

Otter Tail City

Otter Tail City, the first county seat in Otter Tail county, was located on the SE¹ of Section 10, Twp 134 N. Rg 39 W., at the east end of Otter Tail lake on State Aid Road # 9, in Otter Tail county

There is no recorded date as to the first settlement in Otter Tail City, but it was some few years prior to 1858, at which time Otter Tail county was organized and Otter Tail City was named the county seat.

(Mrs Duncan McDougal, a half breed on the White Earth Indian Reservation in Becker county, says that her father, Donald McDonald, with his squaw wife, settled at Otter Tail City location in 1850 or 1851, where he trapped and traded with the Indians. We know that he was one of the first white men at that point. He was employed by the Hudson Bay Company at Fort Gary (Winnipeg), as a young man, in 1815, and, later by John Jacob Astor in Oregon. His principal commodity, in trade, with the Indians was liquor, and it was said that his schedule was as follows: 1 quart-2 canoes or 8 saddles of venison; 1 pint- 1 canoe; 1 gill-1 bear ver hide; 1 sniff-1 pair of moccasins. He died at White Earth in 1883.

After being named the county seat of the new county in 1858, a branch of the U. S. Land Office was located at Otter Tail City and an officer placed in charge, This was raided by the Indians, during the uprising in 1862, and a company of soldiers were sent up from Fort Ripley to gather up the debris.

After this raid, the village was practically deserted, until about 1868, when R. L. Frazee decided that it would be a good point for a saw mill. That summer, he purchased and moved, overland, from St Cloud, the saw mill machinery. He spent the winter of 1868-1869 in the pineries farther north on the Otter Tail river, getting out logs for his mill. He erected the mill in 1869 and sawed out his winter's cut of logs. This was the real beginning of Otter Tail City.

In 1870, the Northern Pacific Railway were running their survey west from Crow Wing and Otter Tail City was one of the towns through which the road was to pass. Construction crews, with loaded wagons, made the village their headquarters. Stores, hotels, saloons, etc., began to flock in. The county erected a court house and jail, and things began to boom. It is said that there were 36 saloons in the village at that time and the town had a population of about 1500.

A flour mill was erected by Marcus Shaw, who was the first county treasurer of Otter Tail county in 1871. Through mismanagement of funds in the treasurer's office, a shortage occurred and this was made up by Mr Frazee, his bondsman, who was the owner of the saw mill. Mr Shaw resigned as county treasurer, and turned his flour mill over to Mr Frazee.

In 1871, a man by the name of Cathcart owned the land in Otter Tail City on which the Railway Company wished to place their depot and side tracks. They could not come to terms as to the value of the land, so the Railway Company, re-routed their line, via Perham, missing the county seat by about ten miles.

In 1872, Mr Frazee moved his saw mill from Otter Tail City to the railroad, to a place that he named Frazee Mills (now New York Mills), and also abandoned the flour mill. That same year the county seat was moved to Fergus Falls. In 1872 the first newspaper, published in Otter Tail county, the Otter Tail City Record, moved their office to Detroit and became the Detroit Record. Most of the business firms moved to other parts, and, what buildings that were not destroyed by fire (most of them were well insured), were dismantled or moved to some other location. Otter Tail City, practically ceased to exist and this condition prevailed until about 1905, when a new lease of life for the village, seemed to be on the way.

In that year (1905) a division of the "Soo" line from Glen-wood to

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Winnipeg, was surveyed through Otter Tail county, the road to pass through Otter Tail City. The same condition existed as it did with the Northern Pacific. The townsite owners could not agree with the Railway Company as to the value of spot and trackage grounds. The line was re-surveyed, missing the village by about a mile, and the new townsite of Otter Tail was platted to the east.

Now, (1941) only one of the original buildings in old Otter Tail City, a former hotel, is there. It is used as a farm house, but still carries the old sign "St Paul House" on the peak of the roof. The balance of the townsite is a grain field.

R. A. B.