

"Memories of Otter Tail"

Written by Hon. W. F. Ball, of Fargo, Editor of the O. T. City Record

The year of our Lord, 1871, saw stirring times in Otter Tail county. Otter Tail City was then the county seat; Fergus Falls was then a "new born babe", among the towns north of Alexandria and though, only in swaddling clothes, aspired to become a local seat of government.; and a very pretty political fight came on in the summer of that year on account of this aspiration. E. G. Holmes the leading "merchant prince" and R. L. Frazee, mill owner and wealthy lumberman were leading spirits on behalf of the "east side" in the fight for supremacy, between the western portion of the county, with Fergus Falls, as its nucleus and the eastern portion with Otter Tail City as its center. The west side people, knowing that they could probably not win in a square fight for the county seat removal, asked the privilege of seceding and with the aid of a tier of townships from Wilkin county, formed a new county with Fergus Falls as county seat. But the Otter Tail City crowd, feeling their strength and having high hopes of the future growth and development of the beautiful town on the shore of lovely and majestic Otter Tail lake, declined to accede to this request, and prepared for a fight. The west side was able to procure the adoption of the necessary resolution of the county board, and the issue of "county division" was thus made up for the voters to decide by their ballots at the election that fall. It was of this situation, that the old "Otter Tail City Record", afterward moved to Detroit and now the "Detroit Record- was born. Mrssrs Holmes and Frazee furnished the plant and your humble servant both stuck the type and filled the editor's chair. Right here, let me say that this opposition to the proposed division of the county was against my judgement. I foresaw, or thought I did, that the west side was bound to grow and develop so rapidly that it would not be long till its voting strength would overbalance ours and that if we did prevent division, the day was not far distant, when the county seat would be moved from Otter Tail by sheer votibg strebgt; while, on the other hand, if we consented to division, then Otter Tail would remain the seat of government of the old county, and her position as such would not be disturbed, for at least, a long time. So believing, I counselled against the fight-but to no use; the "older heads" were firm in their belief in Otter Tail's assured position, and it was "war to the knife" and the "knife to the hilt" against any proposition to to lessen the size of the county and to thereby detract from the prestage of Otter Tail City as the county seat of one of the largest and to-be wealthy and most populous counties in the state. The policy thus settled was followed out, and the fight was made and Otter Tail won out, and the county division was beaten. But alas, the moment of her winning, was the moment of the beginning of her downfall. What followed is to familiar to need any recounting. Suffice it is to say, the views that led me to advise against opposing division were verified in every particular; the outcome was delayed (as I remember it) only one short year. County seat removal was next sought by Fergus; was voted on and carried and the best thing that ever happened to Fergus Falls, was being beaten in the first effort, she made to secure for herself, the position as county seat-of a new county.

Poor old Otter Tail City. Now a memory, merely. She was, in that spring of 1871, a thriving, bustling town of about fifteen hundred souls and with a business of a city of more than that number of thousands. The out-fitting point for the Northern Pacific Railroad, then constructing its western Minnesota division, from Brainerd to the Red River Crossing-now Moorhead and Fargo-she had within her borders, general stores and supply stores, that carried stocks, the value of which would have seemed large, even in a large city. Team trains were going and coming, strange faces were here on our streets every day, speculation was rife, all was life, bustle, activity-money making. There were in the town, a few substantial houses-relics of the "old city".

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ing "at the front" to reap the better, the harvest of their shame. Every saloon had its open gambling attachment and from the open windows of the leading hotel in the place, kept by a man from Boston, named Stone, could be heard, every evening, from a big tent, close by, devoted to all kinds of gambling, the cry of "keno" by the holder of the lucky card and the accompanying ejaculations of the sissatisfaction of the other and less fortunate "speculators". So common was all this, and so familiar had it all become to it, that even the ladies of the hotel, of whom there were quite a number--wives of merchants, contractors, etc. who boarded there, frequently made up purses and sent an envoy, in the person of some husband, brother or friend to "invest" the same on the fascinating "keno" or erratic turning of the high card.

It was, by the way, at this same "Stone's Hotel" that Horace Austin, when he was making his successful race for the governorship of Minnesota, in a speech which he, here made, first gave utterance to his historic remark, "Shaking the railroads over the open jaws of Hell."

