

A Brief History of Williams

by Marlys Hirst

Williams, Minnesota got its start when the Canadian railway line from Winnipeg to Thunder Bay was built through the area between 1899 and 1900. Two men who worked for the railroad, George Williams and William Mason saw the potential for land development in the region and decided to locate near the new line and stake claims when the proper time came. George William's wife and five children soon joined him and William Mason's father, John Mason Sr. also arrived to look over the area. In 1900 he filed for a homestead on the south side of the railroad tracks and George Williams filed for one north of the tracks. They built log cabins, cut timber and firewood. Other land seekers soon joined them and for a time the little settlement was known as "The Siding". As it grew and a more fitting name was sought, Will Mason and George Williams flipped a coin to see which would be the namesake and George won so the town was named Williams.

Once the railroad line was established and the land was opened for homesteading, the boom was on. Timber could be cut, hauled to settlements along the track and shipped to western markets. Logging companies moved in and established a workforce to harvest the timber. The men needed supplies and businesses sprang up to accommodate both them and the land seekers coming to stake their claims. Churches and schools quickly followed.

John L. Williams started the first store in a little log building near the tracks. Billy Duer bought him out in 1902, and establishing a post office in the store, became the first postmaster. Andy Eckland came to town in 1904 and bought John William's homestead and part interest in the Duer store.

By 1909, Williams, with a population of 150 people, had a new depot, a well-stocked general store, a hotel, law office, sawmill, school, hall and two churches; English Episcopal and Catholic. Merchants Duer and Eckland had sold their store interests to the Meloney Brothers;

timber dealers with vast timber holdings in the territory. Meloney's store operation was short lived, however, as the building was destroyed by fire later that year. Albert Chilgren was the town's first lawyer.

Telephone service in the village was available by 1913. The People's Cooperative Telephone company serving areas south and east of Williams and the Lake of the Woods Telephone Company serving areas north and west of Williams were both started that year and used the same switchboard located in the Levandosky's store. Street lights were soon installed on Main Street and a number of businesses had electricity thanks to small local light plants.

By 1916 there was a thriving business district in Williams. Present were the Lundsten and Company General Store, the Brushey Hotel, Anton Levandosky's General Store and Post Office; J.F. Clark's General Store and Meat Market, Ogden and Flint's Billiard Parlor and Barbershop, J. R. Norris's Lumber and Machinery Company and the First State Bank of Williams with A.W. Atwater as assistant cashier. J.E. West had a bakery and café on Chilgren Avenue and Mr. Filitrault built a blacksmith shop on the west edge of town. With the newly organized Congregational church, the town now had three churches and three hotels; the Brushey, the Victoria and the Farmer's Home. Also in that year, a beautiful new six room school was completed and the town's first newspaper, The Williams Northern Light was started by Sam Sherman.

As the 1920s rolled in, the citizens of Williams decided the town was here to stay and in 1923 Williams took the official step of incorporating into a village. New business ventures this decade included another garage built by Oscar and Helmer Lundsten and sold to F.D. Bard and another grocery store opened by Gordon and John Clark. John and Ernest Gillie bought the garage started by Ogden and Nastrom in 1919 and eventually formed the Gillie and Hall Garage with partner Dan Hall. Sam Sherman sold his newspaper to John R. Norris and son Robert.

New quarters were found for the post office when the former Graceton bank was moved to town and accommodations were secured for the town's law breakers with the acquisition of a jail from the

neighboring village of Spooner. The Brushey Hotel became the Idle Hour and when fire destroyed the Victoria Hotel in 1922, the Lakewood Hotel was built.

The fertile lands surrounding the town were favorable for farming and by the 1930s, sufficient acreage had been cleared to shift from the timber industry to agriculture. The fires of the 1930s and the advent of the tractor both hastened its development. Livestock production also increased and membership in farm organizations grew to support the farmer's needs.

The Northern Farmer's Cooperative Exchange was established in Williams during this period and began handling seed for area farmers. The Exchange cleaned incoming seed to help handle the spread of weeds, an important requirement for farmers attempting to grow certified seed. By the end of the decade the Exchange was marketing area seed under the names of Border King and Northern Master. In the late 1940s, the Exchange built the Williams Elevator and expanded it to include a seed cleaning plant.

In addition to seed crops, grain and dairy, foundation seed potatoes became a principal crop. By 1934, with 19 growers in the region they formed the Lake of the Woods Grower's Association. Potato production increased steadily. In the mid-1960s there were approximately sixty foundation seed potato growers in the quarantine area, producing an average of 200 train carloads per year. The Williams Community Commercial Association was organized in 1954 and began sponsoring an annual Potato Day celebration in October of each year.

The business community expanded to support an agrarian economy and changed with the times. I. N. Dyrdaahl opened the International Harvester dealership, Lundsten's added a John Deere dealership and Marv Nelson started a service station. J. H. Cockrell built a creamery which later was remodeled for a slaughter and meat processing plant. Evenson's opened a café, the Bard Garage became the Fox Theatre, and Ernest Johnson operated a pool hall. With prohibition over, the villages started a municipal liquor store. The school gained a gymnasium and several

classrooms as part of the WPA projects. A new congregation, Bethany Lutheran Church, was organized in 1936 and dedicated their church building in 1941.

The 1950s and 1960s also brought change. Bob Sutherland purchased the locker plant. Marv Nelson and Al Francisco built a new garage and the old station was re-modeled into the Highway Café. Arthur Peterson started a cream station. The People's Cooperative Telephone Company was sold to the Wikstrom Telephone Company. Bob Norris, who had owned the Williams Northern Light since 1926, sold the newspaper to Ed and Joyce Lockhart. The bank closed, selling its interest to bankers from Baudette and Warroad. The school saw declining enrollment and began consolidation with the Baudette School, a process that would continue for several more decades. Another church, the Assembly of God Tabernacle was added to the community.

Although missed by the disastrous forest fire of 1910 that burned through much of the county, Williams had its share for fire disasters. In 1962 a blaze destroyed all of the buildings on the south side of Main Street including the pool hall, Evenson's Café, Bard's Garage and the Bard's home. Only Evenson's rebuilt. In the 1970s fire claimed another portion of Main Street, leveling the Red Owl Store, the Williams Municipal and the cream station. Despite these setbacks to the business district, the people of Williams remained loyal and committed to their community. New businesses and business owners continued to bring life to the town. The newspaper continued to boost for the community receiving several new owners between 1979 and 1994. They included LaRae Prosser, Paul and Julie Gillie and Rollie and Julie Bergman of Page One Publications.

As the decades moved on, the town found new ways to invent itself and remain viable. Today Williams retains its agricultural heritage with the only remaining elevator in the county, a seed business and a potato shipping warehouse. Business enterprises include a trucking company, gas station/grocery store, gas company, beauty shop, smoke shop and municipal liquor store. There is a forestry station, post office, community

center, library and arena. Four churches continue to serve the needs of the community.

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