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The Story of FOREST MILLS

A Midwest Milling Community

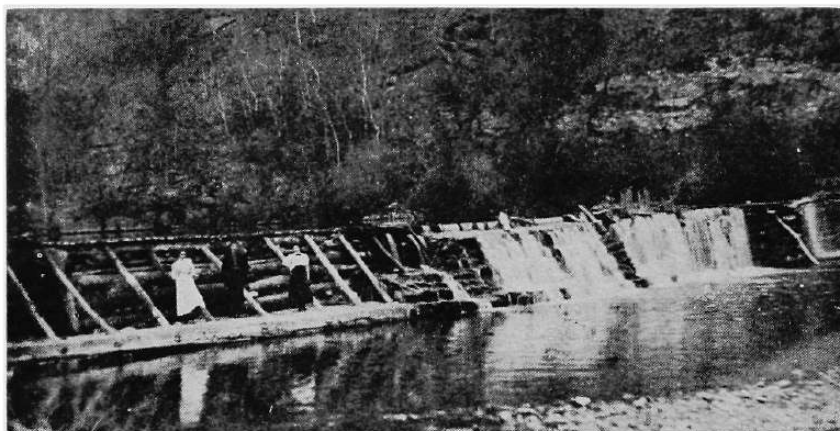
ROY W. MEYER

IT WAS LONG the fashion to depict the pioneering venture in the American Midwest as an unqualified success, as it affected both individuals and communities. Only occasionally, as in Rölvaag's *Giants in the Earth*, did one encounter a forthright statement of the cost that attended this gigantic movement. In more recent years, however, the toll taken by pioneering has been generally recognized, at least in terms of individual lives. What is perhaps not so well understood, though equally obvious, is that the settlement and growth of a new country also meant the projection of many more communities than the region could sustain and the consequent decline and disappearance of many early villages. The failure of numerous communities to survive the merciless competition of frontier days is evidenced by the great number of ghost towns to be found in every part of the Midwest. A close study of one particular type of ghost town, the milling village, may be helpful in understanding this phenomenon. The Goodhue County community of Forest Mills on the Zumbro River affords an excellent example, since the course of its rise and decline

closely parallels the pattern followed by similar communities in the region.

Two principal types of ghost towns, as the term is used here, can be distinguished. There is first the sort exemplified by the Western mining community which rose almost overnight and then quite as suddenly vanished when the mines were played out, leaving streets lined with empty, decaying buildings. This spectacular type is frequently encountered in fiction, but it is actually much less common, especially in the Midwest, than the second type—the town projected in the early days of settlement which developed for a time and then gradually declined. Such communities may disappear entirely, but more often they survive in the form of crossroads hamlets or small villages. Because such a settlement remains inhabited, vacant buildings are usually torn down, and to the casual visitor there is little evidence of the town's former prosperity, little to mark it as a ghost town.

Among the many examples of such communities in southern Minnesota is Wasioja in Dodge County. Although it still has two business places, a school, a church, a town



THE dam
at Forest Mills
about 1910

hall, and more than thirty houses, it may be called a ghost town because of the contrast between its present state and the thriving village that existed in the 1860s and 1870s, when the Minnesota Seminary was in operation there. High Forest in Olmsted County also qualifies as a ghost town, although it too has church and school organizations and several houses. Forestville and Carimona in Fillmore County, Riceford and Sheldon in Houston County, Cannon City in Rice County, and Wilton in Waseca County are other examples in the southeastern triangle of Minnesota of this most characteristic type of ghost town. Sometimes a community will disappear completely, as did Sevastopol in Goodhue County and Elliotta in Fillmore, but most of those which once attained some measure of prosperity still retain vestiges of their former importance.

Two chief causes may be assigned to the decline of most ghost towns: changes in transportation routes and changes in the regional economy. The first is operative in the case of villages which were platted in the earliest days of settlement and later passed up by the railroads. Forestville and Carimona suffered such a fate, as did Marion in Olmsted County and Concord in Dodge. In some cases the later rise of highway transportation has reversed the decline. Marion, on United States Trunk Highway No. 52, is now actually growing, while Predmore, the village which came

into being on the railroad that missed Marion, remains stationary. But in most cases the decline caused by being missed by a railroad was permanent; the town so neglected was replaced by another more fortunate community, and the latter has maintained its lead.

