

The Village of Ashland: Progress and Prosperity 1880-1883-3

PART III

The spectacular growth of Ashland after 1870 is reflected in the Federal census figures.

In 1870, no one lived in Ashland. In 1880, the white population of the Town of Ashland, almost all of which would have been concentrated in the village, was 775. By 1890 the population of Ashland, now a city, was 9,956, an increase of 9,181 in ten years. (The peak population was 14,519, in 1905.) The

economic and civic development which accompanied this growth is shown by a "bird's eye view" of the village from June 1885. From the Union Mill Company at 14th Avenue West, to the great ore dock of the Milwaukee, Lake Shore and Western Railroad at 16th Avenue East, the shore was lined with mills, yards, docks, and log booms. Next after the Union mill came the John Canfield Company boom, then the Superior Lumber Company, Vaughn's dock, Chequamegon Hotel dock, Wisconsin Central Railroad

dock, Michigan Lumber Company, and the Mueller and Ritchie Mill, Twiggs and Selsby Planing Mill, Ashland Lum-

ber Company, Ashland Water Company pump house, and finally the commercial dock and ore dock of the Milwaukee, Lake Shore and Western Railroad. In the village itself can be seen most prominently the Chequa-



Lars Larson
CSA/13/112

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

meagon Hotel, and also the county court house, public school, hotels, railroad depots, churches and other buildings. But that the village was only a fringe of civilization hewn out of what still was a great wilderness is suggested by the thick, dark forest shown pressing against its southern limits and the wild hills of the Penokee Range looming in the distance.

In 1885 a huge ore dock was constructed by the Milwaukee, South Shore and Western at the foot

of 16th Avenue East (then St. Louis Avenue), along with a commercial dock. The first train of 20 cars from the Germania mine near Hurley arrived at the ore dock on July 16th, and the first shipments of ore from Ashland down the lakes was on the steamer Comorant carrying 1,300 tons, and the schooner Wall with 1,000 tons, on July 30th. These small shipments foretold Ashland's future role, not as a great mining center or as the "iron city" of the North, but as the shipping point for iron ore from the Montreal and vast Gogebic ranges. But the substantial expansion in the volume of traffic in the harbor since 1880 and the prospect of further growth, and the increases in the sizes of lake vessels, particularly the ore carriers, made it imperative that something be done about the shoals (shallows) in the harbor. Also, the heavy swells accompanying storms from the northeast, originating primarily within the bay, the long axis of which lays roughly northeast-southwest, posed a threat to vessels in the harbor. In 1884, the U. S. Corps of Engineers recognized the

situation, and recommended the removal of the shoals and the construction of a breakwater. This work continued over the years, maintaining Ashland as a major lake port until the post-World War II years. Bayfield was mystified as to why the government insisted on spending large sums of money improving the harbors at Duluth, Superior, and Ashland, when its harbor was available without such expenditures. The U.S. Corps of Engineers supported Bayfield's claim to have "the best harbor in the world" in its report for 1879: "Bayfield and its vicinity is the great natural harbor of refuge of Lake Superior, and in its deep water and closely-clustering islands nature seems to have left nothing for the engineers to do."

In a report in early May 1883 on the rumors that the Omaha would build its terminal docks at Vanderverter Bay, the Press went on to say that "Rumour also has it, that a syndicate will lay out a town site and push it to prominence." With a slight suggestion of contempt, the report concluded that "As it will become what West St. Paul is to the Sainly City

we suggest that the proprietors call it 'West Ashland.' " By the next month, apparently realizing that the new "one-track town" across the bay would not be a serious competitor to Ashland with its railroads and lumber mills, the Press was more gracious, reporting that "Washburn' is the name given the new town-site across the bay, May it always 'wash' but never 'burn'. Success."

The Ashland Weekly Press viewed the construction of the docks at Washburn as part of the inevitable industrialization of the entire coast of Chequamegon Bay, stating "That the day will come when every available foot of this splendid shore frontage from Red-cliff to Ashland will be utilized by docks, elevators, manufacturing establishments, etc." Fortunately this prophecy did not come true, and the "splendid shore frontage" of the bay remains largely intact today.