

SOME CHANGES IN LOCAL BOUNDARIES AND NAMES IN MINNESOTA¹

There was some confusion in the boundaries of newly created counties in the early days. Lines overlapped and crossed, and it was in many instances difficult for one to know in what county he really lived or whether he had been shifted from one to another following the creation of some new county. The confusion in this respect was so great that Judge Moses Sherburne and William Hollinshead, who were appointed to compile the statutes in 1858, declared that they were unable to follow the various acts creating counties and could not give a list with correct boundaries. They incorporated the original acts in the compiled statutes of 1858 rather than undertake the job of reconciling the numerous confused lines.

A number of counties were created and their boundaries expressly defined which subsequently were put quietly to sleep by the creation of some new county embracing the same and perhaps additional territory. Pierce County, created in 1853 and named for President Franklin Pierce, adjoined Nicollet County; Davis County, created in 1855 and undoubtedly named for Jefferson Davis, lay north and west of Renville and Carver counties. Both were lost in the manner stated. Newton County, created in 1855 and originally named Doty County, included about half of the present territory of St. Louis County, but dropped out of sight when the latter county was created. Buchanan County, established in 1857 and named for President Buchanan, bordered on the St. Croix River in the northeast part of the territory, with Fortuna as the county seat. Neither the county nor the county seat can now be found and the territory thereof is mainly within Pine

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County. Monroe County, created in 1858 and named for President Monroe, lay south of Mille Lacs and had Princeton as its county seat. Princeton has been for many years the county seat of Mille Lacs County, which includes much if not all of the old Monroe County territory. Big Sioux and Midway counties were created in territorial days out of territory now a part of South Dakota, adjoining on the west the present Rock and Pipestone counties. They were both put out of commission by the act of Congress defining the state boundaries.

As originally created Ramsey County was quite large and extended north to the Mille Lacs region, embracing practically all of the present territory of Anoka, Mille Lacs, Isanti, and Kanabec counties. In the creation of other counties in that part of the state a small tract of land, probably two or three townships belonging to and forming a part of Ramsey County, was cut off and left high and dry in the Mille Lacs country, sixty or seventy miles from home base. Whether Ramsey County ever exercised jurisdiction over that detached part of its territory, so isolated, does not appear. The matter was later corrected by adding the land to some adjoining county.

One example of the overlapping of county lines to the extent of wholly appropriating the territory of an existing county in the creation of new ones may be mentioned. The original county of the name of Lac qui Parle, created by an act of the legislature of 1862, met such a fate. It was located east of the Minnesota River, opposite the present county of that name. The boundary of the county extended due north from a point on the Minnesota River above Lac qui Parle Lake to the northwest corner of the township now known as Scott in Stevens County; thence east eighteen miles, or three townships, to the Pope County line; thence south on the town line to a point near Montevideo; and thence up the Minnesota River to the place of beginning. As thus bounded the county was eighteen miles wide, east and west, and about forty miles long. The north end took in the townships of Scott, Darnen, Hodges, Moore, Horton, and Synnes, now in Stevens County.

In 1868 the legislature rearranged the boundaries of Chippewa and Stevens counties and established Grant County, in doing which the county of Lac qui Parle was wholly absorbed and wiped out.

As originally established Stevens County contained eighteen townships, three extending east and west, and six north and south. The north boundary was the present north boundary of Grant County, and the south boundary extended along the present town line between the towns of Darnen and Morris. The north line of Lac qui Parle County was thus the south line of Stevens County. By the boundary rearrangements of 1868 Grant County was created and Stevens was made into its present form of sixteen towns square, including the six townships taken from Lac qui Parle. At the same time the boundaries of Chippewa County were changed, greatly enlarging the county and including therein all that was left of Lac qui Parle south of what had been added to Stevens County; consequently nothing remained of Lac qui Parle. Chippewa County as thus enlarged embraced all the territory of the present Swift County, which was created in 1870. The legislature provided that this change in the boundaries of Chippewa County should go into effect as soon as the voters of the adjoining county of Renville ratified an act of the same year which altered the boundary line of the latter county.

Whether it was intended thus to extinguish Lac qui Parle County or whether the lines of the new counties were drawn without proper information as to the boundaries of that county does not appear. Subsequently some one evidently started in search of Lac qui Parle County, but without success. It had disappeared. To remedy the situation the legislature in 1871 created the present Lac qui Parle County out of territory west of the Minnesota River, thus gratifying the wishes of those who wanted a county of that name.

