

MINNESOTA HISTORY

VOLUME 24 • PUBLISHED IN JUNE 1943 • NUMBER 2

Chatfield: An Essay in Economic History

Margaret Snyder

LEWIS MUMFORD has protested against history which deals with "legal abstractions like Individual and State . . . or with bare economic abstractions like the Capitalist Class or the Proletarians." His *Culture of the Cities* is an admirable illustration of history concerning itself with "life as it was lived in the concrete, in regions and cities and villages."¹ Chatfield, a small Minnesota town on the borders of Fillmore and Olmsted counties, affords rich material for the investigation of that concrete life in a community which might be regarded as a Middletown in reverse, a little town that didn't grow up. One is quickly convinced that it is impossible to make sense about the town itself without taking into consideration the countryside to which it is so inextricably bound. Town and country influence each other in more ways than can be discussed herein; persons move from one to another and back again for residence, for business, for all the social and cultural interchange which clothes the economic processes in that color and variety by which we apprehend our individual lives.

When the townsite of Chatfield was platted in 1854, on land belonging to Thomas B. Twiford and Grove W. Willis, there was already, according to unverified tradition, a sparse scattering of settlement in the vicinity. The village was incorporated in 1857, and the federal land office was located there from 1856 to 1861.²

¹ Lewis L. Mumford, *Culture of the Cities*, 10 (New York, 1938).

² The original plat of Chatfield is in the office of the register of deeds at Preston. See also the records of the Chatfield village clerk for 1857-87, in the possession of the

The town had both east-west and north-south stage service at an early date, and it was confidently expected that railroads would follow the routes of the stage lines, making Chatfield a great city. The abortive Root River Railroad Company, chartered in 1855, with Twiford among its directors, was the first of a long line of unrealized hopes. As late as 1917 a number of local men were interested in the promotion of an electric railway for the region.³

The second railroad attempt came in 1857, when the Root River Valley and Southern Minnesota Railroad Company was incorporated to build part of a system planned on the strength of a four-million-acre land grant from Congress. Great local hopes and very substantial local support were called out by the undertaking, but all Chatfield had to show for its enthusiasm was a strip of grading, remnants of which still are visible south of town along the river. The Root River Valley was one of the roads in which the notorious Selah Chamberlain of Cleveland held heavy interests, and it is possible that some of his claims against the state were based on grading this particular strip.⁴

Eventually a group of local men, including Ignatius F. O'Ferrall, George H. Haven, Milo White, and Sam T. Dickson, set themselves to build a railroad of their own. The Chatfield Railway Company was incorporated on April 27, 1878, with authority to build from Chatfield "to a point of junction with the Winona and St. Peter Railway in the County of Olmsted," thence to the Southern Minnesota Railroad, and on "in a southerly direction" to "the south line of the State of Minnesota." Only the twelve miles of single track necessary to connect with the Winona and St. Peter were ever built, and

Root River State Bank at Chatfield; the text of the bill incorporating the village, in the *Chatfield Republican* for April 4, 1857; and the order for the removal of the land office, in the *Chatfield Democrat* for September 7, 1861.

³ *Democrat*, October 3, 1858; Rasmus S. Saby, "Railroad Legislation in Minnesota, 1849 to 1875," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 15: 116; minutes of the Chatfield Commercial Club, January 16, February 26, 1917, in the possession of Debs T. Lake of Chatfield.

