Early Marshall County History

Marshall County lies in the Red River Valley which is prime wheat raising country. It is part of the lake bed of the glacial Lake Agassiz which left a thick layer of rich soil.

The first people in the area were Indians. Bands of Chippewa or Ojibwa have lived in northern Minnesota since the 1600s. They had been living on the east coast and had been pushed westward. Because they were used to living in the woodlands, they found northern Minnesota very much to their liking. The Chippewa in turn pushed the Sioux or Dakota westward into Dakota. By 1793 a permanent settlement of Chippewa was located at Red Lake. A missionary, Rev. Sela G Wright was stationed on a mission farm on Red Lake during the 1840's and 1850's. Wright wrote about a farm there that could produce 3000 bushels of corn and 2000 bushels of potatoes. This was in 1848 when most of northern and western Minnesota was considered wilderness. The early French trappers traded with the Chippewa and even lived and trapped with them. In 1890 a band of Chippewa lived in Marshall County on the Sand Ridge near Thief Lake.

As early as 1812 Lord Selkirk opened settlements from Winnipeg to Pembina and in 1821 many Swiss people were settled there. Storms, floods, poor harvests, grasshoppers and famine discouraged the people so that many soon left passing through present Marshall County on their way to Fort Snelling and points south.

The county was in a direct line from the Selkirk Red River Settlement to the Mississippi River and one of the early trails passed through Marshall County. The trails was used by fur traders in the early 1800's. In 1823 Major Stephen H Long led and exploratory group to the area. The expedition traveled down the east side of the Red River, thus passing through Marshall County. The Red River became a travel waterway in the late 1850's when steamboats started running from Fort Garry to Georgetown and Moorhead. The first steamboat was assembled in 1858 at a town site called La Fayette, across the Red from the mouth of the Sheyenne River.

The present day Marshall County was first a part of Pembina county and Kittson county. Michael "Tamarack Mac" McCullough was the first permanent white settler. He arrived about 1872, claimed 160 acres and built a cabin on a small knoll alongside the Tamarack River. He filed for his homestead on May 6, 1879. Other settlers has claimed land in Marshall County before Mac but did not stay in the county. He was quite a character being a hunter, trapper, trader and farmer. Tamarac Mac made trips to Crookston, Grand Forks, and Moorhead for provisions. The trips sometimes took a week to complete. A story remains that one time he was caught in a bad blizzard about three miles from home. Being blinded by the snow, he took hold of his oxen's tail and was led to safety at the cabin of another settler Charles Wenzel. The two became friends after that meeting. Tamarac Mac was the first Marshall county resident to raise a crop of wheat.

Charles Wenzel a native of Prussia, arrived in Marshall County via Quebec, Michigan and Wisconsin. He was a blacksmith by trade and settled in Marshall County in 1874. He lived his remaining years in the Warren area.

A few years later Halvor Gunderson walked from Crookston to the Red River armed with only a butcher knife and an axe and settled in Marshall County. Some others who arrived in 1878 and settle near Wentzel were Frank Smith, W. A. Wallace, A. P. McIntyre, James B. Titus, Emmot W. Roosman, J. W. Slee, Ed Slee, A. E. Flint, A. B. Nelson, J. McCann and G. O. Gross.

In 1879 while on a trip from Willmar to Crookston, Nels Malm met Peter Jarvis, a settler from Lousia (Argyle). Peter told Nels about "cream of the valley was around Lousia" and persuaded him to come up and take a look. On the trip from Crookston, they passed only two buildings at Warren. Malm was impressed and when he returned to Willmar he told those people there about the land. That fall he and several families in eight covered wagons moved to Argyle arriving on November 4, 1879. The trip from Willmar took 24 days. They drove 62 cows with them with most of the men walking and herding the cattle.

Charles A. Bergland working as an agent for the Cunard Steamship Line arrived in Marshall County. He was impressed with the area and was responsible for about 100 families who came from Sweden. They settled near Warren. In 1878 the railroad was extended to Marshall County.

The early settlers were miles from any trading center and had to travel to Grand Forks, Fargo, or Crookston to trade. The only contact they had with other people was with bands of Indians or an occasional trapper or trader. The Red River oxcart trail came through Marshall County and provided a visitor on occasion.

