

A Settlement Becomes A Community-1885-1888

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From 1885 to 1888 the transformation of Washburn from an isolated settlement, perched precariously on the edge of a vast wilderness, to an established community linked to the nation by rail, ship, post and telegraph was completed. The Bay Land and Improvement Company advertised its new townsite throughout the Midwest, and perhaps even in Europe, and settlers flocked to Washburn to take advantage of the opportunities it offered. The future of the town looked so promising that speculators made six additions to the original townsite, totaling over 270 acres.

According to the June 1885 state census Washburn's total population was 741 people. There were about twice as many men as women, not unusual in a new community being carved out of the wilderness. Almost half the people were foreign born, most of them from Canada, Norway and Sweden, with a few from Germany, England, Ireland and other countries. A bird's eye view of the village drawn in 1886 shows almost all houses and other buildings in the area adjacent to the Omaha docks, between Second Avenue East and Wash-



**Lars
Larson
Guest
columnist**

ington Avenue, and Omaha Street and Third Street, with a few houses clustered along Third Street west of Washington Avenue.

The work of clearing and improving the townsite continued apace. The timber was gradually cut off, and the brush and stumps were collected in huge piles and burned, casting a pall of smoke over the town. Plank sidewalks were laid along Bayfield Street, while twelve oil burning street lamps were installed at suitable locations around the town. Streets and avenues were laid out, including Washington Avenue, 100 feet wide, which was intended to be the grand boulevard and promenade of the town.

Many business buildings were erected, including several large boarding houses, extending the business district westward along Bayfield Street and Omaha Street from

First Avenue East. An opera house was built on the southwest corner of Bayfield Street and First Avenue East, with an auditorium for social and cultural events on the second floor and Dan Corning's Pioneer Store moved to the ground floor which it shared with a saloon. One block to the east, on the northeast corner of Bayfield Street and Second Avenue East, a town hall was erected in 1887. A banking apartment and the fire and police departments were located on the ground floor, while a "society hall," courtroom and offices occupied the second floor. A fire alarm bell tower and a clock tower without a clock-crowned this edifice. There was regular train service to Bayfield and to Ashland, where connections could be made to Milwaukee, Madison, Chicago and other cities. The Washburn Itemizer, the first in a long line of newspapers, extending to the present day, published its inaugural issue in 1884. It immediately set about "booming" the new town, insisting that its population was at least 800 and that its buildings were the finest to be found in any town.

On September 14 1888, the great fire monster, which had

begun its grim work as soon as the first wooden buildings were erected, struck with renewed fury. Early in the morning a fire started in a barn in the business block between Bayfield and Omaha Streets and Central Avenue and First Avenue East, quickly spreading to the surrounding buildings. With no fire department to speak of the fire was quickly out of control, destroying the entire block, except the brick walls of the opera block and iron stoves and safes left standing forlornly among the ashes. Only the heroic efforts of a few men prevented the fire from destroying the Washburn Hotel, or jumping Central Avenue, and igniting the warren of wooden buildings to the west. As it was the library, telephone exchange, the newspaper offices, business buildings, and many homes were consumed by the flames. Undeterred by the tragedy, the people of the little village soon rebuilt what had been destroyed, erecting a new opera house in place of the old one and a large brick double store on the corner of Central Avenue and Bayfield Street.