⁴ Interview with George A. Haven, October, 1942; William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 2: 42, 3: 423 (St. Paul, 1924, 1926); *Democrat*, November 8, December 15, 1856, March 14, September 11, 1857, November 13, 27, 1867, February 20, June 12, November 20, 1868. All interviews cited are with residents of Chatfield and were recorded by the writer.

the ownership and operation of the road were soon turned over to the Chicago and North Western Railway, which absorbed the earlier Winona and St. Peter. Two "accommodations," combining freight and passengers, ran in and out of Chatfield daily until 1893, when a third was added to take care of the unprecedentedly heavy traffic incident to the World's Columbian Exposition at Chicago. Extra freight trains were sent about once a week as they were needed to haul out accumulations of grain and livestock taken to the Chatfield market. During the First World War the service was cut to two trains a day. Since then successive inroads of bus and truck service have reduced the trains to three a week, which arrive "whenever they feel like it" and have not carried passengers for a period of about ten years.⁵

Chatfield's population has shown interesting trends. In 1857 it numbered 577; in 1860 the census showed 866 inhabitants; ten years later there were 1,661, the greatest number ever reported. By 1880 the figure had fallen to 1,166, a curious circumstance in a decade which saw an increase of nearly nine per cent in the rural population of Fillmore and Olmsted counties. The official number remained close to the 1880 figure up to 1940, though local claims were larger; signs along the highway in the 1930's proclaimed that "Fourteen Hundred Friendly Folks Welcome You." Surprisingly enough, the 1940 census showed a population of 1,640; unofficial local estimates appear to indicate that a rather small proportion of these were "reliefers" who came into town as a result of the depression. Since then the demands of army service and of war industry have taken a good many people out of the town, but no reliable figures are available on that point.⁶

Various regional origins have entered into the population. Of the 489 native-born adults recorded in the village itself in the 1860 census, 125 were born in New York state, 102 in the New England states,

⁵ *Democrat*, May 12, 1878, June 23, 1893; *Chatfield News-Democrat*, May 14, 1917; *Chatfield News*, April 2, 1942. See also the letter books of G. H. Haven for the years from 1879 to 1881, in the possession of George A. Haven of Chatfield.

⁶ An unofficial census taken by Edward B. Eddy, surveyor and engineer, is in the *Democrat* for January 17, 1857. See also *United States Census, 1870, Population, 178; 1880, Population, 66; 1940, Population, 1: 542.*

31 in Pennsylvania, and the rest in 17 different states. Of the 134 foreign-born adults, 64 came from Ireland, 18 from England, 14 from Germany, and the rest from Canada, Norway, Scotland, Austria, Poland, and Switzerland. The numbers of Bohemians, Norwegians, and Irish increased considerably in the years following 1860. Personal report and observation indicate that the past thirty years have seen a considerable displacement of old Yankee stock by second-generation German families from Wisconsin. A recent check of population origins represented in the high school indicates a marked preponderance of Irish blood, with German a close second, and Yankee stock trailing as a distant third.⁷

What did these people live on, or by? Speculation in land was inevitably an important element in the economics of the land office town. The *Republican* for November 15, 1857, carried the advertising of no less than twelve land agents, six lawyers, and three engineers and surveyors, all of whom were concerned in one way or another with the transfer of land titles. The same paper advertises four dry-goods and grocery stores, a hardware store, a watch-repair shop, a boot and shoe shop, two hotels, and a livery stable. There were also a brickyard, two sawmills, a shingle mill, and a flour mill. A description of the community in the *Chatfield Democrat* for September 11, 1857, presents an even more extensive list, which includes three physicians, a "cabinet factory," five master carpenters, three master masons, three bootmakers, a carriage and wagon works, and a total of four hotels. The same account reports the mercantile business as amounting to "\$300,000 per annum average sales," a figure that is more likely an exuberant forecast than a sober record of actual business transacted. Only a month later the *Democrat* admits that, thanks to the bank crashes reported in all the papers, money "may and very probably will remain a scarce article," but it assures its readers that

⁷ The manuscript schedules of the Minnesota census for 1860 and 1870, in which the names and nativity of the individual residents of the village are given, are in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society. Only adults have been considered in this calculation, though interesting migration patterns are reflected in the recorded birth-places of successive members of any given family. Ninety-three Chatfield high school students were consulted in September, 1942, as to the nativity of their four grandparents, with results showing 129 Irish, 108 German, and only 67 Yankee grandparents.

careful management will pull them all through, and now that "the bubbles have burst . . . we know what they are worth."⁸