The second cause is illustrated by the Western mining towns and by some communities on the Minnesota iron ranges. Since the principal Midwest industry has long been agriculture, however, the best illustrations of the operation of this factor are to be drawn from towns which declined because agriculture changed. The most characteristic examples are the milling towns which once thrived along the rivers and creeks that flow into the Mississippi and the St. Croix on Minnesota's eastern border. Established in a period when wheat was grown extensively in this part of the state and when local milling was generally practiced, they prospered so long as these conditions persisted. But when the center of the wheat-raising area moved westward and the centralization of industry made local milling economically unprofitable, the mills ceased to operate and the villages centering about them lost ground and eventually became ghost towns.

Southeastern Minnesota contains many of these communities, any one of which might serve as an example. There are Riceford on Riceford Creek, Fillmore and Forestville on the Root River, Fairwater on

the Whitewater, Cascade on the Cannon, Clinton Falls on the Straight (where the old mill continued to operate until recent years), and Jarretts on the Zumbro, to mention but seven. The subject of this study—Forest Mills—has certain advantages, however, over the others here mentioned. In the first place, it was almost exclusively a milling village. Since its commercial activity was intimately bound up with the milling industry, it provides an almost ideal example of this type of ghost town. In the second place, it was close to the older, established village of Zumbrota, where contemporary news of Forest Mills was regularly published in a local newspaper, providing a readily available record of its rise and decline.

MANY OF the earliest mills established by the pioneers were not commercial enterprises. They were small, primitive operations which ground only a limited quantity of grain for farmers in the immediate locality.¹ Some were later replaced by more pretentious establishments, and communities developed around them. In other cases, however, they remained strictly rural and never gave rise to villages. The mill at Forest Mills represents a later stage in the history of milling. It was a product of the great burst of industrial and commercial activity that occurred in the years immediately following the Civil War and was intended from the start to be a money-making enterprise rather than merely a convenience to local farmers. Although it was a modest undertaking at first, expan-

sion was apparently intended, and before long it became one of Goodhue County's largest country mills.

In the late winter of 1867 H. H. Palmer, a Zumbrota merchant, and William S. Wells, a veteran of the Civil War and owner of some land near Zumbrota, prospected for a millsite about a mile and a half below the village on the Zumbro River. Construction began in May and was completed in March of the following year. Mrs. Palmer is said to have applied the name "Forest Mills" to the site because of the dense growth of timber and bushes there. Starting with only two run of stone, the mill added two more in 1869 or 1870, and late in 1871 it acquired a fifth run. A log dam was erected on the Zumbro and a mill-race dug to provide a more easily controllable source of power than that afforded by the normal flow of the river. In addition to the mill itself, the proprietors built a cooper shop, a warehouse, and a general store. Later, as the community developed, a blacksmith shop, two livery barns, a sash and door factory, a harness shop, boarding-houses, and other enterprises were started, all directly or indirectly dependent on the mill. At first the milling company provided houses for its employees, but later lots were sold to those who wished to build their own homes.²

The mill was established in an era of enormous prosperity for the wheat-raising industry. In 1868 when it began operation sixty-two per cent of the cultivated land in Minnesota was devoted to wheat—the only profitable agricultural product that would stand transportation under existing conditions. By 1870 Minnesota was producing fifteen and a half million bushels of spring wheat alone, and by 1875 this figure had doubled. In 1874, and for years thereafter, Goodhue was described as the banner wheat county in the United States, in terms both of acres sown and bushels produced. In 1873 it was said to have produced 3,250,000 bushels, nearly half of which was floured locally in seventeen

¹ Jacob A. Swisher, *Iowa: Land of Many Mills*, 32 (Iowa City, 1940).

² *Zumbrota News*, August 6, 1885; *Goodhue County Republican* (Red Wing), June 30, 1870, February 13, August 31, 1871; *Red Wing Argus*, July 28, September 8, December 29, 1870; A. I. Andreas, *An Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Minnesota*, 235 (Chicago, 1874); Sarah Hall, "Early History of Forest Mills," a manuscript owned by the author. A brief history of the mill property appears on page 5 of the issue of the *News* cited above. Unless otherwise indicated, all facts about the history of the mill up to 1885 are drawn from this source.

mills.³ No wonder, then, that the men who established the Forest mill expected their efforts to reward them richly.

