

Bemidji: A Pioneer Community of the 1890's¹

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MORE THAN a century before the beginnings of permanent settlement at Lake Bemidji a fur-trading post was built on its shores. About 1785 it seems to have been located on the east side of the lake, then known as Lac Traverse. In 1832, however, when Henry R. Schoolcraft in search of the source of the Mississippi reached Lac Traverse, he found on the west shore, north of the entrance of the Mississippi, a "small, deserted long building." This was a minor trading station of the American Fur Company and was occupied in winter by a clerk of William Aitkin of Sandy Lake.² Although abandoned many years before the coming of settlers, the post indicated the importance of the site of the future community. Today a marker on the lake shore recalls the period when the region about the present Bemidji was part of the vast fur country of the Northwest.

The age of settlement did not begin until late in the nineteenth century. In 1890, Beltrami County, in which Lake Bemidji is located, was little more than a wilderness. The entire county, then much larger than it is now, had only 312 white inhabitants. Because of its location in the northern part of the state and the attendant isolation, the region was one of the last frontier areas in Minnesota. The first white settlers at Lake Bemidji were G. E. Carson and his brother M. E. Carson, who went there from Detroit Lakes in the spring of 1888. On the neck of land between Lake Bemidji and Lake Irving the brothers built a log trading house which for several years was

¹ A paper read before the luncheon session of the ninety-third annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, at the Women's City Club of St. Paul on January 12, 1942. *Ed.*

² Grace Lee Nute, "Posts in the Minnesota Fur-trading Area, 1660-1855," *ante*, 11:369; Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Summary Narrative of an Expedition to the Sources of the Mississippi River*, 231 (Philadelphia, 1855); James Allen, *Expedition to Northwest Indians*, 31, 43 (23 Congress, 1 session, *House Executive Documents*, no. 323 — serial 257).

the only store in the region. Near by lived Chief Bemidji and his small band of Chippewa Indians. To meet the needs of Indians, hunters, loggers, timber cruisers, and scattered settlers, the Carsons carried on a diversified business. They sold a variety of merchandise, operated a blacksmith shop, shipped game, fish, furs, wild rice, and berries, and engaged in other lines of business as demands arose. Supplies for the trading house were hauled over the sixty miles of road running eastward from Fosston, which the railroad reached in 1888.³

With this enterprise as the nucleus and the trail from Fosston as the route of migration, settlement about the lake shores grew slowly. In the early 1890's Freeman Doud and Thomas Joy settled there, and they were followed in 1893 by Robert Carr, Willis Nye, and Alfonzo Godbout. These men, all of whom were native-born Americans, came from western Minnesota counties. Joy bought a tract of railroad land, but the others filed claims. In the meantime hunting and fishing parties visited the region, and their members gave descriptions of the country that helped advertise it and attract settlers.⁴

In 1894 the trickle of migration became a steady stream. More than forty families, about half of them Scandinavians, settled in the township during the year. Most of the newcomers came from the prairies of the Dakotas and western Minnesota. During the summer G. M. Carson, father of the Carson brothers, built a hotel, the "Bemidji House." Late in the year a post office was established in Carsons' store, with M. E. Carson as postmaster. In 1895 John Steidl built the first sawmill. From it came the lumber for the first frame building in the settlement—a hotel erected by J. F. Remore on what is now the northeast corner of Third Street and Beltrami Avenue. Soon the Carson brothers built a new store, also a frame structure, on the southwest corner of the same intersection. Another general merchandise store was opened by J. W. White. More settlers

³ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 3:139, 251 (St. Paul, 1926); *United States Census*, 1890, *Population*, 195; *Hubbard County Enterprise* (Park Rapids), March 29, 1895. See also a report of an interview with G. E. Carson, in which he describes his first years in Bemidji, in the *St. Paul Dispatch*, June 8, 1926.