In this same year of 1871, while Otter Tail City was in the heyday of her prosperity, the "tough" element, gamblers, pimps and more reckless of the saloon folks carried things with a high hand. But, they sometimes did not have things all their own way. One incident will illustrate this. There was a good many Reservation Indians, chiefly the remnant of the old Otter Tail band of Chippewas, who came every spring and summer to the shores of Otter Tail lake, to camp and fish, trade with the whites in the neighborhood, etc. One one occasion, early in the summer of the year in question, quite a large band of these Indians were camped on the shore of Otter Tail river, about a mile above town. It was then, as now, contrary to the law, to furnish any liquor to the Indians, but several of the more disreputable dealers in the town, seeing a harvest in it for themselves, frequently dispensed their vile compounds to these savages, and the latter were not only reeling about the town drunk every day, but had several tremendous carousals at their camp, and when frenzied with drink, used their weapons among and on each other, with such serious results; that, at least, one life was lost, in consequence. The better people of the place deplored this and a lookout was kept for the guilty parties, who were finally identified. Complaint was made against them, a warrant was issued and served and the writer was employed to prosecute the case. The toughs of the saloon element were immediately up in arms and secured the co-operation of a number of pimps and the like, and held a meeting to devise ways and means to "Protect their rights". The result was, that a written notice, signed "Vigilantes", was served on the writer, notifying him to leave the town within twenty-four hours or take the consequences. Now, "Joe" Bennett, afterward elected Register of Deeds; Williams, townsite agent for Tom Cathcart; Judge Carvell, justice of the peace; Bennett, the constable, the writer and one or two others, all officed in the same building, on the main street, known as "Mother LaChapelle's Ranch"--all in one big room in the front--the rear being occupied as a residence by LaChapelle and his wife. We all slept there, also, in bunks that closed up in the day time, and the covers of which, made benches around the wall. We were all "well heeled" and the room contained, every night, an arsenal, composed of, at least as many guns and pistols as there were living occupants. As soon as the notice was received (it came about the middle of the afternoon), a council of war was held, and various good friends about the town were notified, and before evening, it was quietly understood, all around that if the "toughs" wanted to force an issue of that kind, the sooner it came, the better--and the result was never for a moment in doubt. The a counter-message was sent back, by the same messenger, who was directed to deliver it to the same person who had sent the first. This counter-message was to the effect that the writer could not leave town and would go right ahead with the liquor prosecution, and that he and his friends would be "at home" that night and all of the following nights, and that we would be pleased and ready to receive callers at any time. The "Vigilantes" must have satisfied themselves, in other ways, as well as by the message sent them, of the feeling among the better people and the business men, for nothing more was heard of the proposed "expulsion" from the town. though the Prosecutions continued and the men were bound over and finally convicted and sentenced and liquor selling to the Indians was checked for a while, at least.

It was that same summer, too, that the Minnesota Stage Company's stage was "held up" on the road into Otter Tail City from the south, near the old Balmoral mill, then owned and operated by James G. Craigie. The express box of the stage, was supposed to contain a large sum of money being shipped in by the contractors to pay off with--though in fact, it did not, as the same was sent the day before. There were, on

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with the robber's demand and threw his box out. He was then commanded to move on, which he obeyed with alacrity, running his team clear into Otter Tail, where the news was spread and a posse organized and sent in pursuit. The posse found the express box broken open and rifled, but the robbers (it was afterwards found that there were two of them, one remaining hidden in the woods), had too much of a start and got away. In the hope and expectation of heavy plunder in the box, the robbers had not molested the passengers as to their personal belongings. But, although the pursuing posse did not catch the desperadoes, the Minnesota Stage Company did not let upon them so easily, and as a result of its efforts, one of them was afterwards caught somewhere down in Stearns county, brought back to Otter Tail, tried, convicted and sent to the penitentiary. On the trial of this stage robber, at Otter Tail, before the lamented Judge McKelvey, an amusing incident occurred. The stage driver, Ed Patten, was very much frightened at the time of the robbery, and he had apparently not gotten over it at the time of the trial, for he was not only very anxious to have the man convicted, evidently fearing the consequences, to himself, should the robber be cleared, but he was also very nervous and gave his evidence in a very excited manner. Judge Reuben Reynolds—well known throughout northern Minnesota in those days, father of Hon Geo Reynolds of St Cloud, was defending the prisoner, and he, in his cross examination of Ed, got the latter fully fastened to two propositions; first, that the double barreled shot gun was leveled at his head and kept pointed at him, from the moment he was first halted, till he drove on, at the robber's command, and second, that when the male passenger jumped out at the back end of the stage, the robber turned the gun on him, and kept it pointed at him till he came back. Of course, the Judge led Ed along, working these two conflicting statements out at different parts of the cross examination, but still getting him firmly committed to them both. When Judge got Ed, fully and flatly committed to both these statements, he turned on him and said sternly, "Now sir, please explain to this court and jury how the robber could keep his gun pointed, all the time at you, and also turn it a part of the time on the passenger?" Ed scratched his head, looked at the ceiling a moment and then replied, "Well, you see, it was a double barreled gun, and he had one barrel pointed at me and the other at the passenger". Silence was finally restored in the court room and Judge Reynolds dropped that branch of the cross examination. But the jury convicted Judge Reynolds's client, just the same, and Judge McKelvey sent him for a good long time in the pen.

The limits of such an article as this will not permit of too much of incident and detail. It would take many times the space you can spare to recite the incidents and happenings of that one year at Otter Tail City, which would be of interest to re-call incidents tragic, humorous, pathetic, strange, a conglomeration of occurrences as strange and varied as the mongrel and motley crowd that made up most of the population of the place—common only, as being such as are always to be found "at the front" in the building of a great railroad, in this great country of ours and I will occupy no more of your space at present—though, if this happens to be acceptable, it may be that at another time, I can give your readers some more of my recollections, which, if not possessed of historic value, will at least, be enough out of the usual line, to be of some interest to those who know of but little of those earlier days in Otter Tail

Fargo, N. D

W. F. Ball