The great source of wealth for all the countryside was wheat. John Kadlets took with him sixteen hundred dollars, with which he bought, some time in the 1860's, an eighty-acre farm. The first year he raised a wheat crop which brought him the whole sum he had paid for his farm. William Murphy, who arrived with his parents from Indiana in 1856, said of the country in the 1860's: "Wheat, wheat, wheat, that was all you could see around here. All you had to do was sow it on top of the ground. I remember one time when they got the wheat sowed on a ten-acre patch and it stormed before they could drag it. Then before it got dry enough to work, the wheat sprouted and came up, and they had a good crop out of it." He said a man with a quarter section would plant it all in wheat except for enough oats to feed his horses. Once, when he was hauling wheat to Winona, he could see sixty-five teams on the stretch of road through Burns' Valley, all drawing wheat to Winona. The editor of the *Democrat* reported that he counted a hundred and ten wagons of wheat going into Winona by the road on which he left that city one day in May of 1868.⁹

Statistical confirmation of these personal accounts is available in the reports of the Minnesota state commissioner of statistics, whose tabulations show also the decline of wheat raising. In 1870 Fillmore County had 191,624 acres under cultivation and produced 1,997,950 bushels of wheat, with a population of 24,894. Ten years later 231,093 acres of farmland produced only 1,079,851 bushels of wheat, although the population of the county was 28,162. By 1890 the area under cultivation had dropped to 206,030, and a mere 137,577 bushels of wheat was produced; the population had dropped to 25,966. Comparable figures for Olmsted County tell much the same story.¹⁰

The wheat buying of the bonanza days provoked many a sharp rivalry. As early as 1856 the *Democrat* was publishing wheat prices,

⁸ *Democrat*, October 24, 1857.

⁹ Interview with William W. Murphy, April, 1940; *Democrat*, May 30, 1868.

¹⁰ Minnesota Commissioner of Statistics, *Reports*, 1870, p. 43, 45, 49; 1880, p. 32, 44, 87; 1890, p. 32, 46, 107.

"corrected weekly by A. Haven, General Dealer." It also quoted prices in Winona, La Crosse, Milwaukee, and Chicago, and sometimes added the New York price as well. The only local market, however, was for barter or credit in the local stores. Augustus Haven and Milo White advertised regularly their readiness to handle wheat "at highest market prices," but with no mention of cash payments. It remained for James M. Cussons, in partnership with Sam T. Dickson of the Nonpareil Mill, to pay the first cash prices for wheat delivered to the mill. In 1862 Cussons interested a Winona firm in furnishing capital for the purchase of wheat and the subsequent shipment of flour instead of unmilled wheat. Not long afterward Milo White adopted the policy of paying cash for wheat, and from 1873 to 1889 Augustus Haven acted as paymaster for the "wheat tickets" issued by an agent who bought wheat in Chatfield even before a railroad reached the town.¹¹

More spectacular dealings in wheat were carried out by Jason C. Easton, who lived in Chatfield for more than thirty years. As early as 1869 he and L. G. Holley advertised a partnership as general commission merchants in Chicago and Chatfield. In 1872 Easton signed a remarkably profitable contract with the Southern Minnesota Railroad, of which he was then the chief stockholder. By its terms he was to furnish the capital and buy wheat at each station on the Southern Minnesota at the Milwaukee price minus the freight charges and a small margin for operating costs. In return the Southern Minnesota gave him the price he paid plus all his expenses, ten per cent of his capital, and a commission of one cent a bushel. Easton was able to offer the highest price for wheat because the freight rates he paid were just sixty-six per cent of the rates paid by independent buyers. So successful was the contract that Easton handled a third of all wheat shipped in the state. One of the first anti-monopoly actions tried before the Minnesota Supreme Court was a suit to recover the

