

From the Archives

Grain Warehouse, Houston County



STEAMBOAT TRANSPORTATION in the Upper Mississippi Valley was immensely prosperous in the mid-nineteenth century. With little railroad competition, steamers dominated freight traffic. The Mississippi River between St. Paul and St. Louis bustled with these craft carrying Minnesota and Iowa grain bound for the East. It was the “Golden Age” for steamboats and a potential financial boon to those who tied their fortune to the industry. So went the thinking of William Robinson from Allamakee County, Iowa, when he constructed a grain warehouse along a Mississippi River slough in the southeastern-most corner of Minnesota in 1868.

Built of native limestone and wood, the warehouse was about one mile north of the Minnesota-Iowa border in Houston County. Farmers welcomed the structure, since it was the only grain-storage facility for miles. The building edged the water, allowing easy transfer of grain from its basement to vessels moored in the slough. To complement the warehouse, Robinson and R. P. Spencer platted the village of Jefferson. Its future looked bright, but the railroad was coming—and its management had little interest in Jefferson.

Three years after Robinson built his warehouse, the Chicago, Dubuque, and Minnesota Railroad platted the town of New Albin about one mile to the south in Iowa. It hardly mattered that the community was not on the river, since its future was bound to a superior means of transport. Grain-storage facilities were constructed in New Albin, which quickly flourished. Unable to compete, Jefferson soon failed. Many of the town’s buildings remained until the 1940s, when they were demolished to make way for Minnesota State Highway 26. But after more than 130 years, the heart of Robinson’s dream endures. His steamboat grain warehouse was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

—Denis Gardner

Sources

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