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SIBLEY COUNTY

In October, 1863, the building in which the county records were kept was destroyed by fire of an unknown source. Nearly all the records were destroyed and therefore we have to depend on the word of some of the older pioneers for the early history of Sibley County.

It was recognized by the Minnesota Legislature as a county from March 5, 1853, but some three years later its boundaries were changed. At this time it was bounded by the Minnesota and Crow rivers. All judicial matters were taken in charge by Hennepin County. The new boundaries were Minnesota river on the east, Carver & McLeod and a fractional part of Renville on the north, Renville on the west, (three townships) and Nicollet county on the south. There are fifteen full size townships and two smaller ones.

Some settlements were made as early as 1852, but since Sibley was a heavily wooded tract of land except in the extreme western townships, the settlers stayed close to the river, it being the only method of transportation at that time. Even now some ninety years later, there are heavily wooded tracts in Henderson and Jessenland townships, due possibly to the deep ravines and river banks which make it difficult to reach the timbered spots. In the early years of the county's development, there were numerous lakes, several of great size. Of these only about four or five still retain most of their original boundaries, these are Silver Lake, Swan, Washington, Titlow, and New Auburn.

Some forty years ago drainage companies were organized to drain swamp lands and many of the smaller lakes were dried up. This afforded more pasture lands in several of the townships. As a result more and better roads were built in places that before that were almost impossible.

In the early formation of the county, settlements were made by small groups, usually friends who came from Europe or some Eastern states.

These little communities, bound by a common need of each other, in religion or nationality, lack of worldly goods on the one hand, fear of the unknown in a new world, the Indians and wild beasts on the other, had little but high courage and brave hearts to begin a new life. Some became discouraged and returned to a more settled and organized way of living. However, these were few when compared to the members who remained, took claims, built log cabins and cleared the land. From township names we get some idea of their ancestry and early records show the names. Being of a determined nature, they were not to be discouraged in making homes in a new state. Henderson, on the bank of Minnesota river claims to have been the spot of first settlement, a man named Walt who came from St. Paul, the second was made also by a resident of St. Paul, named Grimes.

This village and township were named by Joseph Renshaw Brown, his mother's maiden name being Henderson. Mr. Brown was known as a 'pioneer soldier and statesmen.' To him much credit is given for his foresight and citizenship in this new community. More detail will be given later in this history in regard to his life and good work.

During the first decade, Sibley had a population largely of Germans. They led in the establishment of churches and societies, one of the earliest records being of the Methodist Episcopal church in Henderson in 1858. Very shortly after the town was started there those who were of the Episcopal teaching held services in private homes. Being few in number much credit is due because they built a little church under the leadership of Rev. Marcus Olds in 1859. It is still an active church body. Mrs Lehman, a charter member states "it is really a memorial chapel, to the faithful who have gone on." It is known as the "Little Brown Church".

In 1866, the German Evangelical association, known since 1939 as the Evangelical and Reformed church was organized with about thirty families.

The Catholics, under the able leadership of Father Somreisen from Mankato, organized in 1866. About forty families belonged. The Sisters of



Notre Dame taught a parochial school for several years. Owing to a scarcity of teaching sisters and the event of more public schools in the vicinity, this school was discontinued about the year 1855. <sup>error in</sup> 1890 *fire destroyed school*

Early in 1860, Joseph R. Brown set aside a piece of land on an elevation above the town, to be used for cemetery purposes. This proved to be a farsighted arrangement and in 1872 an organization known as Brown's Cemetery Association was formed. It is still an active one. This is one of the few cemeteries having a plat on file in the Register of Deeds' office. Mr. Brown's grave is in the eastern corner overlooking the town he had given its name and much of his time and thought.

This cemetery is for public use, all creeds may purchase burial lots here.

St. Joseph's Catholic Church owns a private cemetery a short distance from the village. Old settlers state positively that Jos. R. Brown was the first register of deeds in Sibley County. *"Records" then* On other "first officers" opinions vary too much to make authentic statements. Some say the first meetings were held out doors on a spot about where the high school stands, others insist it was nearer town or about where the "Old Court House" stands. All agree tho, that Mr. Brown built the house which held the first records. Three years later, rooms were rented from a Mr. Poehler, then County Treasurer at the time of the fire which destroyed these records, they were kept in a building owned by E. L. Welch.

According to the record in Book "A" of County Commissioners' records, "A room was rented from Jacob Frankenfield, for county use, for six months at \$12 per month." On Jan. 1, 1866, all county records were moved to a house rented from Aug. Blasing. It is supposed that this was used until 1870 when the records state, a building owned by Wm. Carroll was rented for County purposes.