¹¹ James M. Cussons, "Reminiscences," in *American Miller*, 31:665 (August, 1904); *Democrat*, January 5, 1856, May 10, 1862. A "Wheat Book," now in the possession of Mr. Haven, confirms the story of the slow decline in wheat production; purchases totaling \$36,234.30 in 1874 dwindled to \$1,104.43 in 1889, the year Augustus Haven gave up his store and took over the Root River State Bank.

freight-rate differential for the independent buyers, who won the decision.¹²

Inevitably the abundant water power of the Root River and its tributaries drew millers into an area so rich in wheat. The first Chatfield mill was the Nonpareil, owned by Sam T. Dickson and constructed by Norman K. Culver, a New York state millwright who had just finished an elevator on the Illinois Central at Galena. The construction involved a race half a mile long; traces of it and the mill's foundations are still visible just north of the West Chatfield road. Three years later a sawmill a mile north of the town square was converted into a flour mill by Twiford and E. G. Edwards. The *Democrat* referred to the two mills as "worth \$125,000." In 1875 the firm of Dickson, Easton, and Johnson built a "model mill" two and a half miles south of the village at the juncture of the North and Midway branches of the Root River. Its six run of stones could turn out a hundred and fifty barrels of flour each twenty-four hours, and a considerable village sprang up about it to house the millers and the coopers who worked there. But this mill made no such profits as the first had seen, for wheat rust cut down wheat production and the mill lay idle a good share of the time.¹³

Mr. Adolph Pavlish, long a millwright in Chatfield and still a resident there, reports an amusing incident. One day in 1884, when none of the mills of the region were prospering, he walked past the Easton bank just in time to see Easton and his two partners flip a silver dollar to decide who should take full title to their joint property. The chance fell to Dickson, but he appears to have made little profit from the transaction, for the great wheat days were past. Yet when Mr. Pavlish arrived in Chatfield in 1882, a fugitive from military service under the Hapsburg rulers of his native Bohemia, sixteen mills were operating within twenty miles of Chatfield.¹⁴

¹² *Democrat*, February 13, 1869; Henrietta M. Larson, *The Wheat Market and the Farmer in Minnesota*, 87-89 (New York, 1926).

¹³ Interviews with Charles M. Culver and G. A. Haven, April, 1940, and with Thaddeus M. Pease, October, 1942; *Democrat*, September 11, 1857, November 28, 1868, May 22, 1875, May 27, 1876; *History of Fillmore County*, 527 (Minneapolis, 1882).

¹⁴ Mr. Pavlish's statement of the number of mills in the vicinity is confirmed by Cussons, in the *American Miller*, 31:332 (April, 1904).

The most famous of the sixteen was the Elmira Mill, a mile northwest of town. It was first operated as a flouring mill by Twiford and Edwards, but it earned its fame in the hands of Cussons, who went to Chatfield as Dickson's partner. His left in 1865, returned for a second three-year partnership with Dickson in 1868, and in 1876 bought out Dickson's existing interest in the Elmira Mill and ran it for a period of thirty years or more. When he began to operate it, the mill had only two run of stones and ground only grists. In 1887 he installed a "one-break system" and took wheat only in exchange, no longer running each farmer's grain as an individual grist, but turning out a uniform grade of flour. The excellence of his flour became so widely recognized that farmers transported their wheat forty miles to exchange it for Cussons' flour. In 1893 it was awarded one of the Columbian Exposition's bronze medals for excellence of color, strength, granulation, and purity. Thereafter the demand became so great that Cussons bought the Nonpareil Mill and installed his process there, but the mill burned a few months later and Cussons removed to Stewartville. Part of the Elmira Mill still stands, together with substantial portions of the race. The upper floor is used now as a granary and storehouse, but on the lower level fragments of the old machinery can be seen, and the gaping cracks in the hand-hewn timbers supporting the framework still hold the dry smell of flour.¹⁵

The fame of individual excellence, together with an active campaign for the use of improved seed wheat, enabled the Cussons mill to withstand for twenty years the trend which was drawing the milling business to Minneapolis. Cussons evinced an unusual awareness of the connection between the breakdown of local economic autonomy and the incipient imperialism of the 1890's, and his attempts to withstand the increasing tendency to economic centralization suggest a vision larger than that of simple self-interest.¹⁶

Yet Cussons was unable to turn the tide. During the 1880's four

¹⁵ Cussons, in *American Miller*, 31:751, 1005 (September, December, 1904); *Democrat*, January 9, April 3, July 23, October 21, 1869. A list of the mills that received awards given by the World's Columbian Exposition is in the *North Western Miller*, 35:604 (October 27, 1893).

