

The founding of Washburn: 1882-1884

By Lars Larson
Contributing writer

(Editor's note: Would like a reaction from our readers if a history column, such as this one, would be of interest. Lars Larson, author of several books on the history of the area, has volunteered.)

The story of Washburn begins in the summer of 1882, when several executives of the Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul and Omaha Railroad, accompanied by two prominent men from Ashland, crossed from Ashland to the north shore of the bay, where they selected the site of the railroad company's lake transfer dock. Construction of the dock began in the spring of 1883 and was completed in the late summer. The dock consisted of three parts in the shape of a "U." The north arm was a merchandise dock, 1,200 feet long (still in existence), with a large warehouse on the far end; the south arm was a grain elevator dock, 237 feet long (razed in the 1930s); while a coal dock 575 feet long connected the two arms (the present marina). The Omaha Railroad, constructed from St. Paul through Hudson and then north to Chequamegon Bay, reached Washburn in mid-July 1883, completing the land-lake link. Coal, freight, and merchandise were received by ship at the docks for shipment on the Omaha Railroad to the growing settlements in the west, while grain from the rich agricultural districts in Iowa and Minnesota arrived by rail to be shipped to ports on the lower lakes.

In May 1883, the first settlers arrived. Dan Corning, Fred Swain, and two other unidentified men, landed at a

small wharf near the Omaha dock on May 12, followed the next day by a tug pulling a scow with a load of lumber. The lumber was used to construct a store for Dan Corning, which he named the Pioneer Store, located near the work camp for the men building the dock (near the present Veterans of Foreign Wars building). His stock consisted of a box of tobacco, one-half dozen shirts, a dozen overalls, half a dozen straw hats, and a case of shoes. The store also served as Washburn's first post office.

Meanwhile a group of men, including top executives of the Omaha Railroad and prominent men from Ashland and Bayfield, incorporated the Bay Land and Improvement Company in June 1883 for the purpose of establishing a town adjacent to the docks. The townsite, covering 366 acres, was surveyed and platted in the summer of 1883. The company named the town Washburn in honor of Cadwallader C. Washburn, a former governor of Wisconsin.

There were already three settlements on the bay when Washburn was founded. La Pointe, on Madeline Island, an ancient fur trading post and missionary center; Ashland, created in 1872 from Whittlesey and Bay City, two small settlements founded in the mid-1850s, and by 1883 a boom town; and Bayfield, founded in 1856 and in 1883 looking forward to a prosperous future as a lumbering center and lake port. Survey maps also show settlers along the bay shore adjacent Washburn, beginning with a site labeled Vanderverter, near Thompson Creek, and farther east a site marked

Butterfield and two unidentified sites. A sawmill was located in the ravine that marks the west boundary of Memorial Park and a nearby boarding house and mill foreman's residence were known as McCellan. Ashland and Bayfield and these small settlements were isolated clearings in a vast and primeval forest that stretched from the bay shore in all directions as far as the eye could see.

Dan Corning's Pioneer Store and a boarding house for workers, constructed in May 1883, were the first buildings on the townsite. By the end of the year the Washburn Hotel had been constructed on what is now the Legion Memorial Park; and several businesses were in operation, including a barber, a restaurant and confectionary, a saloon, and a brick block, most of them located in what was the first business district, between Central Avenue and First Avenue East. The townsite was in a primitive state, covered with stumps, a sea of red mud when it rained, dust laden air when it was dry, and rock-hard ruts in the winter, while the dark forest, gradually pushed back from the bay shore, loomed darkly in the background.

In January 1884, the Bayfield County Board of Supervisors set off the Town of Washburn, and the election of town officials was held on April 1. At its first meeting the town board quickly appointed a police chief, then moved on to the important matter of the saloon license fee. Although under great pressure to approve a low fee, including the threatening presence of saloon men and their friends in the meeting

room, the board finally approved a \$500 fee. The first killing occurred in May in the Diamond Front Saloon when a "dive keeper" from Hayward assaulted another man in the same business for stealing his girls and was shot in self-defense by his victim. This murderous encounter between dive keepers and the controversy over the license fee presaged the wide-open character of Washburn for the next several years.

The Omaha Railroad completed laying tracks to the docks and erected a depot, water tower, engine house and other facilities, leasing the coal dock to a coal company, which erected a large unloading structure on the dock. In May the first ship, the side wheel "steamer," City of Fremont, arrived with a cargo of freight. Two Great Lakes passenger and freight lines made scheduled arrivals with passengers, freight, and merchandise, while coal boats arrived regularly to unload their cargoes at the coal dock. In fact, the port facilities were so busy that some vessels had to continue to Duluth to discharge their cargoes.

By mid-1884, barely one year after its founding, Washburn was a growing, if somewhat turbulent, lake port, its people having every reason to be optimistic about the future. They had a dream that one day Washburn would be a large and prosperous city, a major port on the Great Lakes. This dream, passed on by the settlers to their children and grandchildren, was to be a continuing theme in the story of Washburn for many years to come.