The first meeting held in 1867 (Jan. 2) was for the purpose of passing a

resolution to ask Minnesota Legislature to pass an act which would enable Sibley county to issue bonds to the amount of \$20,000 for purpose of erecting County buildings, with the provision of submitting it to the people before it became a law. This being granted at the next session of the legislature, notices were posted at various points on Mar. 11, 1870 - submitting the matter to a popular vote - Motion being carried, Jan. 4, 1871 was the date set for purchasing a piece of land. About four acres were purchased on the corner of Main and Sixth streets for a "Court House Site."

In May of 1870, a building was let to Henry Maeder <sup>Mayer</sup> for sheriff's residence and a jail, to be completed by September of same year. Jail building was to be made of brick, with three cells and a hall. This being considered satisfactory arrangement, a meeting held on March 29, 1879 - by the County Commissioners was for the purpose of completing plans for Court House buildings. At this meeting it was agreed that the village of Henderson would furnish \$5,000 for such purpose, privilege being extended to the village to purchase any building at \$3,000 in case the county seat should at a future date be removed to another place. This seemed to be satisfactory and a Court House was built promptly - of brick, two and one-half stories high, having fire proof safes in each office for preservation of all County records. This building was used for Court house purposes until 1915 when after a long bitter struggle the County seat was moved to Gaylord. The reasons being given for removal train service to all but Henderson and New Auburn and its being more centrally located. Henderson township was the first organized, this is the larger of the two small townships in the south eastern corner of the county. Its eastern boundary is the Minnesota river which cuts off a part of the usual six-mile line. In its beginning it was very heavily wooded and the land not timbered was flat and easily cultivated. In the spring the over-flow from the river caused much damage and some years was so great as to damage crops.

Rush River flows thru the townships to Minnesota River, at about the central part of the township - at one time there was a small settlement and a post office, now (1943) only a store and creamery mark the settlement.

The first school (District No. 1) was organized in this township and it is now called an independent district housing a high school in the village. Districts No. 2-3-4 & 5 are all within the boundaries of Henderson township proving the public spirit of those early settlers. Log buildings were first used but now new modern buildings of frame or brick are in use, the best of school equipment both for educational and recreational purposes are found in these districts.

Due to the fact that few early records are available we can not state to whom the credit is due but we find the names Wigand, Mueller, Kroehler, Hoffman, Koblinges, Berla and Boettcher which leads one to believe they had much to do in the early development of the matters of interest to school and town. By the year of 1863 which is the first date county records are available, thirty-eight school districts had been formed, with the usual three months of school during cold weather and if enough children were near, a month or two during the summer months. The teachers usually "boarded around" spending one week with each family, sometimes doing chores or helping with the work indoors in exchange for board.

In 1872 a small newspaper was established in Henderson, it was in charge of Daniel Pickett who afterwards served the county in the office of County Superintendent of Schools and Register of Deeds. He called his paper the "Sibley County Independent," in order to show no partiality to any political party.

No railroads were built within the county limits until 1881. Nearly all business had to be transacted by river and thence to what was called the



St. Paul & Sioux City Road. Ferries at Henderson and Walker's Landing were the chief means of crossing the river. These were used until recently.

Altho several men from the county were actively engaged and several injured or killed during the Sioux uprising and massacre in 1862, less real damage was done to property than in the neighboring counties where homes and property were destroyed and captives taken.

County records in 1876 mention funds set aside for relief to settlers whose crops had been destroyed by grasshoppers. This condition was so extreme that in some places Sibley County farmers suffered for the want of food and clothing to the extent that several left their farms and moved away. This was especially true in the western part of the county because the townships with timber had less grain crops. More cattle were raised and timber cut and sold in exchange for other necessities.

In questioning some of the older men about wages for cutting cordwood, they state that "good woodsmen got 50¢ per cord, usually a good day's work, and cordwood sold for \$1 to \$1.50 per cord depending in a great measure on how great the need was for the sale or the shrewdness of the purchaser." A great deal was sold to residents in the southwestern part of the county then known as "The Prairie."

There were stage routes established about 1880. These made two trips per week carrying mail and passengers. One was for Henderson vicinity to the depot of the Chicago and Omaha depot, about one mile from town, a second passed through Arlington and Mountville to New Auburn and Glencoe, it was called the Henderson-Glencoe stage, a third known as Henderson-Hector stage crossed Kelso, Bismark, Brownston took in Cornish and Transit on its twice a week trip. The meeting of the stage when it drew up with its dust covered coach and steaming horses was an event of much importance in those long ago days equal in all likelihood to a trip by plane now to some distant city. No doubt the distance traveled then with hardships of cold,

mud, bad roads, rain and heat, could be made now in any weather in an hour's time.

Since few wrote or received any mail and newspapers were few, there was not a very extensive mail delivery. Kelso township, through which Rush river flows was an early organized and settled township. It is west of Henderson, the mother settlement. The name is supposedly of Scotch origin because its first settlers, Colbys, Lacys and Walker, a surveyor were Scotchmen. Townsites were surveyed, named Kelso, and New Rome - A post office was established at the latter place, also at Rush River but not for long. To Captain John Graetsch, first post master at New Rome is accorded the honor of naming the settlement. At present only the church and cemetery and a small store mark the place established in 1876.