In the early days of the mill, nearly all the wheat ground was obtained locally. Old residents speak of farmers waiting with their wheat in lines of sleighs nearly a mile long. Later, when wheat raising declined in this region, the grain was shipped in from western Minnesota and the Dakotas. The mill did both a merchant and a custom business; that is, it either bought wheat and sold flour or exchanged flour for wheat. Until the building of the railroad in 1878, much of the flour milled was hauled to Red Wing by team and then shipped down the Mississippi, its destination the Atlantic coast. As early as 1870 some of it was shipped overseas, for in that year Robert Beveridge of Frontenac sent his sister in Scotland a wedding present of five barrels of Golden Dust, the best brand of flour produced at the Forest mill. In later years overseas shipments became commonplace, and on at least one occasion some British flour dealers inspected the mill and reported that they were well pleased with the product.⁴

Associated with Wells and Palmer in building the mill was William Bruce Dickey, a Civil War veteran and later a state senator. Palmer withdrew about eight months after the mill began operation, and after that two Red Wing grain merchants, Lucius F. Hubbard, who later became governor of Minnesota, and W. P. Brown, joined the firm, which was known as Hubbard, Wells and Company until 1878. Then Wells and Dickey bought out their partners and operated the mill themselves for almost two years. Late in 1879 they formed a joint stock corporation called the Forest Mills Company, which was capitalized at forty thousand dollars.⁵ Most of the stock appears to have been owned by Wells and Dickey, and the rest was held by A. J. Grover of Zumbrota and Stanford C. Holland, a well-to-do farmer and member of the legislature who lived near Forest Mills.

During these years the proprietors spent a great deal of money on the latest developments in milling techniques. Although from the first the mill depended chiefly on water power, its owners bought two large steam engines, one in 1875 and the other in 1883, to provide a steadier source of power. When the purifying system began to be widely adopted in the 1870s, the proprietors installed the new equipment, even though it necessitated remodeling and rearranging the mill. Another expensive innovation developed in the same decade was the roller system, which was promptly adopted at considerable cost at Forest Mills.⁶ All these investments suggest that milling was profitable in this period, but they also made it imperative that the industry should remain profitable for some time if the mill owners were to pay off the debts incurred by making improvements.

Since the laborious process of hauling the flour to Red Wing each week with horses did not provide the Forest mill with the most suitable outlet for its product, the proprietors became interested in attracting a railroad. There were rumors of railroad projects in the early 1870s, but before they could reach fruition the panic of 1873 brought a temporary halt to railway construction. Finally in 1877 the Minnesota Midland began building a narrow-gauge line up the Zumbro Valley from Wabasha, with Faribault as its proposed terminus. Work got under way in August, but progress was slow, and by the next February only thirty miles had been graded and only nineteen were ready for use. Worse still, it was rumored that the banks financing the project had failed.⁷ The situation was especially serious to residents of

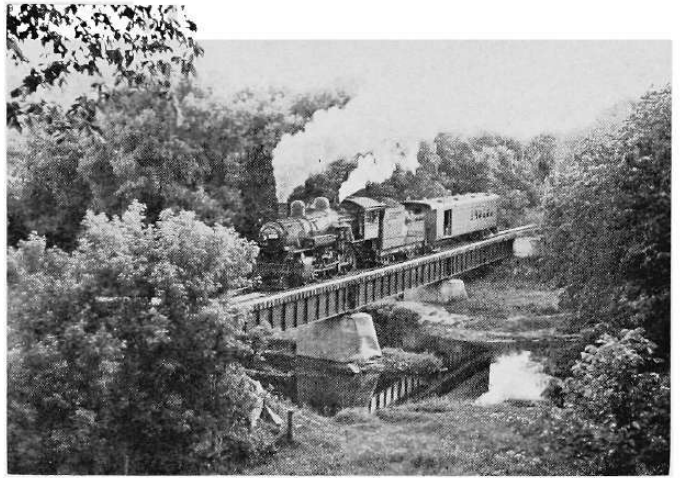
³ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:3, 66 (St. Paul, 1926); Andreas, *Atlas*, 235.

⁴ Hall, "Forest Mills"; *Argus*, April 14, 1870; *News*, October 21, November 4, 1886.

⁵ *News*, November 14, 1902; Goodhue County Register of Deeds, Miscellaneous Records, book 15, p. 111, among the county archives at Red Wing.