⁴ *Thirteen Towns* (Fosston), February 2, 1894; *Enterprise*, March 29, 1895; Minnesota, *Fourth Decennial Census*, 1895, p. 77.

came, including a colony of Germans from Douglas and Otter Tail counties.⁵

Since village, township, and county organization were lacking, pioneer co-operation for common objects was essential. Roads were opened, bridges were built, and a schoolhouse was erected by the settlers themselves. Homestead claims, the arrival of land seekers, new business enterprises, and railroad rumors were topics of interest. Farmers were also teamsters, loggers, trappers, and day laborers. Anticipations of growth and development compensated for the hardships and limitations of frontier existence. Thus did life and work in the little pioneer community repeat the pattern of countless earlier American frontiers.

Social interests helped to relieve the tedium and monotony of everyday living. Occasional religious services were conducted by visiting ministers. Among them was the Reverend J. A. Gilfillan, the well-known Episcopal missionary to the Chippewa. Holidays were occasions for social gatherings and celebrations. The first community Christmas party, which took place in 1893, "was largely attended and much enjoyed," according to a contemporary account. "Each one received a present and the tree was splendidly decorated and well-filled." Independence Day was also awaited eagerly. On July 4, 1894, Bemidji "had a grand old fashion celebration," wrote a Park Rapids newspaper correspondent. "The national salute was fired at sun rise, picnicing was the order of the day," and it "ended with a grand ball at the Bemidji House." A year later patriotic enthusiasm found an outlet in a more varied program, which included a lake excursion and a baseball game between teams representing Bemidji and Moose. Early in 1896 a dramatic club was organized. It presented plays and entertainments and on at least one occasion journeyed to Park Rapids and gave a performance there.⁶

By April, 1896, the population of the settlement had increased to

⁵ *Enterprise*, December 14, 1894, January 4, March 29, 1895. See also the reminiscences of Mrs. Nels Willett, who went to Beltrami County in 1895, in the *Bemidji Daily Pioneer*, November 26, 1927.

⁶ *Thirteen Towns*, December 29, 1893; *Enterprise*, July 13, 1894, February 15, July 12, 1895, February 21, March 13, 1896. Moose was a post office west of Bemidji, within the present area of what is now Moose Creek Township in Clearwater County.

about two hundred. Business enterprises included two general stores, two hotels, a hardware store, a meat market, three or four blacksmith shops, a drugstore, a restaurant, a saloon, and several livery stables. There was one resident physician, Dr. J. P. Omich, proprietor of the Bemidji drugstore. Those requiring the services of a lawyer usually engaged one from Fosston or Park Rapids. In August, 1896, the pioneer church of Bemidji was organized by the Presbyterians. The Reverend Joseph Zoll, who became its pastor, was the first resident minister. Another sign of growth was the establishment of two weekly newspapers. The *Bemidji Pioneer* began publication in March, 1896, and the *Beltrami Eagle* a month later. The editors, typical frontier newspapermen, were enthusiastic boosters of Bemidji, and their newspapers radiated a spirit of optimism and confidence in its future. During the summer the settlement was incorporated as the village of Bemidji. Another spelling which often appeared in the early years was "Bermidji." According to some authorities the village was named in honor of Chief Bemidji. Recent investigation reveals, however, that both the settlement and the chief probably took their names from Lake Bemidji, which was known by a contraction of the Indian name "Bemidjigumag."⁷

A new factor in the development of the community was introduced by the organization of the Bemidji Townsite and Improvement Company. The company acquired title to about ninety acres of land on the west side of the lake and platted a townsite. In March, 1896, the plat was filed and the sale of lots began. The president of the company was Tams Bixby, a prominent figure in the Republican party, who was then secretary to Governor David M. Clough. A. C. Clausen, the secretary of the company, was chief grain inspector of Minnesota.⁸ With influential officials and adequate finan-

⁷ *Pioneer*, April 30, 1896, October 20, 1898, August 1, 1936; Warren Upham, *Minnesota Geographic Names*, 36 (*Minnesota Historical Collections*, vol. 17); J. A. Gilfillan, "Minnesota Geographical Names Derived from the Chippewa Language," in Geological and Natural History Survey of Minnesota, *Annual Report*, 1886, p. 460. For a record of the incorporation of the Presbyterian church, see the "Miscellaneous Records" of Beltrami County, vol. 1, p. 251, in the county archives preserved in the courthouse at Bemidji.

