

# A Settlement Becomes A Community—Docks And Ships

Two natural resources—a natural harbor and vast pine forests—provided the foundation of Washburn's economy and fueled the great boom from 1890 to 1905.

Washburn's natural harbor was chosen by the Omaha Railroad as the site of its rail-ship link in preference to Bayfield and Ashland because it did not require dredging to deepen it or breakwaters to protect it from the heavy northeast storms, and was easily accessible by rail. Here the railroad company constructed a huge U shaped dock. The north arm of the U was a 1,200 feet commercial dock with a large warehouse measuring 125 by 240 feet through which passengers and cargoes of freight and merchandise were received and shipped. On the 237 foot south arm of the U a metal covered grain elevator 149 feet high with a storage capacity of 900,000 bushels was erected. A large steam engine with a flywheel 16 feet in diameter was located in an adjacent engine house. An endless drive belt transmitted power to the complicated machinery of the elevator. Steam was provided by two boilers that exhausted smoke

through a 150 foot stack. Grain was unloaded from rail-



road cars by a chain of buckets and dumped into large storage bins high in the elevator from which two ships could be loaded at one time by gravity flow.

The two arms of the U were connected by a 575 foot long coal dock, on top of which was erected an elevated tramway 46 feet high. Coal was unloaded from a ship in a large scoop, filled by men in the ship's hold, and the scoop was hoisted to the tramway where it was unloaded into buggies. The buggies moved on tracks along the top of the tramway and dumped the coal by the railroad tracks underneath the tramway for eventual loading into railroad cars or horse drawn wagons for local delivery. The coal dock was completed in early fall 1883,

and the first ships, the M.M. Drake and the Commorant, each with 1,300 tons of coal, arrived in early October. In early May 1884 the City of Fremont and the Arizona unloaded the first cargoes of freight and merchandise at the commercial dock. Later, weekly passenger and freight service on the lakes was provided at the commercial dock by the Lake Superior Transit Company and the Lake Michigan and Lake Superior Transportation Company.

Freight and passenger services among the four bay communities were provided by the ferry, S.D. Barker; the barge, Sam Fifield, and the tug, Agate. The Omaha Railroad charged the ferries a fee for using its commercial dock, so in 1885 a ferry dock was constructed directly down from the end of Washington Avenue. The plan was to extend Washington Avenue, intended to be the grand boulevard of the future metropolis, to the ferry dock so that passengers could be picked up by carriages. But the Omaha Railroad refused to allow the avenue to be constructed to the dock. It did agree to a footpath, but erected a post in the middle of the

path to insure that wagons and carriages could not use it.

The M.M. Drake, Commorant, City of Fremont, and Arizona were typical of the many ships that called at the Washburn docks in the early years with cargoes of coal, freight, merchandise, salt and railroad materials, departing loaded with grain, flour, freight and lumber. Known as steamers, they had wooden hulls, ranged in length from 150 to 200 feet, and were driven by propellers, although ships with side paddle wheels were common on the lakes. The steamers carried masts and sails in case their unreliable and coal guzzling steam engines failed. In November 1884, the passenger ship, India, arrived at the commercial dock. Two hundred ten feet long with an iron hull and propeller driven, the India was the forerunner of the type of ships that would soon replace the wooden hull steamers, arriving at Washburn's harbor. The arrival of the India marked the closing of the first shipping season, during which shipping was established as a major component of Washburn's growing economy.