No particular confusion or difficulty arose in the administration of public affairs from the overlapping of county lines or the overnight wiping out of existing counties, for few of

them were organized and many were paper counties only. Some, like Seward County, created in 1874, were subject to ratification or rejection by the voters and were not approved at the election. St. Anthony County was included in the "third council district" according to a law of 1855, but I have found no act creating a county of that name. Keating County was located southwest of the original Stearns County according to the act by which the latter county was established in 1855, but there was no Keating County. Ripley County, created in 1860; McPhail County, in 1866; Franklin County, in 1872; and Canby County, in 1879, were never organized and fell by the wayside.

Most of the counties of the state have retained the name under which they came into being. There have been some changes, however, and in this respect Wilkin County may be mentioned for the somewhat interesting facts it presents. The county was originally a part of Toombs County, christened in honor of Robert Toombs, a prominent citizen of the state of Georgia. It was said years ago by persons who were in position to know that a party of Southerners were looking over the North and West with a view to finding suitable territory for the extension of slavery at the proper time in the future.² The end of a day's journey in the summer of 1856 or thereabout brought them to the point where the Bois des Sioux and Otter Tail rivers join to form the Red River of the North, about where Breckenridge is now located or perhaps a little south of the present site. An optical survey of the country was fascinating; the broad prairies of Minnesota and of Dakota — an empire for miles and miles around — appealed to them as an inviting and promising field for the future exploitation and use of slave labor. They accordingly caused to be platted, in the spring of 1857, the town of Breckenridge; and in 1858 through their influence two new counties were

² The information for this story was secured from the late Joseph P. Wilson of St. Cloud, who had a vast store of knowledge of early history of the Northwest, particularly of Minnesota.

created by the legislature in that part of the state — namely, Toombs and Breckenridge. The town site as well as the county of Breckenridge was named in honor of Colonel John C. Breckenridge, a distinguished statesman of Kentucky and vice president of the United States from 1857 to 1861.

But the venture, or the dream, more properly speaking, of extending slavery into Minnesota was neither realized nor attempted. The Civil War came on. Mr. Toombs was of special prominence in the South as an active and ardent supporter of the rebellion, and so he came into great disfavor in the North, including Minnesota. In order to remove all taint of southern sympathy or respect for anyone supporting the war against the Union, the state legislature in 1862 changed the name of the county to "Andy Johnson," in honor of the loyal Tennessean who became vice president on the second election of Abraham Lincoln. Johnson was in high favor all over the North and very popular because of his courageous stand in favor of the Union, but his conduct in matters of reconstruction after the war, when he became president following the death of Lincoln, was disappointing. He was impeached by the House of Representatives in Congress, and to add to his discomfort the Minnesota legislature in 1868 removed his name from the county and rechristened it Wilkin, its present name, in honor of a distinguished Minnesotan, Colonel Alexander Wilkin, who rendered conspicuous service in the Civil War. No doubt this name is permanent. The county of Breckenridge, which adjoined Toombs on the north, was in 1862 included in the county of Clay, named in honor of Henry Clay of Kentucky. Thus Breckenridge County disappeared also.

A number of people interested in the organization of these two counties settled in St. Cloud and remained there with their slave servants until the Civil War broke out, when they returned to their homes in the South. What became of them in after years is not known. They did not resume their residence

in this state after the war. They were men and women of high character, prominent in territorial and early state affairs as well as in local matters. They, of course, were in favor of the continuation of slavery. One of the St. Cloud newspapers repeatedly assailed the South and those in sympathy with it in violent language, and its editor, Jane Grey Swisshelm, awoke one morning to find her press demolished and her type scattered, some in the river and some on the road. Such things were not uncommon in those strenuous days in other parts of the country.³ Though free speech was then as now guaranteed by the fundamental law, upon the subject of slavery one expressed his sentiments in particular sections of the country at the peril of treatment akin to that handed the editor of the St. Cloud paper.