⁸ *St. Paul Dispatch*, December 26, 1895; *Pioneer*, May 7, 1896; Clarence B. Douglas, ed., *Tams Bixby, 1855-1922*, 61-64 (n.p., n.d.).

cial resources, the company was an effective booster of Bemidji and it played an important part in the settlement's growth.

Until the coming of the railroads, the settlers were dependent on wagon roads for travel and transportation. The cost and difficulty of wagon freighting made it imperative to develop a route to the nearest railroad town. When the railroad reached a town that was still closer, another road was built to that point to take advantage of the shorter distance. The experience of the Bemidji region in developing roads was similar to that of earlier pioneer communities in opening routes to market. At first all supplies for the new settlement came over the sixty-mile trail from Fosston. Then in 1894 a road was opened to Park Rapids, situated about fifty miles south of Bemidji. This road afforded a closer outlet to the railroad and a relatively direct route from Minneapolis and St. Paul. But these advantages were partially offset by the poor condition of the road, and, although Park Rapids became the principal source of supplies, Bemidji merchants continued to obtain a considerable proportion of their goods from Fosston until 1897. In that year Walker began to compete for the business of forwarding supplies to Bemidji. Goods were shipped by steamboat to Steamboat Landing, south of Cass Lake, and then by wagon over the twenty-five miles of road to Bemidji. From 1894 until the railroad reached Bemidji in 1898, however, most of the goods came from Park Rapids.⁹

Over the routes described, freight wagons hauled supplies, and stagecoaches carried travelers and mail. "It is no uncommon occurrence for twenty or twenty-five loaded freight wagons to string into Bemidji from Park Rapids in one afternoon," reads a report in the *Bemidji Pioneer* for April 21, 1898. They contained "freight for railroad contractors, freight for storekeepers, and freight for immigrants." This traffic was an important element in the pioneer economy, giving employment to teamsters, blacksmiths, liverymen, and wagon repairers. Along the roads were "stopping places" where men

⁹ Arthur J. Larsen, "Roads and the Settlement of Minnesota," *ante*, 21:240; *Enterprise*, February 2, March 9, July 27, December 14, 1894, March 15, 1895; *Pioneer*, May 14, June 25, 1896; *Beltrami Eagle*, May 21, June 4, August 20, 27, October 22, 1897; *Cass County Pioneer* (Walker), July 22, August 5, 1897.

and teams could be accommodated overnight on the two-day trips to Park Rapids and Fosston. In 1896 a semiweekly stage carried passengers and mail to and from Park Rapids. The stage left Bemidji at 6:30 A. M., "arriving at destination same day." Later three round trips were made each week, unless impassable roads prevented travel. Sometimes the wretched condition of the roads interrupted service for a week or longer. On one occasion high water forced the driver to abandon his stage at the Schoolcraft River and to take the mail the rest of the way by boat. In 1898 a stage left Bemidji three times each week for Fosston. The trip required a day and a half, with passengers spending the night at Bagley.¹⁰

With the growth of population came a need for county organization. Although Beltrami County was established in 1866, it was attached to Becker County for record and judicial purposes after 1871. In 1894, a board of three Beltrami County commissioners was appointed by the governor. The authority of this board was limited, however, and there were recurring difficulties with Becker County officials. Furthermore the trip to the Becker County seat at Detroit Lakes was long and inconvenient. The impatience characteristic of pioneers who were obliged to deal with a distant government that seemed to neglect their interests now developed among the citizens of Beltrami County. In 1896, therefore, a movement to organize the county was started. But the interests of the settlers, who desired roads, schools, and a more conveniently located county government, clashed with those of the pine-land owners, for whom organization would mean increased taxation. Only after a prolonged struggle in the legislature was an act organizing the county for all purposes passed in April, 1897. Restrictions were placed, however, on the amounts of indebtedness the county could incur and on the taxes it could levy. These limitations were irritating and unwelcome to the people of the county and were attributed by them to the influence of the pine-land owners.¹¹

¹⁰ *Pioneer*, April 30, May 14, 1896, June 30, 1898; *Eagle*, April 9, 23, July 23, 1897.

¹¹ William Anderson and Bryce E. Lehman, *An Outline of County Government in Minnesota*, 145 (Minneapolis, 1927); *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, March 20, 1897; *Pioneer*, April 15, 1897, October 20, 1898; *Eagle*, April 9, 1897.