⁶ *News*, August 6, 1885; *Zumbrota Independent*, March 25, 1875.

ONE of the last trains
to cross the Zumbro River at
Forest Mills, June, 1952



Forest Mills and other towns in the vicinity because another projected railway, the Rochester and Northern Minnesota between Zumbrota and Rochester had appeared on the horizon. If completed first, this line would divert prosperity to other towns and ruin the milling business down river from Zumbrota.

But the proprietors of the Forest mill were equal to the challenge. On March 9, 1878, the *Mazeppa Tribune* reported that Wells, Hubbard, and James G. Lawrence had bought a controlling interest in the Minnesota Midland and were about to push the narrow-gauge line to completion. This they did, building forty-five miles of road in fifty days through extremely dif-

ficult terrain. The rivalry between the two railroads reaching toward Zumbrota was keen, and both lines entered the town on the same day—May 21, 1878. The palm of victory went to the Midland, however, for members of its crew took advantage of their rivals by laying track during the lunch hour, thus enabling the Midland train to be the first to enter Zumbrota.⁸

THE YEAR 1878 was Forest Mills' *annus mirabilis*, for not only did the railroad arrive but the town was platted. As early as 1870 a correspondent for the *Red Wing Argus* reported that a small village was beginning to spring up about the mill, and as the decade progressed, quite a community developed. It was not until the summer of 1878, however, that the site was actually surveyed and laid out into lots, blocks, and streets. The town plat provided for two principal thoroughfares, Main Street in the valley and High Street on the bluffs above, with six connecting streets running up and down the hillside. The business places and some of the residences were in the valley, while most of the houses and the schoolhouse, built in 1871, straggled along the steep slope or stood on the crest of the hill. Provision was made for six blocks divided into lots, and for a block in which the mill, the engine-house, and similar installations were lo-

⁷ *Argus*, March 28, 1872, August 16, 1877, February 7, 1878. The Minnesota Midland eventually was absorbed by the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad.

⁸ The *Mazeppa Tribune* is quoted in the *Argus*, March 14, 1878. See also the *Argus* for March 28 and May 30, 1878, and the *History of Goodhue County*, 629 (Red Wing, 1878). The Rochester and Northern Minnesota, which was later taken over by the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad, was never extended beyond Zumbrota. It was abandoned in the early 1930s. After the Midland was taken over by the Milwaukee road, it was made standard gauge and in 1903 it was extended to Faribault. The section of the road between Zumbro Falls and Wabasha was torn up about 1934, and in 1952 service was discontinued through Forest Mills on the section between Zumbro Falls and Zumbrota. The tracks were removed in 1955. *News*, June 12, November 13, 1903, March 13, 1952.

cated.⁹ The plat has never been vacated, and real-estate transactions in Forest Mills are still recorded in terms of lots and blocks, although much of the land is now used for agricultural purposes.

On January 3, 1879, a post office was established at Forest Mills and Dickey was appointed postmaster. Earlier, the townspeople had received their mail at Zumbrota, despite the fact that their village was much larger than many other rural communities which then had post offices. The Forest Mills post office lasted fewer than twenty years. Moved about from place to place and kept for its last ten years in the railroad depot, it was finally discontinued on August 25, 1898.¹⁰ It served both Forest Mills and a limited rural area immediately surrounding the community.

As the decade of the 1880s began, Forest Mills stood at its peak. The railroad had come, the milling business was prospering, and the town had a post office and, according to the census of 1880, a population of 124.¹¹ Although reliable population figures are not available for any other period, comparative statistics on school enrollment at Forest Mills indicate that 1880 marked the peak of its population. Dependent as it was on the mill, however, the village could survive only so long as that industry flourished. And two developments were taking place which were to undermine the prosperity of the milling industry. One was the tremendous expansion in the wheat-raising area of America, with consequent production beyond the needs of the domestic market; the other was the parallel growth of wheat raising in countries like Russia, Australia, and Argentina, which competed with the United States in the world market. Other factors, such as a series of poor crops caused by soil exhaustion and chinch bug infestations, helped reduce the amount of wheat grown in Goodhue County. As a result, the milling company at Forest Mills was forced to let its machinery, representing heavy capital investments, remain idle