¹⁶ Cussons, in *Preston Republican*, December 31, 1900. See also Cussons' advertisements for seed wheat, in the *Democrat*, March and April, 1889.

millwrights removed from Chatfield to Minneapolis, according to Mr. Pavlish, and after 1905 no more flour was milled in the Chatfield locality. After a winter spent working elsewhere, Mr. Pavlish returned to Chatfield in 1894, where he turned to building houses, a craft at which he had worked intermittently for some years. Later he made small amounts of furniture, first for his own family, then for customers outside Chatfield; most of it has been fashioned from native walnut that he bought as it grew, cutting and curing the wood himself. In somewhat comparable fashion the community of which Chatfield is the center found new bases of prosperity in the extension of already existing activities.¹⁷

As wheat production declined between 1870 and 1890, other crops increased in importance. Fillmore County produced 515,480 bushels of corn in 1869; it grew 926,344 bushels in 1880, and 970,650 in 1890. For Olmsted County the gain was greater, with records of 274,119 bushels in 1869, of 491,042 in 1880, and of 683,978 in 1890. More than a million and a half bushels of oats were produced by the two counties in 1870; the crop amounted to two and three-quarters million bushels in 1890. Barley production in 1870 amounted to 231,270 bushels for the two counties; in 1890 it came to more than a million and a half bushels; and in 1910 it was nearly two and three-quarters million bushels. In 1926 the Chatfield elevators shipped 53,222 bushels; local pride has it that only one shipping point in the state exceeded the Chatfield figures in that year, but there are no figures available to support such a claim.¹⁸

The figures do show, however, that the grain shipments of 1926 were higher than for any other year covered by the state grain inspection department reports, which deal with the period from 1923 to 1941. The total was 76,877 bushels, all but 2,500 of which were shipped by Lynch and Delaney. Will Lynch built up a consistently increasing business that reached considerably beyond the boundaries of Chatfield's normal trade area, and when he left the business in 1927 its

¹⁷ Interview with A. Pavlish, April, 1940.

¹⁸ Commissioner of Statistics, *Reports*, 1870, p. 46, 47, 48; 1890, p. 36, 37, 38; John A. Whaley, supervisor of local grain warehouses for the grain inspection department of the Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, to the author, April 10, 1940.

volume shrank by a third. It continued to diminish until in 1938-39 only 25,061 bushels of grain of all kinds were handled in Chatfield, and an undetermined part of that was shipped in rather than out.¹⁹ Impersonal factors were, of course, at work in this great decrease, but it is clear that the activity of an energetic, likeable personality contributed greatly to the expansion of the small grain business in the 1920's. It is a story that appears over and over in the community's history. Individual leadership has led to clearly discernible changes in the community pattern.

Individual leadership probably played a minor part in the increase of cultivated hay production in the two counties from 18,364 tons in 1870 to 197,302 tons in 1910. In the same period the number of cattle increased from 16,566 to 54,241 for the two counties combined. Fillmore County produced 420,693 pounds of butter in 1880, according to an item appearing in the *Report* of the commissioner of statistics; in 1910 the record shows 868,936 pounds of butter, plus 1,070,904 pounds of butterfat.²⁰

Before the building of creameries, butter bulked large as a barter commodity in the local stores. Wonderful tales are told about the tricks of the trade. It was not unknown for a ten or twelve pound roll to reveal a stone in its center when it was cut. One ingenious buttermaker lined her pound molds with fresh new butter and filled the center with a rancid mess more like whey cheese than butter; the trick was not discovered until the eleven pounds had been "traded out" and the storekeeper had no recourse. These and other stories told by Henry Silsbee, who spent a good share of his ninety-three years as a clerk in and a proprietor of Chatfield stores, suggest that pure-food laws may have been needed before the appearance of food-processing corporations.²¹

A creamery was set up by a group of Chatfield businessmen in the early 1880's. It had a somewhat uncertain career until 1889, when

¹⁹ Whaley to the author, April 10, 1940.

