

The founding of Ashland -4

Part 4

As the first post-Civil War decade opened, the little settlement, clinging precariously to life on the south coast of the Chequamegon Bay, waited impatiently for the arrival of the railroad from the south, which would be its salvation. On July 26 1876 railroad construction was resumed at Worcester northward, and on October 2nd southward from Penoka. Arrangements were made for a telegraph line to Ashland, which was completed on August 15th. When the work from the north reached Chippewa Crossing (Glidden) on November 26th, and that from the south stopped at Butternut Creek on December 8th, regular train service was established from Ashland to Chippewa Crossing and from Butternut Creek to Stevens Point, with a scheduled stage line between the two terminals. Daily mail service was also established, and Bayfield was linked to the railroad by a stage line over a new road between the two settlements.

One important improvement in 1876 was the construction of the Methodist Episcopal Church, the first church building in Ashland. A second improvement was the organization of a fire company for which a new engine, "built at an immense expense," was purchased. With mining operations on the Penokee Range abandoned, and with no prospect of



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resumption in sight, the Press re-assessed Ashland's prospects for the future. In an editorial in April it abandoned the vision of Ashland as the "Great Iron City of Lake Superior" for "Ashland the Great Lumber Centre of the North!" The depletion of pineries in Michigan and to the south in Wisconsin, the Press declared, would surely attract the lumber business to the lake region. Ashland, "surrounded by large tracts of pine" with good driving streams tributary to the bay, a fine harbor, a railroad, and many good mill-sites, "is favorably situated to be made a second Oshkosh or Green Bay." Further, the Press continued in a second editorial, Ashland, with a plentiful supply of hardwood timber, was "the Finest Location for a Large Chair and Furniture Factory in the Union." Finally, in a third offering, the Press predicted that Ashland, "when its location and

surroundings are carefully examined," "must become a commercial port of no slight importance." This, plus the abundant agriculture, mineral, and timber resources in the region, "point unmistakably to a prosperous future for Ashland." The past expectation of immediate "greatness" was replaced by a more cautious view: "But it will not all be realized at once. It will take time to bring Ashland forward and build up the city the future has marked out."

In June 1877, the long anticipated first step toward this new future for Ashland finally occurred. Work on the Wisconsin Central line had resumed at Butternut Creek on May 19th, and on June 2nd the end of the northern section at Chippewa Crossing was reached. A party of Ashland and Bayfield dignitaries traveled there, and Asaph Whittlesey drove the last spike and made a short speech. The first train proceeded to Ashland (where the news had been received by telegraph from Chippewa Crossing) to be greeted by a rousing reception described by the Press: "Hon. S.S. Vaughn, with his usual enterprise and public spirit, rallied the people, and when the train drew up at the depot at ten o'clock at night, it was greeted by at least three hundred citizens of Ashland and vicinity, . . . headed by a platoon of boys bearing torches, while huge bon-fires illuminated the town in

every direction. "The six pound field-piece brought over from Bayfield by a delegation of prominent citizens, thundered forth a salute that sent its echoes vibrating through the surrounding forests and across the waters, heralding the tidings of great joy to all people who inhabit the shores of Chequamegon Bay."

With the railroad completed, scheduled service to Milwaukee and Chicago began, while two steamer lines connected Ashland to ports on the upper and lower Great Lakes. The Wisconsin Central, eager to develop sources of revenue to support the isolated line to Ashland, and no doubt having observed the brisk tourism at Bayfield and La Pointe, announced in March that it would build a large resort hotel. Construction began on April 18th and the Chequamegon Hotel held a grand opening on August 1st. Located on the present site of the county courthouse, it was an L shaped structure, measuring 40 feet by 100 feet, three stories high, with a wide veranda around the building. The Press announced that the hotel marked the "Commencement Of Another Era Of Progress," and that "Ashland and Vicinity to be the Saratoga of the Northwest!" One visitor, in September, noted that the hotel "is overflowing and spilling over pretty much all the time with an excess of pleasure seekers," and that plans were already being made to expand it.