

The founding of Ashland-5

PART 5

All was not doom and gloom on Chequamegon Bay during the depressed years that began in 1873. People — or at least some people — had a good time. There were dances, “sociables,” picnics at Houghton Point, Christmas celebrations, and other events. “Three double teams and one single” pulled sleds loaded with Ashlanders in elaborate costumes across the ice to Bayfield on Friday, Feb. 25, 1876, to attend a “grand masquerade ball.” After a “hearty supper” everyone went to the courthouse where the dance was held. Festivities continued during a raging snowstorm that began on Saturday, and it was not until Tuesday that the Ashland party could return home. The centennial of independence was the occasion for July 4th celebrations in Ashland and Bayfield. Bayfield proposed a joint celebration, but apparently that idea did not find favor in Ashland, so they each held their own. Ashland’s was the more elaborate with patriotic songs, toasts, an oration, sport games typical of such affairs, a “grand ball” and fireworks in the evening. Bayfield’s celebration included a reading of “Washington’s Prayer For America” and other public documents, speeches, games, and a parade by the Bayfield Rifles in their new uniforms. Houses throughout the town



Lars Larson

■ has been a guest columnist for The County Journal for many years.

were decorated with evergreens and a “brand new flag was flung to the breeze” from the courthouse pole. The Ashland Weekly Press correspondent was apparently not impressed, however, concluding that “the best report to be made is that there was not a single row during the whole day. Every one was orderly, decent and [sober].”

An article in a lumberman’s magazine in October 1877 provided a brief but evidently accurate description of Ashland. “Ashland is not a large town neither is it pretentious or assuming. It is a quiet little burg holding about 600 souls, who chiefly inhabit snug cottages and have goodly sized garden patches under an excellent state of cultivation. . . . The strip of ground upon which the town stands has been cleared of the forest which once covered it densely thick to the water’s edge, for [a] dis-

tance of a couple of miles along the bay shore, and something like one-half a mile wide. There is but one main street, but that is long enough to make up for any deficiency in number. The numerous bridges which span the ravines form quite a novel feature.” The report failed to mention the rapid construction of buildings and houses. The opening of the Chequamegon Hotel, on Aug. 1, 1877, was followed by the erection of a new courthouse. It was located on courthouse square, the block formed by the present Lake Shore Drive and Main Street, and 6th and 7th Avenues West. The cornerstone was laid with a Masonic ceremony on Oct. 6, 1877, and by the end of November the building was enclosed, ready to be finished in the spring. In addition to these major projects, there were new houses and business places constructed and improvements to existing ones, with additional streets, bridges, sidewalks, and culverts installed, amounting in all to \$845,850 in value.

At the beginning of the new year, the Press observed that “the Centennial year gave but little promise for Ashland during 1877, owing to the hard times which have prevailed throughout the country.” The Press stated that while the progress made during the year was “worthy of note,” it did not meet expectations, “considering the fact that our railroad was completed

in June.” But while the railroad was an important condition for the growth and prosperity of Ashland, it was not sufficient by itself to bring this about. There had to be productive economic activity and this developed gradually—lumber mills, ore shipping, and tourism—over the next several years. There was progress in two of these areas in 1878. The Union Mill Company was organized in March 1878 with capital stock of \$30,000. A mill and dock were constructed at the foot of 14th Avenue West (then Wisconsin Street). The mill began operation on Aug. 1. The company also operated a provisions store and a boarding house.

Tourism had become a major industry for Ashland (as it was for Bayfield), and was assiduously pushed by the Press and the Wisconsin Central. The accommodations of the Chequamegon Hotel having proven inadequate after only a year of operation, the manager announced in October that it would be substantially enlarged for next year’s season. There was also encouraging news from the Wisconsin Central mining operations on the “Penoka Range,” where it was reported that a rich vein of iron ore had been reached, and that the “outlook for a good mine is encouraging.” Finally, marine traffic during the year was brisk, with 405 vessels (steam and sail) bringing in \$129,608 worth of cargo, and shipping out \$147,180 worth.