²⁰ Commissioner of Statistics, *Reports*, 1871, p. 53, 56, 58; 1881, p. 51; *United States Census*, 1910, *Agriculture*, 6:832, 840, 842.

²¹ Interview with Henry Silsbee, August, 1942. The *Democrat* for July 3, 1869, reports that three tons of butter were shipped out the preceding week by a local firm.

the Chatfield Co-operative Creamery Association was organized and took over the equipment. Its records show a steady increase in the volume and value of the business. In 1891 the complete expenses, including disbursements to the patrons, amounted to only \$7,906.31; yet, in the same year, a Chatfield traveler, Mrs. G. H. Haven, was served Chatfield butter at a hotel in Kingston, Jamaica. In 1927 a creamery building costing \$20,000 was completed, and two years later butter sales reached their highest sum, \$194,430. The figure dropped to \$84,385 in 1932, but in succeeding years it grew steadily and it has totaled well above the hundred thousand dollar mark every year since 1933.²²

Only part of the stock raised in the community has been dairy cattle. Sheep have had considerable importance. J. C. Easton imported a flock of Shropshires, together with a Scotch shepherd, whose bare knees and kilts and consumption of oatmeal were inestimably precious to the sensation-hungry folks of the community. At one time Easton is supposed to have devoted three thousand acres to sheep raising, acres that came into his possession by the opprobrious route of mortgage foreclosures. His flocks were the largest but not the only ones in the area. Enough wool was produced to support a woolen mill for almost thirty years; its blankets and cloth were shipped as far as New York, and it carded the wool that many farm women knitted into warm socks and mittens for their families.²³

Market stock has long been important in the area economy. Dressed hogs were an early cash crop, and there again Easton figures. One winter after he invested unusually large sums in dressed hogs, the weather turned unseasonably warm and threatened to spoil the entire lot. Fortunately, however, the thermometer dropped and the Easton investment was saved. An early butcher who sent many wagonloads of dressed hogs to La Crosse before railroads were built into the state

²² Timothy Halloran, *History of Chatfield*, 18 (Chatfield 1902); minutes of the Chatfield Co-operative Creamery Association, in the office of the Chatfield Creamery; *Democrat*, March 17, 1893.

²³ Interviews with Mr. Pavlish and Mr. Murphy, April, 1940, and with Mr. Pease, August, 1942; *Democrat*, July 2, 1864, December 11, 1868, March 9, 1869; Mrs. Edith M. Wright, "Reminiscences," in *News*, September 3, 10, 1942. See also an account book for 1873-89, in the possession of Will McKeown of Chatfield.

was Levi Bauer, whose Chatfield-bred son Aleck was one of the founders of Bauer and Black. For a number of years W. L. Crawford bought stock for Bauer and he later shipped livestock on his own account. In 1894 the local newspaper reported the shipment of two or three cars a week throughout the fall and winter.²⁴

Since 1914 the chief stock buyer has shipped out of Chatfield each year well over a million dollars' worth of cattle, sheep, and hogs. In addition, a co-operative livestock shipping association has sold from \$69,000 to \$252,000 worth annually, its best year being 1919-20. Again the story of a community enterprise can be told largely in terms of one man's devoted energy; it remains to be seen whether the recent death of Anthony Sharpe, manager of the association since its inception in 1913, will mean lowered effectiveness in the organization. Sharpe himself estimated that the association forced a general advance of from twenty-five to thirty-three per cent in prices paid by private buyers. An interesting footnote on the function of the association lies in the fact that its chief expenditures, aside from the manager's salary and equipment for the stockyards, have been for the annual picnic.²⁵ Thus do the impulses of simple human sociability invade the province of economic man.

