



Harvesting the Virgin Pine Forests and the Coming of the Railroad.

Becker and Crow Wing counties, in fact all over Northern Minnesota.”

He later wrote, *“From Wadena 200 miles to the northern boundary of the state, and 300 miles the other way east and west, there was solid forest most of the way. Lately I was cruising in Northern Minnesota. I stood on a high hill and wondered that men had time to destroy a world which took God’s nature thousands of years to create. Much of the country will remain a cut-over waste for a hundred years, at least.”*

The early history of northeast Otter Tail County and west central Wadena County dates back to 1876 when this region was first surveyed by the government. According to history, it was a very wet season; there was a 20-inch rainfall in two weeks time. The surveyors platted the Red Eye Valley that cuts across Butler and Paddock townships. The valley itself was mostly open land with willow brush and blue joint hay. Oak and other hardwoods grew on the hillsides of the valley, and one mile south was the edge of a vast white pine forest that covered thousands of acres, and to the north, more forest. John A. Raycroft, who worked with the surveyors that year, is thought to be the first white man to become a permanent settler in the Paddock/Blowers area.

The Northern Pacific Railroad was built through Wadena and Otter Tail counties in 1871, and towns began to spring up almost immediately along the line. The railroad would bring many immigrants here. Many of the first immigrants traveled to New York Mills, where they left the train and journeyed by foot and wagon to their homesteads in the vicinity of Sebek.

In 1883 construction began on an extension or the “K Line” that ran from Sauk Centre to Eagle Bend and reached north to Park Rapids, but it was not until 1891 that the first trains began running over the new rail line. The first passenger train stopped in Sebek in 1891. That was also the year the Great Northern Railway Co. bought out the Wadena and Park Rapids Railway. Sebek was designated “K70” on the

rail line because the town was located 70 miles from the line’s origin. Mile post 70 stood just off the south end of the depot.

The railroad company provided immigrant cars, which were box-cars used by the settlers to transport all their household goods and livestock at a reasonable cost. Trains pulled as many as 40 cars as they rumbled through town. Every consumer item bought, sold, exported, and traded in Sebek could link its way in and out of town via the railroad. The rail line through Sebek was undoubtedly the greatest influence in the growth and settlement of this community.

The Coming of the Settlers

The Homestead Act of 1862 provided 160 acres to any person willing to occupy and cultivate the land for five years. When the settlers reached the Sebek area to begin establishing a homestead, the earliest settlers found heavy forests covering the land, and later ones found stump land left by the early loggers. Both had the back-breaking task of clearing the land for their yards and fields. The tool used by the pioneer farmers was a grub hoe. Some men earned their living by taking contracts to grub land, with prices ranging from \$2 per acre to \$15. The semi-open prairie land was easier to clear and so was settled first, with the hard clearing done at a slower pace later.

The axe rang in the remaining woodlands to clear stumps for farming, followed by hoe scraping against stone in tilling the land for sowing. The early tilling of the soil was performed by stout but lazy oxen, which drew the moldboard plows slowly, yet straight, lumbering left at the command of ‘hee’ and right at ‘haw.’ They were strong creatures, and everyone used them for hauling all kinds of material, but particularly for snaking the big logs to the riverside. As progress marched forward, the horse replaced the ox.

In the summer months, the settlers cleared and broke up more land to raise grain, feed for their livestock, and wheat – which was the main crop and their only cash

crop at the time. Timber products all had to be traded for merchandise at the local store.

By the time the supply of heavy timber began to decrease, it was apparent that this was a natural grass country where clover grew abundantly. Farmers increased their livestock and started in the dairy business in a small way, churning the butter at home and trading it for groceries. Soon there were fertile fields where once stood forests, and the economy started changing from growing wheat to dairying.

E.H. Pelton wrote in 1924: *“I can look back now and see the poor farmers coming into the country. About all they had was a little bundle tied up in a red handkerchief... The government had given them 160 acres of land to homestead but nothing else. For the earliest settlers, it was a battle to survive with barest of necessities.”*

The Wadena Pioneer Journal published a character analysis of the early pioneers of Wadena County in its 50th anniversary edition, dated 1927:

(Continued on Page 16)

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