

First trader to locate at Ottertail City was Donald McDonald, a native of Canada who had travelled on the Red river as early as 1837. Wm. R. Atkinson was the innkeeper. A United States land office was manned by George B. Clitherall, register, and Wm. Sawyer, receiver.

The census listed mail carriers, laborers, farmers, servants, teamsters, coopers, carpenters and traders in 1860. Some of them hailed from New England. Others were Canadian, part Indian or Negro.

Recollections of R. L. Frazee, preserved by the Otter Tail County Historical society, tell of the boom. Frazee built a sawmill there in 1868 and cut timber that winter in the Toad river area. Four years later when the town had folded he moved his sawmill to New York Mills.

RAILROAD STARTS BOOM

In August, 1870, surveyors, contractors and builders of the Northern Pacific railroad dropped down on Ottertail City like a thunder cloud. For some reason, Frazee wrote, no one had an inkling of the railroad's plans until scores of teams loaded with supplies moved into town.

"Ottertail City had been designated a supply depot by the railroad company and warehouses soon were going up. They were about 30 by 190 feet and were soon piled with everything needed to build a railroad and feed the men."

Every day hordes of laborers, horses, mules and ovens descended on Ottertail City. Close behind came merchants with all kinds of goods. The keystone of each outfit was a barrel of whiskey.

"It was a red letter day for the Indians and half-breeds," Frazee recalled. "Peppermint essence, pain killer and other liquids of that character were soon dropped as whiskey was cheaper and went to the spot where wanted."

Everyone believed the railroad was going through Ottertail City and that it would be a metropolis. It was a City for a short time but

A large hotel was built. There were more saloons, a wholesale liquor store, hardware store, a brewery, blacksmith shops, carpenter shops. At one time there were 36 saloons and all kinds of gambling flourished.

"It was a wild winter and when it passed we found that the railroad also had passed several miles north of us. With the coming of spring in 1871 our population began to depart. At least part of them followed the railroad west. Some went in wagons, some by boat and some on foot."

According to one version of the story, Thomas Cathcart, who owned the townsite, refused to grant the railroad right of way over his property and the company chose another route.

By the summer of 1872 the town had a lonely, faded and deserted aspect. The county offices soon moved to Fergus Falls which became the county seat in 1872.

BALMORAL IN 1861

Ottertail City wasn't the only settlement in the township 85 years ago. James G. Craigie, his wife and daughter came to Otter Tail county in 1861 and settled at a spot he named Balmoral five miles south of Ottertail City where a creek runs into Otter Tail lake.

A Sioux massacre in September of that year depopulated the Minnesota frontier and the Craigies moved to an older settlement. Part of that time he worked in a mill at Sauk Centre. They returned later and built a dam and mill. Mrs. Craigie, who often worked like a man, went to St. Cloud in the dead of winter and hauled machinery for the mill.

Craigie, a brawny robust Scotsman, soon earned a reputation as a thorough miller and provided a gist mill much nearer for the settlers than Alexandria. His enterprise Snow Flake flour was a success.

In 1871 his daughter Anne reached the age of 18 and eloped with Archie McArthur and they went to Detroit to live.

CRAIGIES MEET DEATH

Tragedy came to the Craigies one beautiful day in September, 1872. Mr. and Mrs. Craigie and a young woman fresh from Scotland, who claimed she was the wife of Becker county's auditor, John Cromb, went sailing.

No one really knew what happened next. The boat was reported as a poor one ballasted with stone. The boat tipped and the three passengers drowned. Mrs. Cromb's body was found near the boat in eight feet of water. The Craigies' bodies were recovered the next day.

Alexander M. Craigie of Minneapolis and George F. Walker of Dassel, a brother of Mrs. James Craigie claimed Annie McArthur was not Craigie's daughter and took possession of the mill then valued at eight or nine thousand dollars.

from the probate court decision and a district court jury in 1875 decided in her favor. The Craigies appealed to the supreme court and a new trial was ordered. Expert counsel for both sides called numerous witnesses and the Methodist church in Fergus Falls, where the trial was held, was filled with spectators. Again the jury decided in favor of Annie.

The McArthurs operated the mill for a few years. Annie McArthur died at Balmoral in 1879.

OTHER SETTLERS

Colorful characters were attracted to Otter Tail even after the boom collapsed.

Washington Muzzy, who came to Otter Tail township about 1870, was the father of the Otter Tail County Alliance out of which developed the Populist movement. He served a term in the legislature in 1885.

His daughter, Bertha Muzzy, who wrote under the name of B. M. Bower, became famous as a writer of western novels. Her first novel was "Chip of the Flying U."

Wm. Morrow, born in Ireland and a veteran of the Civil war, came to Otter Tail in 1881. During the war he was stationed at Arlington Heights and often saw President Lincoln. He was part of the cordon drawn around Washington after Lincoln was shot.

Mary Estes Johnston, born at Chalk Level, Mo., moved to Otter Tail township by covered

wagon in 1878 and a year later moved to Otter Tail township. Her father fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War.

Mrs. Zilpha Barber, who lived the age of 93, was the postmistress at Balmoral for 10 years. She was born in New York state in 1844 and went to Wisconsin through the Great Lakes with her widowed mother when she was free.

OWNSHIPS ORGANIZED

Otter Tail township was organized in 1870 and the first election was held Sept. 24 that year at Mm. McArthur's home.

The present village of Ottertail, which takes in six sections, was incorporated in 1904.

Lakes cover half the township. They include Otter Tail, Buchanan, Gourd, Donald's, Portage and Long Lakes. Every summer population of the township swells with vacationers who find the area as alluring as first settlers did 85 years ago.