Merchants have been numerous and essential in the community life. Milo White, who opened his store in 1853, conducted Chatfield's longest-lived mercantile business. The grocery and drygoods departments continued in the hands of a nephew until 1928, and the clothing business he started still flourishes under a man who clerked for him. He sold everything from sugar and coffee to fur coats and farm implements, and his policy was to buy anything the country produced, including raw furs. He prided himself on being the friend of the farmer. Evidently the farmers accepted him in that role, since he acted as purchasing agent for an experiment in co-operative

²⁴ Interview with Edward Crowley, August, 1942; *Democrat*, October 10, 1868, January 2, 1869, September 27, 1873, April 17, 1875. Throughout 1894 the *Democrat* published weekly reports on the amount of grain and livestock that was being shipped out of Chatfield.

²⁵ Interviews with Anthony Sharpe, April, 1940, and with Charles F. Farrell, September, 1942; minutes and annual reports of the Chatfield Co-operative Livestock Association, in the possession of Ira M. Lambert, its secretary.

buying which the local Grange undertook in 1873. He served in the state legislature and was a representative in Congress from his district for two terms, conducting his campaigns on his "Farmer's Friend" slogan.²⁶

Another very successful mercantile establishment was the Haven Brown Store. Augustus Haven opened the business in 1856 and on his death in 1863 his son, George H. Haven, took it over. He continued in it until 1889, when he bought the Root River State Bank, founded by J. C. Easton. Each spring and fall G. H. Haven went to New York to buy new stock, and his advertisements in the *Democrat* changed rather oftener than some others, which often ran in the same form year after year.²⁷

Today Chatfield has a name for lower grocery prices than any of the neighboring towns. One of its grocery stores is a member of a chain, another is one of a half dozen operated in as many towns by members of one family, a third belongs to a merchants' co-operative buying association, and two have been set up in the past two to five years by people with no previous Chatfield connections. Only one is operated as an independent concern by a man of long standing in the community, and he is Irish, not of the Yankee stock which dominated the business of the town in the first twenty or more years. One of the old stores that flourished for sixty years was sold four years ago, and the surviving son of the founder is now the town marshal; another lingered for a time as a small lingerie shop in one corner of a building now entirely taken over by a furniture store. There is no longer a jewelry store in the town; the meat markets have been absorbed into the grocery stores and use only packing-house products instead of locally grown meats dressed in the local slaughterhouse.

²⁶ Interview with P. H. Laivell, September, 1942. Almost every issue of the *Democrat* up to 1928 carries an advertisement for White's business; his first offer of "Cash for Wheat" was published on April 3, 1863. Mrs. Blanche Laird of Chatfield, whose husband was master of the local Grange for several years, told the writer of the organization's venture into co-operative buying.

²⁷ Interview with Mr. Haven, August, 1942; *Democrat*, October 19, 1861. The records of the Haven business, in the possession of the family, are unusually complete. They extend from an invoice of Augustus Haven's stock just before he left Galena for Chatfield, through an elaborate series of ledgers and daybooks that cover every detail of the business to 1889.

There is one blacksmith shop instead of the three or four there used to be. A shoe store survives, heir to part of the Milo White tradition. Twenty-five years ago Chatfield had two tailoring establishments, one of which carried a rather good quality of women's clothing; now there is no tailor, and the only women's wear is an inexpensive line handled by two of the general stores. The better trade goes to Rochester, only eighteen miles away, or to the Twin Cities, eighty-five miles distant — mere trifles in an automotive world before rationing.