Interest then centered on the location of the county seat. Bemidji and several other settlements were eager to obtain it. At a meeting of the board of county commissioners in June, 1897, representatives of Bemidji, Popple, Peterson Lake, and Buena Vista appeared in behalf of their respective communities. The board then voted to establish the county seat at Bemidji, the largest settlement in the county. This increased the prestige and importance of the village and added another factor to aid its growth. The townsite company donated a block of land for a courthouse, but the county board purchased a building for the purpose. Perhaps the motive for this step was to make a change in the location of the county seat more difficult.¹²

"Land-seekers are arriving daily," reported the *Eagle* in May, 1897. Like the earlier settlers most of them came from the prairie regions of the Dakotas and western Minnesota. Drawn by the opportunity to acquire free homesteads of a hundred and sixty acres, the newcomers erected rude log cabins and filed their claims at the Crookston land office. Until the land could be improved, however, subsistence rather than commercial farming prevailed. Timber for fuel and building purposes was plentiful, and to the foodstuffs grown on the farms fish and game could readily be added. But the farmers needed some cash income, and to obtain it they took advantage of available opportunities for part-time work. Some labored in logging camps, while others found employment in railroad construction. In the late summer many went to the Red River Valley to work in the harvest fields.¹³

In the village, activity was brisk during the summer and fall months of 1897. Lots were offered for sale by the townsite company at prices ranging from fifty to two hundred and fifty dollars. The first addition to the original townsite was platted and the lots were placed on sale at prices beginning at twenty-five dollars. To meet

¹² *Eagle*, August 20, 1897; *Pioneer*, October 20, 1898. See also the "Official Records" of the board of county commissioners for 1897, vol. 2, p. 52, 53, in the county archives at Bemidji.

¹³ *Eagle*, May 28, June 4, August 13, 1897. Material on homesteading was drawn also from a series of typewritten interviews with old settlers, made available through the courtesy of Mr. H. Z. Mitchell of Bemidji.

the needs of the growing population, more houses and business buildings were erected, new streets were cleared, and a new bridge was built across the Mississippi. New business and professional opportunities were created and work became more specialized. The first bank was established. Another physician, Dr. D. B. Newman, and a lawyer, W. F. Street, became residents. Several new stores were opened, among them two dealing in general merchandise, one, in furniture, and another offering "a fine line of millinery" with "dressmaking done at reasonable rates."¹⁴

Late in June, 1897, the *Eagle* reported that "tourists have begun to arrive and already several parties are camped on the lake shore, boating, bathing, and fishing in our beautiful lake." Every summer since 1893, the recreational opportunities of the Bemidji region had attracted tourists from North Dakota and western Minnesota. The early tourist industry, though small, played a not unimportant role in developing the community. It made the village better known, and it brought visitors who patronized local business places. It also added another note to town boosting; a bright future for Bemidji as a vacation center was confidently predicted.¹⁵

Residents as well as visitors enjoyed play and sport. Boating was very popular. Sailboats appeared on the lake as early as 1894; four years later a steamboat accommodating two hundred passengers was launched. Like most communities, Bemidji was infected with the cycling craze of the 1890's. In 1897 a rifle club was organized and shoots were held regularly. Baseball games attracted enthusiastic spectators. Occasionally contests ended with both teams claiming victory. Typical was one played in August, 1897, between Bemidji and the Great Northern surveyors. The game was "very spirited," reported the *Eagle*, "and as the results were not very satisfactory another game will be played next Sunday." The principal winter sport was skating.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Eagle*, April 23, October 15, 29, 1897.

¹⁵ *Eagle*, June 25, July 9, 23, 1897; *Thirteen Towns*, July 21, 1893; *Enterprise*, July 13, 1894; *Crookston Daily Tribune*, August 6, 1895; *Pioneer*, December 1, 1898.

¹⁶ *Enterprise*, July 27, 1894; *Eagle*, May 7, August 27, 1897; *Pioneer*, June 16, 1898; interview with Mr. Earl Geil of Bemidji.

