

THE EVOLUTION OF PORTAGE COUNTY

It seems hard to believe that a spot in Wisconsin less than two-hour's drive east of Portage County was one of the first to be explored and settled in North America. This is Green Bay where Jean Nicolet landed in 1634, some 14 years after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, and 27 years after the first colony of Europeans was established at Jamestown. Twenty years after Nicolet arrived, the first fur traders came to survey the area around Green Bay with a view to establishing trading posts and making friends with the Indians.

In the century that followed, the French, the Indians, and the beaver, a fur-bearing animal, all played leading roles in the history of Wisconsin. Under the French, what is known as Wisconsin became part of New France which extended all the way from Canada through the Ohio and Mississippi valleys to the Gulf of Mexico, with the northern anchor of empire at Quebec and the southern anchor at New Orleans. Thus the history of modern Wisconsin from 1634 to 1760 was directly allied to the French who were concerned with two enterprises, the fur trade and missionary work among the Indians. But even while the missionaries attempted to evangelize the Indians, their French compatriots were engaged in military adventures and stratagems designed to assure them of hegemony over Indian policy and monopoly over the Indian fur trade.

The Indian trapper and hunter was concerned with all peltry to barter with the French, but one of the most valued and yet most widely scattered fur-bearing animals in the future Wisconsin was the beaver. In 1867, when Jens Rasmussen settled on a quarter section later to become part of the village of Rosholt, he located on the high bank above the South Branch of the Little

Wolf, a few rods east of a pond created by a beaver dam where he later built a grist mill. Half a mile down the same stream was still another beaver dam. Peter Rasmussen, his nephew, digging a drainage ditch in the marsh many years later, came upon slender tree trunks and sticks pointed at both ends in the manner of the beavers. Thus in one spot of Portage County less than half a mile apart were two colonies of beavers busily maintaining a dam and house in each. There were millions of them and men waxed wealthy acting as field agents trading supplies and weapons for these furs.

Thus it is easy to imagine that small parties of Indians, up from Fort Winnebago (Portage city) or working out of Fort Howard (Green Bay) spent months on the creeks and swamps of Portage County trapping beaver which later were made into gem-studded robes for kings, or hats for the newly-rich growing up with the Industrial Revolution in Europe.

The French were fairly successful in dealing with the Indians and many of the traders took Indian women as wives, while their children learned the language of both people and served as interpreters and often as mediators between whites and Indians. In the French and Indian War, French officers commanded Indian troops in defense of Quebec in 1759; but the British, who also had managed to train Indian auxiliaries, were growing more powerful than the French in North America and managed to defeat the French and Indians. By 1763, New France had been surrendered to England, and future Wisconsin became for a time British territory governed from Mackinac and Quebec. Direct British rule ended by the Treaty of Paris in 1783 at the conclusion of the Revolutionary War when all British territory east of the Mississippi was ceded to the United States. Although Congress passed an ordinance in 1787 for government of the Northwest Territory, British influence in this area continued strong until 1815. Following the war of 1812, the United States established its own system of control in the Middle West and by an act of Congress restricted fur trading to United States citizens which meant that the British were no longer welcome. The

Astor-owned American Fur Company took over in Green Bay from the British after the war of 1812, and a few years later a man of French-Canadian and Indian ancestry, John Baptiste DuBay, was establishing a trading post for the American Fur Company in a township later to be known as Eau Pleine and finally as Dewey. The beaver hat was still in vogue and it helped to found a dynasty of banking people in Manhattan which also contributed to the fortunes of John DuBay.

In 1818 three counties were created out of Michigan Territory in what is today Wisconsin, Upper Michigan, and eastern Minnesota, called Brown County, Crawford, and Michillimackinac, and out of parts of these counties the Territory of Wisconsin was established by act of Congress in 1836. That same year the first Council and House of Representatives of the Wisconsin Territory, meeting in Belmont in the southern part, created "a separate county . . . to be called Portage" and established the seat of justice "at the town of Winnebago."¹

