

P38

A Window On The Past— Washburn's Historic Buildings -2

The original commercial district of Washburn was located along Bayfield Street and the north side of Omaha Street, between Central Avenue and First Avenue East. By the fall of 1886 there was a total of 15 businesses in this district, including six saloons, three boarding houses, two billiard parlors, two jewelry stores, a drug store and a barber shop. Hotel Washburn reposed grandly on five lots on the northwest corner of Bayfield Street and First Avenue West, ready to accommodate visitors (the Veterans Park). The hotel, built in 1884 by the Bay Land and Improvement Company, was two and one-half stories high with a veranda on two sides on the first and second floors. The Washburn Bee (an early newspaper) reported that the hotel was "supplied with soft water, electric bells and telephone connections with Bayfield and Ashland. Has large airy rooms, furnished throughout in first-class style, and offers special inducements to summer tourists. Has accommodations for 100 guests." It opened on October 14 1884 with a "grand complimentary dinner." Located one block from the railroad station, the hotel was the headquarters for the varied assortment of businessmen, engineers, land speculators, con men, and others, who were building, or hoped to benefit from, the grand speculative enterprise that was Washburn.

With the end of the great lumbering boom the fortunes of the hotel, once a social and entertainment center of the city, declined. It bounced between owners, eventually coming into possession of the Bay Land and Improvement Company. In November 1897, "at a time when it was run down and business demoralized" according to the Times, the company sold the hotel to J.W. Twiggs of Ashland. He renovated and enlarged the building so that it became



**Lars
Larson**
Guest Columnist

"one of the most popular and best paying institutions in this part of the state." Twiggs remained only two years; however, selling the hotel to a party from Hayward in August 1899, after which news about it once again disappeared from the pages of the local newspapers. Then in the early morning of February 1917, the hotel was back in the news in a dramatic—and climatic—way when it was destroyed by fire. The fire apparently originated in the laundry room, then quickly spread to the remainder of the building. The staff succeeded in arousing all of the guests to evacuate, so miraculously there was no loss of life. Due to an inadequate fire alarm system, the 20 degrees below temperature, and the delay in telephoning each fireman, it was forty minutes before the firemen arrived on the scene, by which time the old wooden building was doomed. The Times reported that "The fire could be seen from every section of the city, the sky being illuminated as plain as day. The building being a frame one made a dramatic fire. It was not until daylight that the fire burned itself out and all that remains to mark the spot where the popular hotel once

stood is a pile of ruins and few chimneys which still remain standing."

Another well-known hostelry, the Swain Hotel, was located two blocks west of the Washburn hotel on the southeast corner of Bayfield Street and First Avenue West. Fred Swain was part of the group of four men, the original settlers of the townsite, who came across the bay from Ashland in May 1883. Swain constructed a boarding house for workers, located across the railroad tracks, adjacent to the village construction site. The building was three stories high 48x80 feet, and had accommodations for 100 people. It burned down on November 10 1894. Swain then built a new hotel on the Bayfield Street corner as noted, which burned down in February 1895, and in May 1897 the ruin was demolished. A Ford Motor Company dealership was built on the site in April 1930, but it burned down in December 1961. The site was vacant until the present Redwood Motel was constructed there in February 1967.

The Rait building was located diagonally across the street from the Swain Hotel. It was constructed by Walter S. Rait, one of the early arrivals in the village, sometime before 1889. In March 1895 the Masonic Lodge purchased the building, remodeling the second floor for lodge rooms, shared with the Eastern Star Lodge. Over the years the first floor was occupied at various times by a playhouse, post office, newspaper office, general merchandise store and high school auditorium. Probably it served longest as a movie house for the Orpheum and Bjou Theaters and the Lake Theater after World War II. The building was demolished in the spring of 1967, replaced by a Masonic Lodge building, now occupied by the Lake Superior Big Top Chautauqua and other offices.