In contrast to Wilkin County, Stevens County has retained the name by which it was first designated in 1862, when it was created along with Pope, Big Stone, Traverse, Chippewa, and the original Lac qui Parle counties; and the act creating them was reenacted in the statutory revision of 1866. Until formally organized in 1871, nine years after it was so created, Stevens County was attached successively to Stearns, Douglas, and Pope counties for judicial and general administrative purposes. Like many of the other counties which are named for some distinguished personage of the state or the nation, it was named, according to a publication recently issued by the Minnesota Historical Society, in honor of Isaac I. Stevens, who headed an expedition in the early fifties for the survey of a railroad from Minnesota to the Pacific coast. The Northern

³ The most prominent Southerner at St. Cloud was "General" Sylvanus B. Lowry, the "democratic boss of northern Minnesota." Mrs. Swisshelm wrote that Lowry "lived in a semibarbaric splendor, in an imposing house on the bank of the Mississippi, where he kept slaves, bringing them from and returning them to his Tennessee estate, at his convenience, and no man saying him nay." See Lester B. Shippee, "Jane Grey Swisshelm: Agitator," in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 7: 206-227 (December, 1920).

Pacific Railroad was subsequently constructed on the route substantially as surveyed by Stevens.⁴

While Stevens County has retained its original name, some of its towns have not fared so well. The county contains sixteen organized townships. The town now known as Swan Lake was first named Sahlmark, in honor of A. G. Sahlmark, a pioneer settler of the locality. He settled in this township before the county was organized and he and his sons participated in the township organization proceedings. In common with all the early settlers they suffered the privations and hardships of frontier life and, like many of their kind, tired of the struggle. In the early eighties the younger members of the family moved on in search of more favorable fields of opportunity, but whether the elder Sahlmark died while a resident of the town or followed his sons I do not know. Subsequent to their departure the name of the town was changed to Swan Lake by legislative enactment. The latter name was suggested by Peter G. Larson, a resident of the town.

The town of Hodges was organized under the name of Honolulu, which was changed by an act of the legislature of 1879 to its present name in honor of Leonard B. Hodges of St. Paul. Hodges was the representative of the old first division of the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, and later of James J. Hill and the St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Manitoba Railway, in the encouragement of tree-planting on the western prairies. Many groves of trees along the railroad right of way, designed as "snow breaks," still stand as the results of his labors.

The town of Darnen was organized as Darien, from the isthmus of that name. The name was changed to Darnen by

⁴Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names; Their Origin and Historic Significance*, 535 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17—St. Paul, 1920). The understanding has been heretofore, at least in Stevens County, that it received its name in honor of Colonel John H. Stevens, the territorial pioneer who constructed the first house west of the Mississippi River on the present site of Minneapolis. A statement to this effect appears in an *Illustrated Album of Biography of Pope and Stevens Counties*, 376 (Chicago, 1888). Both the author of this volume and his source of information are unknown to the present writer.

special act of the legislature in 1879 at the instance, as I recall the facts, of J. C. McCarthy of St. Paul, known to his friends as Jerry McCarthy, "alderman of the 6th ward."⁵ McCarthy owned and operated through tenants a large farm in the township, which he thought properly should have an Irish name, since it was settled largely by Irishmen. He first suggested Derrynane, the name of a town in County Kerry, Ireland, and that name was used in the bill introduced in the legislature to effect the change. It was discovered, however, that a previously organized town in Le Sueur County had been christened by this name, and another had to be found. McCarthy was equal to the occasion and promptly directed the chairman of the proper legislative committee to strike out the letter *i* from Darien and to insert in its place the letter *n*, and behold, he had coined a new word, and the town of Darien became Darnen. To hear McCarthy pronounce the new name in his rich Irish brogue one would think the word one of ancient Irish origin.⁶

The name of the town of Potsdam west of Pepperton was changed to Everglade. The name first proposed in making the change was Chew, for Fielder B. Chew, an attorney then practicing at Morris and a member of the firm of Brown and Chew. But Chew did not approve of the proposal and the name Everglade was adopted.

Donnelly Township was first named Douglas, probably for Stephen A. Douglas. The change to Donnelly in 1877 was in honor of Ignatius Donnelly, who owned a large farm near the town. Donnelly, who served as lieutenant governor from 1860 to 1863 and as a representative in Congress from 1863 to 1869, was one of the most prominent and brilliant of the state's public men, from pioneer days down to the time of his death in January, 1901.

CALVIN L. BROWN

MORRIS, MINNESOTA

⁵ I am confirmed in my opinion by H. W. Stone, formerly of Morris, but now living in Idaho.

⁶ Upham, in his *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 535, states that the use of the name Darnen "elsewhere as either a geographic or personal name has not been ascertained."



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