A number of Germans who had come to America to establish new homes and had heard of the new state came in the early 1870's. The names Geil, Budtke, Delger, Fuerstnon, Steinke, Weckworth, Weckworth, Weist in the town and county records then and now prove that they found the country to their liking.

The Evangelical church established when the New Rome settlement was in its infancy is still an active congregation known as St. John's Evangelical and Reformed church. The cemetery which lies near the church is known as the Weckworth cemetery, the land having been given for burial purposes by members of the Weckworth families.

Jessenland, <sup>FAXON</sup>Talon and Washington Lake were all settled between 1852 and 1855. <sup>FAXON</sup>Faxon is the smallest township in the county being cut up by the Minnesota river, its eastern boundary.

A village was platted and named <sup>FAXON</sup>Talon for a surveyor who was one of a party of settlers from New England. It was later called "Walker's Landing" probably because several brothers of the name had settled and built homes there. Boats carrying supplies for the people inland stopped there to get fuel and exchange goods for whatever the farmers had to sell. A ferry was



used here, later to be moved to Blakeley, Scott County. There was a general store, a blacksmith shop and a saw-mill for cutting logs and making lumber.

Washington Lake was named by Patrick Mullen who had moved there in 1854 from Washington, D. C. and had settled on the south bank of this lake - A friend Matthew Wilson came with him. He took a claim directly west of Mr. Mullen's. These two gentlemen took an active part in the settlement of the community.

Most of the settlers were of Irish descent or directly from Ireland. In 1865 plans were made for the establishment of a Catholic church. In 1868 a log and frame building was built. In 1882 a brick church was built. Until 1925 no other church was established. In Nov. 1925 the German Lutherans organized and have a small basement church in Green Isle village.

A post office was established in the extreme end of the township named Assumption for the Catholic church which was built just across the line of Carver County.

We find the names Congrove, Donlon, Donovan, Egan, Fahey, Bradley, Brazil, Brown, Duane, Healy, Hogan and McCormack so often in church, school and town records that no question is raised about the existing nationality.

The name Jessenland is questioned as to its origin. When the writer did research for old town records, a wife of a pioneer, Mrs. Mary Grimb<sup>?</sup> stated it was so named because first settlers thought it was a land described as "the land of Jeseen" in the bible. Another pioneer, Mr. Henry Lawrence, said it was so called because a man named Jesse Cameron staked the first claim. It became known as Jesse's land. For years it was heavily timbered. The tillable land was known as "The Bottoms" because of the fact the Minnesota river so often overflowed its banks. Silver Lake lies within its boundaries as well as High Island creek which flows through the center.

Several French and French Canadians built a little log and bark church near where St. Thomas Catholic church now stands. In an interview in 1937 with Mr. and Mrs. Henry Lawrence, they mentioned this but no records could be found. The present church built 1868 is second oldest in the state, records of early baptisms, marriages, etc. are kept in Henderson at St. Joseph's church.

There are no other churches in the township.

Descendants of the older settlers still live on their original homesteads. We find the name Bray, Connelly, Curtin, Doheny, Carroll, Frazier, Trimbo, Lawrence, Scully, Skelly, Skelly, Berger, Flynn, McNamara, Quinn, Weber and Young still in evidence.

Green Isle township was given its name by a man who had recently come from Ireland, his first view of the country was on a spring day, he said, the green fields and the lake, which he named Erin reminded him of the Emerald Isle he had left. No one seemed to question it so the township and later the village was known by the name. When the lake, through drought or drainage or both, lost most of its boundaries, it was called and is still still known as Mud Lake.

John McGrann is given as first to make a settlement, about the same time Patrick O'Meara, Bernard Gray, Patrick Dwyer, Thomas Shortall, John Davitt, Patrick Brazill, James and Michael Walsh staked claims. First settlements were made in 1857. No records before 1866 are to be found.

Later, several families who had relatives or friends here, Currans, Dillons, Connellys, Bries O'Connell, O'Donnell and Waldron made homes for their families. It has been said that because of the poor roads and few traveling facilities, the western part of Green Isle township was so vague in the minds of those living in the eastern part of it that the settlers felt as though it were a land apart. Taking distance at face value they seemed

to reason that beyond the heavy woods which covered the greater part of the township, lay another country not to be reached in daylight. The common expression "Be home before sundown" is probably one reason for the locality being so called. Altho New Auburn village was less than twenty miles away, a certain few miles lying between was called and to a small number who still live over the "days of long ago," Sundown is a real place. Perhaps these good people were not curious as to the real place when the sun went down - To them it was the horizon and they lived and worked according to their means. Very few of the original "Sundowners" still live there but the name is significant of the location and those who named it.