A somewhat different aspect of this delocalizing process is illustrated in the story of the public utilities. In 1897 the Chatfield Electric Light and Power Company was organized with local capital, and the old North Branch Mill was used to produce electricity. In the first years the current was turned off at ten o'clock, except on gala occasions when a hostess giving a really important party paid a dollar to have the lights kept on till midnight. When the franchise was renewed in 1916, it required that service be continuous from five in the morning to midnight, "except during the daytime Sundays," and until specified new equipment could be installed. The installation was to be completed not later than May 1, 1917, and thereafter the service was to be continuous "except between daylight and sundown Sundays and except when closed down for necessary repairs." By 1930 the company's stock was concentrated in the hands of two persons, who sold it to the Interstate Power Company, a Delaware corporation which now owns and operates the system, maintaining a branch office in Chatfield.²⁸

The story of the telephone service also is one of local initiative, spurred by an individual with imagination and directive energy. George R. Thompson set up a unit that later fed the growth of a nation-wide corporation, in this case Northwestern Bell, a subsidiary of the American Telephone and Telegraph Company. Even the development of bus service followed the same pattern. Twenty-odd years ago a local man drove his big Cadillac back and forth between

²⁸ *Democrat*, April 29, 1897; *News*, April 16, 1916, July 9, 1936; interview with the Honorable Joseph Underleak, August, 1942. The records of the Chatfield Light and Power Company up to its absorption by the Interstate Power Company are in Mr. Underleak's possession.

Rochester and Chatfield, partly on schedule, partly by special arrangement to meet individual or group needs; now the Jefferson Transportation Company provides the service which connects Chatfield with the Greyhound system.²⁹

One more illustration of the process is afforded by the local fire insurance companies. The Security Mutual was organized in 1898 by Charles L. Thurber, who after some years of partnership in a general store spent three years as traveling representative for the Albert Lea Insurance Company. Gathered dissatisfaction with insurance rates led a group of Chatfield businessmen to support Thurber's proposals for a mutual company, which should return to the insured the profits accruing to the business. The enterprise prospered and within a few years fathered a capital stock company that had a unique combination of profit sharing with profit taking. This, the Minnesota Fire Insurance Company, was so successful that in the late 1920's it attracted the attention of an eastern corporation, which purchased the charter as much for the glittering promises held out as for the cash. But the promises failed after 1929's Black Friday, and the charter was allowed to lapse. It took some dextrous prestidigitation to rescue anything from the debacle. The dormant charter of Northwest Underwriters, an agency set up in 1909 to combine land speculation with insurance activities, was revived and used as the legal basis for salvaging the business of Minnesota Fire. Northwest Underwriters is now the agency, in Minnesota and three bordering states, for General American Companies of Seattle. In 1940 its volume of business was larger than that of any other general agency of the national organization. Security Mutual retains its independent status, being licensed in seven states. Each company is managed by a son of Charles Thurber, founder of both companies.³⁰

The mail incident to the activities of the insurance companies was

²⁹ In an interview in September, 1942, Mrs. George R. Thompson described the ridicule that was heaped on the idea of a telephone exchange for Chatfield. The city ordinance authorizing the telephone exchange and system appears in the *News* for August 5, 1897.

³⁰ *Democrat*, September 13, 1894; interviews with Lewis M. and Herschel P. Thurber, August, 1942; minutes of the local insurance companies, in the Chatfield offices of the Security Mutual and Northwest Underwriters.

largely responsible for raising the Chatfield post office from third to second-class rating in 1916. The office building erected in the flush of pre-crash expectation has proved a profitable investment for the expanding business; it houses two doctors, a dentist, and the telephone exchange, besides the twenty-five or more employees of the insurance companies.

Here are sketched the economic patterns underlying the life of a community which has retained, through ninety years, its individual character as a country town living in intimate friendship with the farm land about it. Through the community's culture have flowed the currents of the nation's culture, in countless aspects left untouched in this paper; here widely significant types of activity and relationship are exhibited on a scale small enough to permit one to grasp them in concrete detail. The economic process, on which attention has been focused in this paper, is only the framework of a story rich in human variety and not devoid of instruction for those concerned with the quality of local and individual life in an increasingly centralized world.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).