Lodges and other organizations also served to occupy leisure time. The Modern Woodmen, organized locally in 1897, were soon followed by several other fraternal societies. The ladies' aid society of the Presbyterian church was probably the earliest women's organization. In 1897 a group of women founded the Up-to-Date Club. The program presented at a meeting held in October included the reading of selections from Pope, Emerson, Burns, and other authors. Civil government and Whittier were assigned as topics for the next meeting, and "the physical culture hour was a delight to all."¹⁷

During 1898 free land attracted another tide of incoming farmers. "There were more than 300 homesteads taken in Beltrami County last month," reported the *Pioneer* in April. "If anyone doubts the reality of Bemidji and Beltrami County he has to put in but one day at this end of the stage line." The growth of settlement increased the importance of Bemidji as a center of trade for the surrounding area. New business enterprises were established and more professional men arrived. During the summer the Baptists and the Methodists organized congregations and began holding regular services. A new school building—a two-story brick structure—was completed. By the fall of 1898 the population of the village had increased to about five hundred.¹⁸

¹⁷ Located on the Mississippi River and Lakes Bemidji and Irving, with the pine timber of southern Beltrami and northern Hubbard counties tributary to it, Bemidji was clearly destined to become an important logging and sawmilling center. The first sawmill, built in 1895 by John Steidl, had a daily capacity of twelve thousand feet, which was later increased to twenty-five thousand feet. Farmers hauled or drove logs to the sawmill, often receiving lumber in exchange. A smaller sawmill was located at the junction of the Mississippi and Schoolcraft rivers, about two miles southwest of Bemidji. In 1898 another sawmill was built in Bemidji.¹⁹ But the develop-

¹⁷ *Eagle*, April 23, September 3, 24, October 1, 1897.

¹⁸ *Pioneer*, April 21, June 16, September 29, 1898.

¹⁹ *Enterprise*, November 22, 1895; *Pioneer*, April 30, 1896, July 14, 1898; *Eagle*, April 9, 1897; interview with Mr. Geil.

ment of the lumber industry on a large scale awaited the coming of railroads. Until logs could be shipped to sawmills elsewhere or lumber to outside markets, logging and sawmilling operations were limited to meeting local needs.

In 1893 the Great Northern Railroad surveyed a route through Bemidji. But the hope of the settlers that actual construction would soon follow was disappointed. The prospects became even more discouraging in 1896, when a new survey placed the line two miles south of the village. Fortunately, however, another change was made and the route was again located through Bemidji. The Great Northern then began construction on an extension from Deer River westward to Fosston by way of Bemidji. During the summer of 1898, the approach of the railroad was perhaps a more absorbing topic of interest to the residents of the village than the Spanish-American War. On August 13 the first carload of freight was delivered in Bemidji. The first passenger train arrived on August 29, with James J. Hill, the Empire Builder, and other officials of the railroad on board. A contemporary newspaper records that "As the train crossed the Mississippi bridge, the occupants all took a platform view of the two lakes, and then the train stopped at the foot of Beltrami Avenue and took a good long look at the future Broadway of northern Minnesota. After that they moved westward at the rate of ten miles an hour." In the meantime construction of the Brainerd and Northern line northward from Walker was begun, and in December it was completed to Bemidji.²⁰

With the building of the railroads, Bemidji's pioneer period ended. Stagecoaches and freight wagons no longer carried travelers and supplies over the rough roads from Park Rapids and Fosston. During the two years from 1898 to 1900 the population increased more than fourfold, a result mainly of the swift development of the lumber industry. Minnesota lumbering was shifting northward, and Bemidji, with railroad facilities available, rapidly became an important logging center. At first most of the logs were shipped to Brainerd.

²⁰ *Thirteen Towns*, December 29, 1893; *Cass County Pioneer*, October 4, 1896; *Pioneer*, May 5, August 18, September 1, December 8, 1898.

erd; soon, however, large sawmills were built in Bemidji. But the rise of the exciting and picturesque lumber industry should not be permitted to obscure the significance of the preceding decade of pioneer beginnings. Institutional foundations, the beginnings of agriculture and the tourist industry, the courage and optimism of the early settlers, and the location of the county seat constitute the heritage modern Bemidji received from the pioneer community of the 1890's.



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