a large part of the year, while flour sales dropped and profits decreased.¹²

A heavy decline in flour prices began in 1883, just after the company had invested ten thousand dollars in a new engine and when the mill had on hand the equivalent of a hundred and forty thousand bushels of wheat in grain and flour. This was too much for the Forest Mills company, especially after its heavy investment in the Minnesota Midland, and on June 21, 1884, the firm was declared insolvent and it went into the hands of a receiver. For a year and a half the mill was silent, and its employees left to seek work elsewhere; the *Zumbrota News* speaks of "scores" of them leaving, but the number of men working in the mill and its auxiliary enterprises is elsewhere given as about thirty. The mill, which was said to have been erected at a cost of "upwards of \$65,000," and the adjacent property were sold at auction in the summer of 1885 to John W. Moore of New York for ten thousand dollars. He resold them to E. V. White and George H. and John R. Rust, who reopened the mill late in 1885 as the Rust Milling Company. Wells had by this time gone to Pierre, Dakota Territory, to recoup his fortunes, while Dickey remained in Forest Mills and started a creamery which he operated until shortly before his death in 1902.¹³

The mill ran with apparent success for two years under its new management. Then, because of a poor wheat crop, it was again closed in the summer of 1887. Contemporary accounts suggest that this shutdown was considered final; the store was closing out its stock at cost, and men were

⁹ *Argus*, July 28, 1870; Goodhue County Register of Deeds, Book of Plats, no. 2, p. 19, among county archives.

¹⁰ This information was supplied by the National Archives, Washington, D.C., in a letter to the author, September 9, 1954.

¹¹ *United States Census*, 1880, *Population*, 233.

¹² *News*, August 6, 1885, April 18, 1890.

¹³ *News*, August 6, November 19, 1885, October 7, December 23, 1886, November 14, 1902; *Argus*, December 29, 1870; Hall, "Forest Mills."

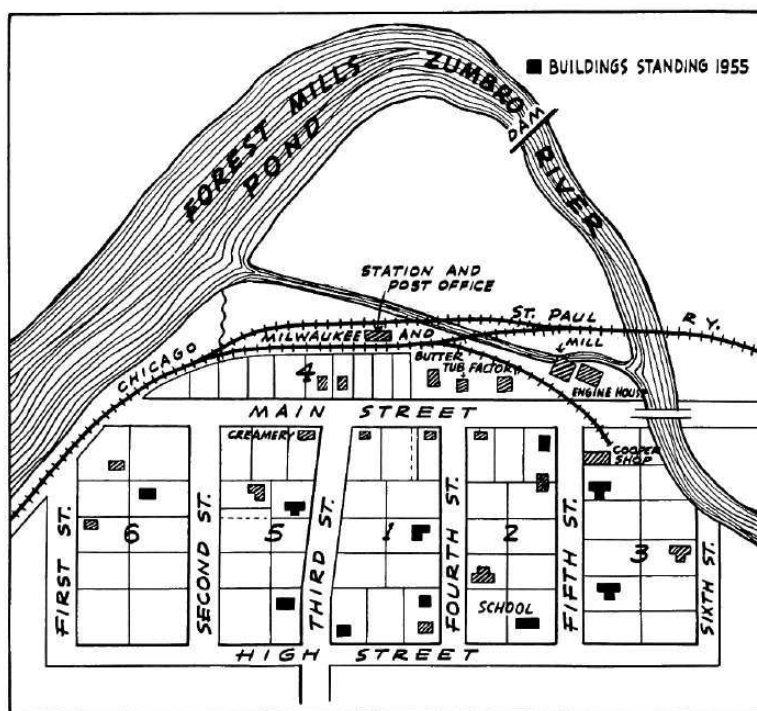
leaving the village. But within two months John Rust and his head miller, J. R. Mason, had reopened the mill and the town's doom was once again postponed. For the next ten years the mill was operated, with modest and gradually declining success, under the firm name of Rust and Mason. Comments in contemporary newspapers attempt to paint a rosy picture, but occasional shutdowns for repairs, repeated damage from spring floods, and a revealing controversy between the millers and a spokesman for the Farmers' Alliance all bespeak waning prosperity and a community gradually decaying with the passage of the years. When the Forest Mills correspondent for the *Zumbrota News* reported of Rust and Mason that "They are doing a great deal better than they expected to do," what he implied was more significant than what he said.¹⁴

