

Washburn During the Post War Years — The Dream Dies

What were Washburn's prospects for the post-war future? In early December 1943 an editorial predicted that there would be a serious unemployment problem because of the reduction of the work force at the Du Pont plant to peacetime levels, along with the return of servicemen. To meet the problem it recommended a program of public works to rebuild the material base of the city—a high school, an auditorium, a community center, a sewage disposal plant, and so on.

Most of the public works suggested by the Times editorial were eventually completed, adding substantially to the city's material base, while saving its antique infra-structure from collapse. The components of the economic base continued to be the traditional ones—the Du Pont explosives plant, government employment, and small businesses—plus the Michela Coal Dock Company, the Washburn Wood Products Company, and the Washburn Foundry Company. But the coal dock company ceased operations in the 1960s, and the Du Pont plant closed in the spring of 1975. By 1983, one hundred years after its founding, Washburn's economic base had been reduced to a small foundry, government employment, a marina, any economic benefits provided by campers and tourists, pensioners and a new category of residents—nature lovers and escapees from urban life. The popu-



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lation base remained stable, declining from 2,070 in 1950 to 1,896 in 1960, but increasing to 1,957 in 1970 and to 2,080 by 1980, for a net gain of ten during the 30 years. The population continued to be generally older, with about 23% 65 years or over in age in 1980. The social base was transformed by the individualism and acquisitiveness of the post war mass consumption ethos. The complex web of activities, rituals, and mutual obligations that for years had comprised the fabric of the community were to a considerable extent replaced by a tenuous narrow network of functional exchanges and relationships of convenience and coincidence arising from people occupying the same geographic space.

For many years after the great boom ended, the dream of Washburn as a prosperous and growing community, endured. People looked

back on the early days, when the dream briefly became a reality, nourishing the hope that somehow it would finally be realized, that some day Washburn would rise, Phoenix-like, from the remains of its glorious past. This dream of old Washburn was passed on by the settlers to their children and grandchildren, sustained by stories and pictures of the past; and by the ubiquitous material remains—buildings and the foundations, where buildings had once stood; and by the remains of wharves on the waterfront—from that time. But the dream became increasingly fanciful as it was passed down through the generations. Eventually people came to realize that with no resources, a tenuous agricultural base, no inducements to industry, and geographically isolated as it was, there was no realistic possibility that Washburn would ever regain the level of growth and prosperity it had enjoyed during its boom years. The death of the dream of Washburn, the city to be, was symbolized by the destruction by fire of the Walker High School, in February 1947. Dedicated during the a special "education week" in May 1894, during the glory days of the town, the school was situated on a hill beyond the boundary of settlement, on the grand north-south thoroughfare, a monument both to what Washburn was and what it was to become. Built of native brownstone,

its great size, massive walls, twin turrets, tall bell tower, and steeply pitched roof, combined with its elevated location, gave the strong impression of a castle, and so was affectionately referred to as "our castle on the hill." Some 45 years after its symbolic death in the destruction of the high school, the dream of old Washburn was memorialized by the resurrection of another building from those early times. Built in 1890, the old bank building towers over what had once been the commercial center of Washburn. Abandoned in 1966 and falling into ruin, the building was saved from demolition and restored as a museum devoted to the history of Washburn under the leadership of a descendent of one of the prominent early families of the community. With their capacious dimensions, grandiose architecture, and unique locations, these two buildings expressed, the one by the preparation of enlightened citizens for the community and the other by fostering its economic development, both the achievements of the people of Washburn and their hopes and expectations—their dream—for its future. While the destruction of the one symbolized that the dream of Washburn, the city to be, would never be realized, the resurrection of the other was a recognition that the dream and the people who pursued it were worthy of remembrance.