This was merely the beginning as it consisted of only 24 townships around modern Portage city, four of which actually lay in a newly-created county called Dodge, a mistake which was corrected in 1838. This new, rather special but small county, was carved out of Brown County, probably in recognition of the fact that it was an important link between northeastern Wisconsin and the Mississippi Valley via the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers. In the next three years several minor changes were made in the boundaries of this comparatively small county; and, in 1841 an act to enlarge the boundaries of Portage County was passed which made it the third largest in the territory, extending east and west across eight townships (about 48 miles) and north from about modern Portage city all the way through the central part of the state to the modern Wisconsin-Michigan state line. These boundaries remained constant until 1846, when Columbia County (north of Madison) was carved out of greater Portage County. In the next several years, most of the other southern counties as they are known

¹ *Wisconsin Territorial Laws* (1836), Sec. 5, p. 62.

today were set off until finally in 1856 modern Portage County was constituted.

At the time of organization, county representatives were called commissioners, and the first meeting of greater Portage county commissioners was held April 20, 1842 when it was ordered that election precincts should be established at six points in the county. The two that concern us in the north were located at Andrew Dunn's mill on Mill Creek (Linwood) and a second at the house of George Stevens at Big Bull Falls (Wausau). The commissioners sessions do not describe the actual extent of the precincts, everyone voting, probably, at the most convenient election booth. A month or so after these six precincts were established, a seventh was created at Little Bull Falls (Mosinee) at the house of John L. Moore. This was followed in 1843 by an attempt to define the boundaries of the precincts, but overlooking the one created the year before at Little Bull.

In this first attempt to define the several precincts, a change of venue was made from Dunn's Mill to the house of Gilbert Conant whose home was referred to as in "Plover Portage" but was probably located near the saw mill on the right bank of the Wisconsin River in Sec. 7 (T. 24, R. 8). Known as the Second Precinct, it ran from Conant's house and all that part of the county north of Mill Creek to the north line of Township 26 (above modern Knowlton). The judges appointed for elections in this precinct were Hugh M. McFarlin, Gilbert Conant and Enoch G. Bean.

The First Precinct, known as Big Bull Falls, ran from the town line between Townships 26 & 27 north to the state line.

The precinct of Little Bull Falls, created in 1842 and passed over in the appointment of judges of election in 1843 appears to have been re-established in 1845 when John DuBay and others petitioned the county commissioners to establish a precinct in this district, which on Jan. 9 they agreed to do. This, however, nullified the precinct established earlier as Big Bull Falls.

Two years later in 1847, three supposedly new election

precincts were established, one was to be "at the house of Abraham Brawley on the Au Clair (Eau Claire River) and to consist of all that part of the county north of Junior Creek, east of range seven. . . ." (Junior Creek was an early name for the river later known as Bull Junior Creek and today as Bull Creek which flows out of the swamp in the southwest of Ringle township and enters the Wisconsin River above Mosinee.)

Another precinct established in 1847 was "at the house of J. B. DuBay in Towns 25 and 26 of Range 7 and 8. . . ." This presumably was DuBay's trading post located in Sec. 3 of modern Dewey. Two years earlier in 1845, as noted above, DuBay had petitioned, with others, for an election precinct to be located at Little Bull Falls which had been granted at the time; but this in turn was probably a duplication of still another order dated 1842 when an election precinct was established at Little Bull "at the house of John L. Moore. . . ."

The county commissioners were probably unacquainted with the territory in the north and, with poor maps to work from and hearsay evidence to guide them about people and places, were understandably confused. Moreover, it was not altogether important because men on the frontier of America had long since learned to use their own judgment first and accept the orders of the government after the fact.

A third precinct included in the 1847 order was "at the house of Matthias Mitchell in the Town of Stevens Point, being in Town 24 of Range seven and eight East. . . ." The inspectors of election were to be Mathias (note change of spelling within same document) Mitchell, George J. Goodhue, and William H. Johnson.

While this is one of the first times the "Town of Stevens Point" is mentioned in the county commissioners' proceedings, it manifestly did not refer to the township of Stevens Point, which had not yet been created, but to the village. The William H. Johnson mentioned in the above died in 1848 and is buried in Union Cem-

¹ *Proceedings*, County Commissioners Sessions, Vol. I, pp. 95-96.

² *Loc. Cit.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

etry, the oldest marked grave and headstone in Portage County of which there is contemporary evidence, although it is quite certain that this grave and probably the headstone were moved to Union Cemetery after 1848.

