

Ottertail's St. Paul House gets new lease on life

Renovation to restore link between Ottertail City and City of Ottertail

By **Andy Barr**
Henning Advocate

It has been decades since life stirred behind the walls of the St. Paul House hotel, whose vacant windows stare steadily out across greater Ottertail and much of its storied past.

More than just a few local spectators have remarked over coffee that the old hotel, an imposing if only dilapidated-looking presence at the intersection of highways 108 and 78, would never see a useful life again. But, as even the casual observer driving past the site today might attest, life has indeed returned to the old St. Paul House, and it comes in the form of its new owners, Clay and Stacy Montella.

The Montellas bought the historic building last summer. Clay, owner of Ever Green Irrigation & Pools in Ottertail, has been taking advantage of this unusually warm winter by beginning in earnest his planned restoration of the building.

Montella reports that the building, which most published accounts say was built around 1885 by stage coach operator John McNellis, is remarkably sound for its age, and he plans to restore it and use at least part of it as showroom and headquarters for his business.

The building, the only remaining structural link between Otter Tail City and the City of Ottertail, has been home

of course to the St. Paul Hotel, as well as several other businesses over the years.

Romo Dybsand, the owner immediately before the Montellas, said that he used it only for storage for the past 26 years, and he always tried to keep it up as best he could until someone would come along to fix it up. That day has arrived, and he says he's happy to see the old place coming back to life.

Before its dormancy, the building was used as a private home for many years. Prior to that, it was home to a boat repair concern and a minnow outfit that seined its stock from the Otter Tail River out front, just up from its confluence with the lake of the same name.

Montella's plans call for complete restoration of the interior, including all new wiring and heating, new period-correct windows, a new roof, and he hopes to use most if not all of the original siding.

And when the job is complete, both Montella and the community at large just may have a shining nugget of history to look upon with pride. That's in large part because the history of the St. Paul House is, in a sense, a reflection of all that passed by on a dusty trail through historic Otter Tail City.

Before heading down that trail, so to speak, it should be noted that Otter Tail City is not to be confused with the

present day City of Ottertail, inhabitants of which are beginning to make some headway on fleshing out the nearly six square miles of land it occupies.

Otter Tail City, the first city platted in the county and designated the county

seat by the state Legislature in 1858, was actually among three places that once served as the county seat before that distinction was removed — not by widely rumored theft but by formal election — to Fergus Falls in 1872.

— continued on page 25



NEW LEASE ON LIFE IN OTTERTAIL

The St. Paul House faces eastward at the intersection of highways 108 and 78 in Ottertail. Used for storage for most of the past three decades, the venerable old building is now getting a face lift that will bring it well into the next century.

Advocate Photo