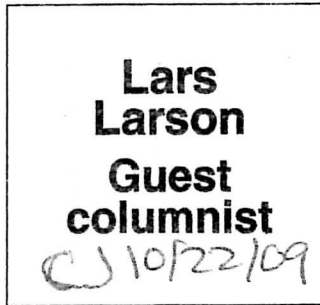


# The Great Boom: Washburn becomes a real city

As the great boom declined after 1896 the people of Washburn searched for ways to attract businesses to replace the dying lumber industry, in order to maintain the prosperity to which they had become accustomed. One idea was to incorporate, that is to make Washburn a real city, not just a village passed off as a city. Incorporation had been occasionally suggested earlier, but people had opposed it because they believed that their taxes would increase if Washburn became a city. But the opposition of the growing country population to using town tax money for village needs and improvements convinced the residents of the village that they, rather than the town board, should control village affairs.

In a special election on March 15 1904, incorporation was approved by a vote of 455 to 138. The city fathers were determined not only to make Washburn a city, but a big city. In a classic example of "gerrymandering" the northern boundary of the corporate ter-

ritory was drawn to include the quarries and settlement at Houghton, while south of the



village the boundary ran close to the shore, then looped around to enclose the land on which the new dynamite plant (more later) was located. On March 22nd Governor Robert M. La Follette approved the incorporation of Washburn as a fourth class city. He issued a typewritten patent of incorporation much to the disappointment of the people of the new city, who expected a beautiful engraved charter.

The next order of business in the transformation of Washburn into a city was the election of a city government,

held on April 5th. A minor crisis developed because the losing candidate for mayor, defeated by only a few votes, demanded a recount, which confirmed the original outcome. Also elected beside the mayor were city officials, and aldermen and supervisors for the eight wards into which the corporate territory had been divided. The new council held its first meeting on April 19th, during which it organized itself and appointed various city officials from city attorney to keeper of the dumping ground.

The new city government was now besieged with unanticipated challenges. The first challenge, which the proponents of incorporation had conveniently overlooked, was how the city government was to be financed. The problem was solved by a bank loan and by issuing 20 year bonds for \$40,000, the annual interest on the bonds to be paid from a tax increase. These were short term arrangements of questionable municipal financial practice. The second challenge came from the Town of Washburn. The town board objected to the city taking over what it considered to be town property. A group of men, from the town, armed with a court order, descended on the city, carrying away the road maintenance equipment, and the records, books, and office equipment, including the cuspidors, from the city

clerk's office. In addition, the city was obliged to pay judgments against it by the Town of Washburn and the Town of Ellieen amounting to \$40,719, almost all of the \$41,875 realized by the sale of the bonds.

As if these assaults of the dignity and integrity of the new born city were not enough, demands soon arose for detachments from its grossly inflated territory. The new dynamite plant brought suit against the city, requesting the detachment of the two sections of land on which the plant was located. The city council quickly approved, thereby forfeiting the lucrative taxes from the plant to the Town of Barksdale. The council approved a petition asking that the narrow strip of land along the lake shore, which had connected the city to the dynamite plant location, be detached. With these two detachments the southern boundary of the city was moved to Summit Avenue, its present location. This was not the end of the matter, however, for the residents of Houghton petitioned the county court to detach the northern extension of the corporate territory, and organize it as the Town of Houghton. No action was taken, however, and the territory remained part of Washburn until the Town of Bayview was organized in 1913.