

History of Downtown

Written By Mrs. Clement Felix

Inevitably, a general store and post office marks the beginnings of a town. Both Spring Lake and Prior Lake Villages had their start in this manner. Spring Lake Village, platted in 1852 by R. Lewis and surveyed in 1857, hoped to become a railroad town. John Turner built a water-driven gristmill in 1859 where the Spring Lake Bridge now crosses the creek. This was later converted to steam by James Skinner. The store and post office, for many years named Maple Glen, were built just east of the mill and near the shore of the lake. The cemetery was surveyed and recorded in 1863.

The routing of the railroad in 1871, cutting Prior Lake in two, ended the hopes of Spring Lake. Thus, the village, post office and lake were all named in honor of Charles H. Prior, who in 1871-86 was Superintendent of the Minnesota Division of the Milwaukee RR. However, long before the railroad was laid, Neal and Malcalm McColl, whose father had settled in Eaglecreek Township in 1855, had built and managed a store on the site where Carpenter's Hardware is now. Prior Lake was platted in 1871; and the post office in which Malcalm McColl was Postmaster, was opened in the McColl store.

Except for the depot store, construction in the town began in 1872. The positions of the depot and elevator were nearly reverse of what they are now. The latter, built in 1872, was just where the coal bins stand along the tracks north of Lyons' Hardware. Fred Leudke came in 1872 to build and operate a blacksmith shop. Mrs. Bridget Sullivan opened a saloon in 1872 where Graves' liquor store now stands. In 1874 it became Sheehan's place and Bridget built another down the street. The hotel, for many years a residence, was begun in 1884 and a saloon was added soon after by August Schmokel on the present site of the doctor's office. A livery barn was built by him in 1887 just north of the hotel. Since McColl's store had burned in 1876, A.F. Arndt and Fred Ellis had operated a store where Monnen's Food Market stands. A. F. Arndt, succeeding Malcalm as Postmaster, dissolved his partnership with Fred Ellis, built a new store and moved the postoffice to that building where it remained until 1935.

District 17 School, which included Prior Lake, was conducted in a log building two miles south of the present village. In 1869, reorganization created District 49 for Prior Lake, which was then just a part of Spring Lake Township. The first year school was conducted in the Lyon's farm home south of the future village with Russell Hawkins as teacher. The following year a log building was erected and the first teacher was George Mueller. A brick school was built in 1898 just east of the old Presbyterian church and has since been demolished.

Marystown, the oldest parish in the county, served many Catholics in the western half of the area. At Credit River, Father Ravoux offered mass in the log home of the Cleary brothers. A log church was built in 1864 on the present site of St. Peter's church. In Prior Lake, A. F. Arndt held services over his store for Lutherans, while Reverend Rogers came from Farmington once a month to hold services in the depot for Presbyterians. Their church, the first in Prior Lake, was built in 1897 and is still standing. St. John's Lutheran church at Fish Lake was established in 1874. However the oldest Protestant church in the area was the Methodist church at Concord Hill, where the cemetery remains. This old log church was built in the sixties, also. Prior Lake did not have a Catholic Church until St. Michael's church at Spring Lake was moved across the lake ice during the winter of 1908, and placed just north of the present Parish House. This church burned in 1921.

After 1800 Prior Lake became important as a northern summer resort. Four years after Prior Lake became a village, the Grainwood Hotel, catering to wealthy socialites from the East and as far south as the Gulf States, opened on May 15, 1879. This hotel offered accommodations for about 150 guests with cottage facilities as well. Due to differences in train schedules of the Milwaukee and Omaha railroads, the hotel maintained its own horse-drawn bus, seating ten persons, which traveled to Barden (where "Stagecoach" is today) twice a day to meet the morning and evening trains. This hotel burned in 1894 early in the spring. Mrs. Bowles, who had succeeded W.E. Hull as owner, had it rebuilt at once and continued to operate it.

Grainwood Hotel was organized in the grand manner of many eastern resorts. Sailboats and Catamarans, as well as canoes, were a common sight on the lake. The Hull family owned a large, beautiful sailboat named the Lulu, for Mrs. Hull. The fashionable dress of the guest in those golden years between 1880 and 1900 added to a panorama that is now gone. Driving was a preferred pastime and many a fine livery traveled the wooded country lanes with these gay strangers. Fourth of July brought the Regatta, fireworks display and music on the lake. In fact, music was synonymous with the Grainwood Hotel. There were always songs drifting across the water as the guests floated about in canoes close to shore. There were concerts on Sunday afternoons when the guests sometimes participated or when special artists performed. There was a Seminarian who was a violinist, one summer; a lady guest who was also a violinist, another summer. There were accomplished pianists and a string trio. For dancing, Bill Dane's band came from Farmington and waltzing, quadrilles and the Virginia Reel were the dances of the day. In addition, the hotel maintained a tennis court and bowling alley for its guests. For forty years, one of the finest resorts in Minnesota, the Grainwood Hotel declined in status after 1920 when northern resorts offered better prospects to summer travelers. It never regained its importance, and in 1923 it burned to the ground. Mrs. Van Slack, wife of the owner at that time, had been W.E. Hull's daughter, and she had known her father's house in its grandeur. It was never rebuilt.