Actually, the decline of Forest Mills had begun at the precise moment of its appar-

ent peak of prosperity. For the railroad that went to Forest Mills also went to Zumbrota, and, what is more important, a standard-gauge line reached Zumbrota at the same time the narrow-gauge railroad arrived. In 1889, the Duluth, Red Wing and Southern built into Zumbrota, giving the town three railroads, two of them standard gauge, as compared with one narrow-gauge line for Forest Mills. Zumbrota's population grew from 797 in 1880 to 867 in 1890, and 1,119 in 1900, and trade and industry naturally gravitated there rather than to Forest Mills, which had been thrust into what amounted to the backwater of commercial activity. In 1893 one of the large steam engines owned by the mill was sold, apparently after several years of disuse. Early in 1895 Earl C. Dickey, who operated the general store at Forest Mills, put in a new stock of goods, but less than a year later he moved to Fair Point, and the store appears to have closed with his departure. The local sash and door factory had gone out of business years earlier and its building had been converted

¹⁴ *News*, July 14, August 11, September 2, 1887, January 12, 1888.

MAP of Forest Mills
based on a plat
published in 1894



into a dwelling; the blacksmith shop and the harness shop were closed by the mid-nineties. W. B. Dickey's creamery operated until about 1900 or 1901 and then closed its doors, presumably because of competition from Zumbrota creameries. In the 1890s Ole Larson ran a cooper shop and manufactured butter tubs, but this business lasted only a short time.¹⁵

Early in 1898 Rust withdrew from the milling enterprise, and a new firm was organized under the name of Mason, Olson and Engelhart. The Olson component of the firm was Nels M. Olson, who had been successively grain buyer, postmaster, and miller for the community. Peter Engelhart was from Mazeppa, and it was his intention to dismantle the mill and re-erect it there at what he considered a more suitable site. The work of tearing down the mill began in July, and the first load of parts was shipped to Mazeppa about the middle of August. The feed mill and elevator portions were left undisturbed and were leased to a Zumbrota elevator company, which continued to operate them for the convenience of local farmers. The loss of the flour mill, of course, meant the virtual end of Forest Mills as a scene of commercial activity. Since the post office, which was kept in the railroad depot, was discontinued in 1898, it may be presumed that the railroad agency also was closed—a move that had been considered as early as 1894.¹⁶

Something approaching a revival was attempted at Forest Mills in 1903. In that year the narrow-gauge line was converted to standard and extended to Faribault, and perhaps this gave rise to a hope that the village might still have a future. Theodore Stecher, proprietor of a fur business in Zumbrota, bought the mill property, supposedly with the intention of using the water power to operate a tannery. Nothing came of this scheme, but Stecher continued to run the feed mill for several years. In the spring of 1907 he began the erection of a concrete dam, which, it was said,

would raise the level of the pond and attract boatowners.¹⁷

Five years later another business enterprise—the last—was started at Forest Mills. Encouraged by a well-known Minnesota dairy promoter, John Roch, a group of local farmers organized the Forest Mills Dairy Company, a stock company capitalized at \$625.00, and built a small frame cheese factory. According to the last surviving member of the original group of incorporators, the factory lasted only two years. When Roch ceased to manage it personally, it came under the direction of a cheese maker who skipped out with the proceeds, including the supply of cheese on hand, and that was the end of the enterprise.¹⁸ The building stood for many years, the loading platform on the east end sagging more and more as time passed, and finally falling off. After being used as a barn or machine shed until the early 1940s, the weather-beaten old building was finally torn down in October, 1943.

The feed mill suffered a similar fate. Stecher became increasingly interested in some land holdings in Virginia, and he eventually moved there, paying less and less attention to the men he employed to run the mill. In time the farmers' trade was lost, a spring flood took out the dam, and the mill was closed about the same time as the cheese factory. The building stood until the winter of 1918–19, when it was dismantled.¹⁹

¹⁵ *News*, December 15, 1893, March 15, 1895, January 24, 1896, November 14, 1902; C. M. Foote and J. W. Henion, *Plat Book of Goodhue County*, 58 (Minneapolis, 1894). The figures for Zumbrota are from the *Population* volumes of the *United States Census*, 1880, p. 226; 1890, p. 228; 1900, p. 219.

¹⁶ *News*, November 23, 1894, January 21, July 22, August 19, 1898.

¹⁷ *News*, June 19, 1903, April 19, 1907, October 3, 1908.

