

A settlement becomes a community: Schools, libraries, churches, culture and government

By December 1888, despite the destruction of the business district by the terrible fire of the previous September, the transformation of Washburn from a settlement to a community was complete. Docks and mills were in operation, streets and avenues laid out, and many houses and business buildings constructed. During the winter of 1884-1885 the first school building was constructed on the present site of the courthouse at a cost of about \$10,000. Appropriately named the Pioneer School, with two floors crowned by a fancy cupola, and entered through an elaborately decorated front door, it was an elegant building for its time. School enrollment soon exceeded its capacity, however, so a school for children in the western part of the community was built on the northwest corner of Fourth Street and Fifth Avenue West, opening in October 1888. A town library was opened in the Pioneer School in January 1887, but later was moved to a building on the south side of Bayfield Street, about midway between Central Avenue and First Avenue East. The library's collection of 160 books included classics and favorites of the time. It was

destroyed in the great fire of September 14 1888.

By 1888 a Catholic and six Protestant congregations had been established. Four of the congregations immediately built churches, the Catholics on the northeast corner of Third Avenue East and Fifth Street, the Methodists on a lot about midway on the south side of Fifth Street between

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Central Avenue and First Avenue East, the Swedish Lutherans on the southwest corner of Washington Avenue and Fourth Street, and the Congregationalists on the northeast corner of Second Avenue East and Fourth Street. The Norwegian Lutheran, German Lutheran, and Episcopal congregations met in private homes or in the opera house or town hall.

The cultural center of the new community was the 500 seat auditorium on the second floor of the Opera Block. The

opening of the auditorium was celebrated with a "grand ball" on December 4 1884. Later that month the Washburn Dramatic Club presented a "thrilling drama," entitled "Saved At Last," followed by the "laughable farce," "Irish Assurance." Traveling dramatic companies, band and orchestra concerts, literary readings, and fancy dress balls were among the many other cultural and entertainment events held in the auditorium. Audiences were occasionally disturbed by "unholy noises" from the saloon on the ground floor. Many cultural events were sponsored throughout the community by churches and lodges, while the Favorite Theater featured variety shows for those whose tastes ran in that direction.

As part of the Town of Washburn, the public business of Washburn was conducted by a board of supervisors, and a town clerk, assessor, treasurer and justices of the peace. The first election was held on April 1 1884 with 46 votes cast, all by men. At its first meeting a few days later the board appointed a police chief (John Anderson, who served in that capacity for many years) and, after some controversy and despite

the threatening presence of several saloon owners, approved a high annual saloon license fee of \$500. Saloon licensing—who should be issued a license and whether the license fee should be high or low—was an issue that sharply divided the community. For some people, the saloon was the root of all evil, while for the men who frequented them, the saloon was a central part of their lives, providing entertainment, fellowship, and a refuge from work and family cares.

Not satisfied that Washburn was the seat of town government, a few businessmen hatched a scheme to make it the county seat, by stealing the county records from the courthouse in Bayfield and moving them to Washburn. But people in Bayfield, which had been the county seat since 1864, convinced the state legislature to pass a law that obstructed the scheme. Bayfield's victory was short lived, however, for in 1892 Washburn outmaneuvered Bayfield and was officially designated as the county seat. How that came to pass is a story for another time.