
THE EDITOR'S PAGE

AFTON ROAD NAMES

Evelyn Bolles Grant

IN THE FOLLOWING report a member of a pioneer family in the lower St. Croix River Valley discusses a situation by no means limited to Afton or the St. Croix area. The problem exists in many places.—Ed.

OLDER CITIZENS of Afton Township (now incorporated with Afton Village) can remember when people were not obsessed with speed and there was time, while moving quietly along our lovely winding roads, to observe and enjoy the beauty of our countryside, the hills and valleys, the meandering streams, the lakes, and the incomparable St. Croix River. It was possible to walk or ride with pleasure.

Older citizens, too, might be forgiven for wishing that street names were less prosaic than "15th Street South" or "Afton Boulevard South." My memory goes back to a period when many of our most interesting and historic local roads had no official names but were known only by the name of a prominent resident, a church, a school, or a stream. Two roads were called Upper Creek Road and Lower Creek Road because they paralleled two branches of our principal watercourse. It seems that there had been an attempt in the distant past to name some of the roads more or less officially, as evidenced by a few rusty signs which have become collectors' items.

The seminameless status of our roads existed until 1961 when the Afton Township Board appointed a committee of residents, of which I was one, to name them

officially. I was pleased that the other members shared my interest in honoring the early settlers and in preserving the history of this part of the St. Croix Valley. Therefore, we gave some roads the names of settlers and delved into the past for names that the pioneers and Indians gave to trails or cartways. The board purchased road signs, and they were put up during the fall of 1962. The residents enjoyed them.

But in March, 1968, Washington County officials adopted the Uniform Street Naming and Property Numbering System proposed by the Seven County Metropolitan District, leaving acceptance to individual local units. Afton Township accepted the plan, which went into effect in 1970, giving each residence a number and designating the roads alphabetically and numerically. (To the north, Marine, for one, rejected the plan.—Ed.) The new road names, which admittedly facilitate fire and police protection and commercial deliveries, "must have been drawn out of a hat," as one irate citizen observed, for some names had no relation whatever to indigenous history or tradition.

Take, for instance, Cooney Road which the township's appointed committee had named for James Cooney, an English immigrant who settled near Afton in 1864. He was the father of one of the township's most celebrated and best-loved citizens, Tom Cooney. Under the Capitol Grid Plan, Cooney Road became Fiftieth Street South.

Bissell Mounds Road, named for Elijah Bissell, whose claim included the unusual Bissell Mounds, became Fifteenth Street South. Haskell Road was named for Joseph Haskell, a Maine Yankee who in 1840 settled on a claim that is said to have been the site of the first ground-breaking and farming operation in Minnesota. Under the Grid Plan, Haskell Road became Thirtieth Street South.

Fahlstrom Road was named for Jacob Fahlstrom, gen-

erally recognized as the first Swede to settle in Minnesota but also at various times during his long life a fur trader, mail carrier, farmer, and a Methodist missionary to the Indians and early settlers. He married Margaret Bungo, an Indian girl from a community of Chippewa living near Valley Creek. Fahlstrom Road, which either went through or skirted their claim acquired in 1850, is now officially Tenth Street South.

Bolles Mill Road was named for Lemuel Bolles, the author's great-great-uncle, an enterprising New Englander who in 1843 built (with Indian labor) the first privately owned flour mill north of Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. His mill was operated by water power from the stream which bears his name. Bolles was also appointed the first postmaster for this area. Bolles Mill Road is now officially Putnam Boulevard, a name that has nothing to do with either Bolles or the mill.

Fortunately, some historic names have been kept, except to add "South" to them. One is Indian Trail, the route by which first the Indians and later many white settlers traveled to the St. Croix River. It was on this trail that Fahlstrom built his log cabin, which still stands although the logs are now covered with siding. Another

name left intact is Trading Post Road, originally the path to the trading post at Point Douglas for Indians and early settlers.

Some names would have meant something if correctly spelled. Neal Avenue, for example, could have been spelled Neill and then would have honored Reverend Edward D. Neill, who contributed much to the cultural foundations of Minnesota.

The change in road designations outraged the history-minded of Afton. They found that their best alternative was to purchase, by voluntary subscription, at least two signs marked "Historic" to preserve the traditional names of the seven roads mentioned above. The Washington County surveyor kindly installed these below the official grid signs, but unfortunately several have already disappeared.

We hope that visitors who appreciate the St. Croix Valley's scenery and colorful past will move gently along our winding ways, will enjoy the loveliness that we still preserve here, and will, upon seeing the historic signs still remaining, give a thought to the days and to the intrepid people they commemorate.

BOOK REVIEWS

A History of Iowa. By Leland L. Sage.

(Ames, Iowa State University Press, 1974. xii, 376 p. \$9.95.)

IOWA, Minnesota's southern neighbor, has long needed a one-volume history of the Hawkeye State. During the past decade adequate and comprehensive narratives of the two Dakotas were written by Elwyn B. Robinson and by Herbert S. Schell, each of whom, using broad strokes supported by specific examples, offered both students and general readers enlightenment and perhaps even entertainment. Alice E. Smith, in 1973, published a superb history of Wisconsin, covering the years of exploration to the achievement of statehood. Hers is the first of a proposed six-volume history of the Gopher State's neighbor to the east. Now comes Mr. Sage's eagerly awaited *A History of Iowa*.

Mr. Sage, professor emeritus, University of Northern Iowa, originally took as his professional field modern European history, but for years interested himself in Iowa history with emphasis upon the political. His biography of William Boyd Allison, long-time congressman and senator, was subtitled "A Study in Practical Politics." It is not surprising, then, that his narrative of Iowa's development should follow established pat-

terns of interest. Unlike Mr. Robinson and Mr. Schell, Mr. Sage devotes relatively little space to social, cultural, and intellectual forces, although it must be admitted that now and again he alludes to them. He himself says, "If the book seems heavily weighted on the side of politics, perhaps a second look will show that I am writing about economic and social politics, using an account of the political processes as a vehicle for carrying other aspects of history."

Viewed from what the author intended to do, the volume achieves its purpose. He does a competent job when discussing agrarian radicalism, the silver problem, and populism, issues which agitated Iowans toward the close of the nineteenth century. He is, perhaps, even more skillful when dissecting the various and complex threads which, when woven together, became the rope of progressivism. Speaking of Albert Baird Cummins, the "front man" of Iowa progressives, Mr. Sage writes that "It is at least a defensible speculation that the Old Guard of Iowa politics drove this brilliant and magnetic leader of men into progressivism, much as their counterparts a generation earlier had driven James Baird Weaver into Populism."

Economic and agricultural historians may well be interested in Mr. Sage's discussion of the Herbert Hoover era of financial distress and general economic depression. Milo Reno,



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