¹⁸ Goodhue County Register of Deeds, Miscellaneous Records, book 36, p. 598; interviews with Edward S. Nelson, a resident of Forest Mills since the 1870s, September 16, 1954, and with Herman Dahl, one of the incorporators of the Forest Mills Dairy Company, September 17, 1954.

¹⁹ Interview with Mr. Nelson.

THE *Forest Mills*
schoolhouse in
August, 1953



The Forest Mills school was the last community enterprise to cease functioning. From an enrollment of nearly sixty about 1880, it gradually declined as the town faded away.²⁰ It remained in use until the end of the school year 1944-45, when it was closed and the children of the district sent to the Zumbrota schools. When Consolidated School District 18 was organized at Zumbrota, the rural school buildings were sold at auction. In the summer of 1953 the Forest Mills schoolhouse was sold and put to use for the storage of hay.

IN THIS sketch of the history of Forest Mills, little has been said about the life of its people and their amusements. Yet a picture of this type of community is incomplete without some treatment of its social and cultural life. Throughout the history of Forest Mills, the schoolhouse was the focal point of its social life. As a settlement began to develop around the mill, the need for a local school district became apparent. In September, 1870, District 130 was organized and the sum of eight hundred dollars voted for the erection of a schoolhouse. That there was an emphatic need for education is shown by

the fact that two members of the school board signed documents with their marks, sworn to by literate members. Apparently classes were held in the Forest Mills store for two terms before the schoolhouse was built in the summer of 1871. A "term" at the time meant a period of about three or four months. At first classes were conducted for only two terms each year, one running from November to March, the other from April to July. In 1875, however, a third term, which started in September and continued until Thanksgiving, was inaugurated.²¹

Besides housing the district school—its primary function—the Forest Mills schoolhouse was used for various other purposes. Public entertainments, including at least one operetta, were presented there, and it was the home of a singing school. What is perhaps more important is the fact that it served as the center of the community's religious life. Most churchgoers in Forest Mills attended services in Zumbrota, which was less than two miles away, and once a movement was started to provide a conveyance to transport them between the villages. For a time Forest Mills had its own sabbath school, apparently conducted under the auspices of the Congregational church of Zumbrota. Groups of Scandinavians met occasionally

²⁰ Records of School District 130, now among the files of Consolidated District 18 at Zumbrota.

²¹ Records of District 130.

for church services in Forest Mills, first in the store and later in the school, and in the late 1880s one of them organized the Swedish Mission Church of Forest Mills. Although it persuaded a minister, the Reverend John Rood of Lake City, to move to Forest Mills, and even contemplated buying a house and lot for a church, nothing came of this scheme.²² Eventually all formal religious activity, including the Sunday school, ended in the little village.

As the commercial life of Forest Mills was identified with the milling enterprise, so its cultural life was, less directly, influenced by the presence of this industry. The millpond was the favorite resort of the young at all seasons. In winter there was skating on the ice, in summer, boating and fishing. Sometimes a group from Forest Mills would skate to Zumbrota and back and then top off the jaunt by enjoying an oyster stew. Others preferred sliding down the steep hill from Mason's house at the top and trying not to hit the blacksmith shop at its foot. Spring was always an exciting season for the people of this milling town. High water often caused anxiety over whether the dam would hold. Young people would clamber about the bluffs and wander through the woods as early as March to find the first blossoms. Picnics and baseball were popular in summer. Sometimes picnic socials were held at the school or at the Mason home, and people from Zumbrota would go to Forest Mills and join in the festivities. Dances were, of course, popular winter and summer, and at all seasons getting the mail provided diversion for young and old.²³

Forest Mills never had a newspaper, but news from the village was submitted to the Zumbrota newspapers by "Our Regular Correspondent" or "An Occasional Correspondent." Most of the items published in these columns were of the personal type still common in rural newspapers, and they were written in the whimsical style characteristic of the period. They probably reflect with reasonable accuracy the lives of

those mentioned—lives for the most part placid and at least externally enjoyable. Despite the charges of isolation and bleakness so often associated with rural Midwest life in the late nineteenth century, it would seem that the people of Forest Mills found spontaneous and healthy ways of entertaining themselves.