Most early settlers came and claimed land under the Homestead Act of 1862. The nearest land office was in Detroit Lakes about 100 miles to the south. In 1879 a land office was started in Crookston. The first areas of the county to be settled were along the Red River and its tributaries, the Snake, Middle and Tamarack rivers. On the banks near the river were trees for homes and heat along with water for drinking. Early settlers walked or came in wagons but most of the later ones came by rail.

The first railroad constructed in Marshall County was that of the St Paul and Pacific Railway in 1878. The line went from a point 4.9 miles north of Barnesville to a point 2.3 miles south of Warren. Norman W. Kittson who worked for the Hudson Bay Company constructed a line from Crookston to present Fisher. James J. Hill and three Canadians Donald Smith (Lord Strathcona), George Stephen (Lord Mount Stephen) and Norman Kittson completed the line from Warren to Emerson. This made the line international.

On February 25, 1879, the Minnesota legislature created Marshall County. The land had been a part of Beltrami County until that time. The county was named after William Rainey Marshall a former governor of Minnesota. He also served in the Seventh Minnesota regiment during the Civil War where he achieved the rank of brigadier general. He was governor from 1866 to 1870. A strip of land one and one-half miles wide was left between Marshall and Polk County because of the manner of defining the northern border of Polk County. This strip was added to Marshall County in 1883.

In the fall of 1879, the first church (the Methodist Episcopal Church) was established in Warren with Reverend Samuel Kerfoot the first minister. Because there were no public buildings at that

time, the first service was held in the barroom of the Commercial Hotel. A church was completed and dedicated on November 25, 1883.

The first school district in Marshall County was organized on December 23, 1879 near Stephen and opened after the Christmas holiday in 1880. The first teacher was 16 year old Mary Ann Hughes.

Other firsts for the county included the following. The first marriage in Marshall County was between Charles Wenzel and Emma Smith from Switzerland and the widow of Peter Smith. The first white children born in the county were Roy Rossman and Winnie McCrea both born in 1880. The first brick manufactured in the county was by August Lundgren and the first building of those bricks was the Bank of Warren erected in 1883.

As with other counties, there was a contest over the county seat. Although Warren had been considered the county seat when the county was created no official action defined it to be so. On February 8, 1881, the county commissioners passed a resolution that the safe be placed in charge of the sheriff and moved to Argyle a few miles north of Warren. The county business was then conducted in Argyle. The commissioners met there a few times but on February 27, 1882 they passed another resolution authorizing the county chairman to hire men and teams to haul the safe and other property from Argyle to Warren and place it in the count buildings there. In 1881 the state legislature passed an act establishing Warren as the county seat.

Central Marshall County was settled mostly by Scandinavians starting in 1882. Ole Folden settled near what is now Newfolden with the town being named after him. He settled there along with Ole O. Lee, Mathias Hanson and others. Samuel Tunheim with his wife Taletta and daughter Marie arrived in Newfolden in 1884. He edited and published a religious newspaper 'Bug og Hilson' on his farm for several years.

Letters back home to Norway have become the best ways of learning what life was like in early Marshall County. Halvor Torstveit who lived in Newfolden sent back the following message.

  "This has been a good year. I have put up 100 loads of hay on my land. I had 2 men to help me and paid them $1.00 per day... I worked out in the harvest this year and received $5.00 per day for me and the team. A relative drove my oxen so I had $90.00 left when I paid him."

Torstveit's brother-in-law Gunder Forberget sent a different message back home.

  "Life is good in many ways but the climate . . . hard to get used to . . . winters extremely cold, with severe storms, and the summers can be extremely hot."

Neither man returned to Norway however. Many other families wrote both types of letter home, some returning to Norway but most staying in Marshall County. Many of the Norwegian papers contained stories of the good life in Minnesota and caused several families to come to this country.

Eastern Marshall County was the last to be settled with settlers arriving there for the first time in the late 1890's. Most of early eastern Marshall County was dedicated to timber and sawmills. One hazard the settlers in the east had was forest fires which is the counterpart of the western county hazard - prairie fires.

The biggest hazard was, however, the annual spring flooding. One of the worst floods occurred in 1897 after a huge winter snowfall. A sheet of water extended between the Snake, Middle and Tamarack rivers which normally empty into the Red River. Ole Sands used a raft to transport mail between Warren and Alvarado. Others coped as best they could. As with settlers in any territory, the ones in Marshall County survived and formed lasting communities.