

**March 21, 2012**

**Dodge County Independent**

**Kasson School, Church and Dodge County History**

**What's Happening Around Town?**

*By Joe and Flo*

Flo: Hey, Joe! Have you ever wondered what it was like to have lived during the years our 1918 Historic School was built?

Joe: Hmmm....interesting question. I know World War I was happening; it had begun in Europe in 1914, and by 1917 the United States was in the heat of it. The United States was unprepared for war; our military was tiny and weapons were decades old. There was a parade of mistakes, misguided enthusiasm and confusion. Along with this there was a coal shortage, which was our major source of energy and heat. With the draft now in place, many women took traditionally men's jobs—on assembly lines, producing tanks, trucks and munitions. For the first time, department stores employed African American women as elevator operators and cafeteria waitresses. Most important, the morale of the women remained high, as millions joined the Red Cross as volunteers to help soldiers and their families.

Flo: On a local level, according to the Dodge County Republican dated July 21, 1917, the Kasson public school burned to the ground, the result of a fire that started in the evening of July 20th; reported by some boys who had been playing on the school campus. I read, because of extremely strong winds, burning shingles were carried over the business district of the town. Later in the night the wind changed and blew the embers in exactly the opposite direction carrying the sparks over another part of town. Had it not been for rain descending, the entire town could have burned up. Rochester, hearing of the fire, sent their big fire engine to aid but found it could not connect with our fire hydrants; but their men worked like "Trojans" beside ours to confine the fire to the building.

Joe: Construction on a new school, which consisting of grade and high school, began almost immediately, and was completed in the fall of 1918. There were fifteen students that graduated in 1918. Commencement exercises were held at the City Hall. Sixteen students were on the stage including Curtis Osborn, but he

was two studies short and received his diploma when those were made up. Names of the others were: Helen Bell, Edith Blanchard, Salutatorian – Jeanne Brown, Otis Campbell, Gordon Cornwell, Cora Evjen, Marie Evjen, Cleo Grems, Alman Hagen, Valedictorian – Florence Jensen, Flora McNeal, Cora Otterness, Josephine Tucker, Bradford Van Allen and Paul Leuthold.

Flo: Tell me about the town of Kasson and what it was like in the early years.

Joe: Well, this much I know, the first settlers to Dodge County found it to be plentiful of timber; hardwoods, cottonwood and white pine. Early historians reported that herds of buffalo, elk and even antelope were found in this region. It is believed some of the first people to this area were French Fur traders; who also were dealing in guns. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century brought other Europeans. Here already were tribes of Dakota along with Ojibwa sometimes called (Chippewa or Anishinaabe). They were hunters and gatherers. There was also another small group of Native Americans called Ho-Chunk or (Winnebago).

Flo: When did organized government come to this area?

Joe: Dodge County was organized in 1855. Peter Mantor, among others, journeyed to St. Paul and petitioned Governor Gorman to appoint county officials and institute county organization. The county commissioners convened and held the first meeting at the Mantor Store (Mantorville). Following meetings were held in homes, at the Hubbell House, and at the school house.

Many of the first settlers were instrumental in bringing others to the new land. The early settlers were predominately of New England birth. The first cabin to be constructed in the Village of Rice Lake was used as a stagecoach tavern. The first hotel in the county was built and operated by John R. Hubbell at Mantorville, made of logs and then later of Dodge County stone and opened for business in 1856.

Flo: I understand many of the early settlers were of Norwegian descent.

Joe: Yes, as well as Germans, Swiss, and some Danish, Scotch, English and Irish. Life was not easy and they faced many hardships; hail storms, one the likes of which dropped hail stones so violent, it destroyed nearly all the crops; some cattle

and pigs as well. (Ice cakes ten inches in circumference and ½ to 2 inches in weight). People died of lightning strikes, disease, and struggles with the Indians.

Flo: What was the population of Dodge County in 1857?

Joe: I've read population at that time was 4,130. By 1865 it was 6,222 and in 1881 the Federal census gave Dodge County a population of 11,344. Then look at the population number in 1950 ....12,605.

Flo: What was Dodge County's chief industry?

Joe: In 1859, it was agriculture: the county produced wheat, corn, oats, barley and potatoes in commercial quantities. Flour mills sprang up: O.C.F. Sorenson began operation of his flour mill at Kasson in 1893; widely known buckwheat flour shipped to dealers in 41 states. As wheat production diminished, raising stock became a large part of the agricultural picture; dairying and diversified farming gained rapidly. Cheese factories and creameries furnished a large market for the county's dairy products.

Flo: When did the Churches organize?

Joe: Berne Zwingli Reformed Church organized in 1872; the Kasson Presbyterian Church, 1866, the Kasson Baptist Church, 1866, (built in 1875), and St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Kasson, 1866. By 1879 in Dodge County, there were twelve churches. More than 1700 church members belonged to the following denominations, in order of membership totals: Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Episcopal, Congregational, Christian (Disciples of Christ,) Presbyterian, Evangelical, Baptists, and Protestant Episcopal.

Flo: How about the schools?

Joe: Schools started in Mantorville, (1855), Vernon Township, Ripley Township, Westfield Township, Ellington Township, Canisteo in 1856 as well as the village of Wasioja. School districts were organized into 11 districts and in 1864 Rev. Sanborn of Wasioja was appointed county superintendent of schools at an annual salary of \$150.00.

Flo: Just compare that to where we are today. I'm starting to realize how lucky we are to be born in this generation, and yet it is good to be reminded of our past history. "How do we know where we are going if we don't know where we have been."

*"What's happening around Town"*

*by Joe and Flo is sponsored by: KARE (Kasson Alliance for Restoration.)*

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