ANY STUDY of a ghost town must include some attempt to answer the question, why did this town decline? For certainly Forest Mills did decline. From a population of 124 in 1880, it slipped to 80 by 1887 and to 60 by 1893, according to gazetteers published in those years.²⁴ Although these figures are only approximate, they coincide with estimates made by old residents and can probably be regarded as fairly accurate. After the removal of the mill, the town's population decreased still further, until it finally stabilized at about twenty-five. There are today nine occupied houses in Forest Mills, in addition to one that has been used for many years as a granary. Two residences have been built since 1948. This does not indicate a revival of the community, but merely reflects the fact that it is near Zumbrota.

As was pointed out earlier, towns usually decline because of changes either in economic conditions or in routes of transportation and communication. Both factors were involved in the history of Forest Mills. In the first place, there was the proximity of Zumbrota. Considering the population density of the Goodhue County region—an area where the farm population has decreased steadily since 1880—

²² *News*, August 27, October 15, 1885, April 15, October 14, 1886, April 21, November 17, 1887; Mrs. Grace Dickey Scofield to George Grim, June 2, 1952; interview with Mrs. Scofield, September 8, 1954. Mrs. Scofield, who is the daughter of William B. Dickey, lived in Forest Mills as a child.

²³ Hall, "Forest Mills"; Scofield to Grim, June 2, 1952; *News*, July 7, 1887, March 29, 1889, June 8, 1894.

²⁴ Minnesota, Dakota, and Montana, *Gazetteer and Business Directory*, 1886–87, p. 304; 1892–93, p. 374.

and the type of agriculture that predominates, there simply was not room for two trading centers so close together as Zumbrota and Forest Mills. It is axiomatic that, other circumstances being equal, when two communities compete for survival, the one with the better location will win out. The operation of this principle helped make Rochester rather than Marion the county seat of Olmsted County. Located at the junction of a branch of the Zumbro River with several tributary streams, Rochester was a natural hub of communication, while Marion, on the insignificant Badger Run, had only one main route of travel.

From the start, Zumbrota unquestionably was more favorably located than Forest Mills with respect to both existing and potential routes of transportation. In a broad, bowl-like valley, it was situated at the crossing of two important trade routes, the St. Paul-Dubuque and the Red Wing-Mantorville stage lines, both of which are followed in large part by modern highways. Consequently, it was an obvious junction point and terminus for railroad lines when they were built. The Minnesota Midland, later absorbed by the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul, the Rochester and Northern Minnesota, which became part of the Chicago and Northwestern, and the Duluth, Red Wing and Southern, which was taken over by the Chicago Great Western, all terminated at Zumbrota. With the extension of the Milwaukee to Faribault and of the Great Western to Rochester, five tracks radiated from Zumbrota. As with railroads, so with highways. By the 1950s one trunk and two state highways and two county roads intersected at Zumbrota.

Forest Mills had none of these transportation assets. Situated in a narrow valley between steep bluffs, it was on no major line of communication. True, it did acquire a narrow-gauge railroad in 1878, but the

benefits derived from its arrival were only temporary, and in the long run the situation of Forest Mills was much like that of such towns as Marion and Cannon City, which the railroads missed altogether.

Why then did Forest Mills prosper at all? Although location is usually the decisive factor in rivalries between towns, it has sometimes happened that other influences have outweighed a poor location, and a town has flourished under handicaps which ordinarily would bring about its early extinction. A classic example is the city of Duluth. William W. Folwell points out that the most logical place for a town at the west end of Lake Superior was the vast stretch of level land south of the St. Louis River, on the Wisconsin side of the state line. But powerful Minnesota interests used their influence, and the railroad was built along the left bank of the river to the rocky hillsides of the North Shore, where the city of Duluth today clings to its precarious perch.²⁵

In the case of Forest Mills, a large milling enterprise justified the existence of a town in an otherwise unexceptional location, and so long as this enterprise flourished, the town continued to exist and prosper. This is where the economic factor enters in. Wheat raising declined in the region and with it the milling industry, and gradually the milling company at Forest Mills lost ground and finally expired. It might be inaccurate to say that the town was doomed from the start, but, given the need for only one town in the vicinity, the superiority of Zumbrota's location, and the temporary nature of wheat raising in the region, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the decline of Forest Mills was inevitable. Human agencies were involved, of course, but it was not individual ineptness or faulty judgment which brought about the downfall of the village, but rather a combination of natural circumstances and economic trends that human ingenuity was all but powerless to change or halt.

²⁵ Folwell, *Minnesota*, 3: 61.



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