

The Great Boom-Ethnic Washburn

While the founders and first settlers of Washburn were native born Americans, by June 1885 the state census showed that of a population of 741 people, 55% were native born and 45% foreign born. The largest foreign born group was the French-Canadians with 17% of the population, followed by the Scandinavians-Norwegians and Swedes- with 16%, while the French, German, Irish and British together made up 12% of the population. The people in these foreign born groups usually did not come directly from their countries of birth. Many of the French-Canadians probably came from the northern tier of eastern states, where the lumbering industry was on decline because the timber was exhausted, while the Norwe-

gians came from the large Norwegian settlement in the Eau Claire-Chippewa Falls area. Washburn's population

CJ 12/3/09
**Lars
Larson
Guest
columnist**

in 1885 was thus heavily ethnic and a medley of languages-English, French, Norwegian, Germany, Swedish and a smattering of others-must have been commonly heard spoken on the streets of the village.

By 1895 the population of the village had increased by

seven times to 5,178 people and was even more heavily ethnic than a decade earlier, with 52% foreign born and 48% native born, almost three quarters of whom had foreign born parents. Scandinavians were the largest foreign born group, with 24% of the population, followed by French-Canadians with 20%, Germans with 4%, and other national groups totaling 3% of the population, including a few each of French, Dutch, British, Irish, and Polish extraction. By 1900 the population had declined to 5,005 people, and by 1905 to 4,924. That the population had decreased during this decade, if only by 254 people, rather than increasing dramatically as it had from 1885 to 1895, was the surest sign that the great boom was declining. There was also a significant change in the composition of the population from 1895 to 1905, native born people now making up 63% of the population and the foreign born 37%. Scandinavians with 17% of the population and French-Canadians with 12% continued to be the largest foreign born

groups. The decrease in the size of these two groups from 1895 accounted for almost all of the decrease in the foreign born group. Since they were employed primarily in the mills and logging camps, their departure reflected the decline of large-scale lumbering, which was a principal contributor to the great boom. Other foreign born groups included Germans, with 3% of the population; Poles, with 3%; and a few people from Austria, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Russia, Scotland, Switzerland, and Wales contributing another 3%.

Although people from the four major foreign born groups-Scandinavians, French-Canadians, German, and Polish-resided throughout the community, there was some clustering. About 62% of the Scandinavians lived between Third and Eighth Avenues West, while there were two clusters of French-Canadians, 39% east of Wash-

Continued on Page 15
See LARSON

Larson

Continued from Page 4

ington Avenue and 38% west of Eighth Avenue West. The Germans were scattered throughout the community from east of Third Avenue East to beyond Tenth Avenue West, but most of them resided between Central Avenue and Eighth Avenue West. There were also two clusters of Polish people, 53% along Third Avenue East and eastward, and 34% between Eighth and Tenth Avenues West. The concentration of Poles along the northern section of Third Avenue East, know as Polakk Hill-Polakk being the Norwegian word for a Pole-came about because they were able to purchase double-sized lots there on which they could cultivate gardens.

By 1910 the population of Washburn had decreased to 3,830 people, a loss of slightly more than 1,000 since 1905, confirming that the great

boom was over. The proportion of foreign born declined to 30% of the population, while that of the native born increased to 70%. However, somewhat over three quarters of the native born had foreign born parents. These first generation native born Americans maintained, to a certain extent, the values and customs of their foreign born parents, preserving the diverse ethnic character of the community.

As might be expected in a pioneer lumbering community, the population of Washburn was male dominated in the early days, with 67% men and 33% women in the population of 741 in 1885, or about twice as many men as women. By 1895, at the peak of the great boom, there were 61% men and 39% women in a population of 5,178, or about half again as many men as women. By 1910, with the great boom over, men made up 54% and women 46% of a population of 3,830, proportions which changed gradually over the years in favor of the women, the 2000 census showing 48% men and 52% women in a population of 2,280, less than half of the peak population of 5,178 in 1895.