By 1849 several new counties had been set off from the Portage County of 1843, as mentioned earlier, covering that part of the county south of Ten Mile Creek (roughly the north line of Waushara County) to the Dane County line. What remained of the county extended from about Ten Mile Creek north to the state line, with the majority of townships still on the right bank of the Wisconsin River.

On Jan. 9, 1849 the first townships were created in what still remained of Portage County, namely, Plover, Middletown, and Bull Falls. Plover township took in most of modern Wood County north to one mile south of the north line of Town 23, and the town of Middletown continued north to the north line of Town 27, above modern Mosinee, and the third township, Bull Falls, extended from Town 27 north to the state line.

In 1850 the nucleus of modern Portage County was formed when Marathon County was set off which definitely cut off Portage County from the northern tiers of townships. What remained took in nearly twice as much territory on the west of the Wisconsin River as it did on the east, and what later came to be part of Wood County formed slightly more than half of Portage County. This was divided that same year into three townships, namely, Grand Rapids, Plover and Stevens Point.

On Feb. 27, 1851 the legislature approved an act to extend the eastern boundary of Portage County to include Range 10,¹ that is, modern Alban, New Hope, Amherst, Lanark and Belmont.

By the end of 1852 Portage County consisted of six townships. Part of what later came to be Wood County was called the town of Eagle Point and the town of Grand Rapids, while to the west and north, the town

¹ *Wisconsin Laws* (1851), p. 114.

of Stevens Point had been reduced considerably by the incorporation of the town of Eagle Point. In the east, the Town of Amherst had been incorporated which took in modern New Hope and Lanark. Plover was also modified somewhat, while a sixth township called Almond was also organized that year.

Finally on March 29, 1856 Wood County was created which took the western townships known as Eagle Point and Grand Rapids away from Portage County; although in the process an exchange was made with Wood to give it part of the town of Stevens Point on the west while part of Grand Rapids along Buena Vista Creek and south was ceded to Portage County to make up its present situation. There were still many changes to be made in the next several decades, but all within the limits of the county as it was constituted in 1856. The basic changes in township organization will be noted elsewhere.

At an election held in greater Portage County in 1844 to determine where the county seat was to be located, the southern tiers of townships naturally favored its retention at Fort Winnebago (Portage city) and the northern tiers favored Plover Portage. The latter won out allegedly through a stratagem employed by Thomas McDill. According to legend, McDill rounded up the lumberjacks from the north country around Little Bull and Big Bull which together with the voters around Plover and Mill Creek, were able to swing the election to Plover. This oft-repeated story lacks credibility. The county commissioners at their first meeting held in 1842 had ordered election precincts established at Little Bull Falls and at Big Bull. If these orders were carried out, there was no need to bring any lumberjacks down to Plover to vote. A more plausible explanation is offered by George W. Mitchell who is quoted as saying:

“As to the vote of locating county seat at Plover I will say it was taken at the spring election of 1844, at a time when the pinery was full of men from Beloit, Rockford, etc., who came up to run down the river every spring and we availed ourselves of their presence and they all voted for the location of the county seat at Plover; of course there was no opposition, if so it was not counted. I think

the name Plover was not named as the county seat, but a certain 80 acres of a section, town and range. Had it been contested it would have been void but that part which is Columbia County preferred to let it go and get set off by the next legislature, which was done. . .”¹

The river drivers were patently not residents of the county and there apparently was no alternate ballot from which to choose. This stuffing of the ballot box was a common occurrence in the formative period of American history, particularly over the question of locating a county seat when property stakes were at issue and men seemed willing to go to almost any length to win.

After Columbia County was set off from Portage County in 1846, the first to be so constituted, other counties to the south were later created which left the northern tiers of townships still holding the name Portage. When Marathon County was constituted in 1850, the townships to the north of Marathon could no longer be included in Portage County, now sandwiched between its former southern and northern townships. This arrangement continued until 1856 when Wood County was set off from Portage, leaving the latter within the constitutional limit. At this time, the name of the county might have been changed to avoid confusion with Portage city but tradition and the fact that the county seat of greater Portage County had become a fixed location at Plover and the fact that this region had once been known as “Plover Portage” both worked against a change in name. In fact the name Portage County might well have been changed in 1846 when Columbia County was created in the southern part of what was greater Portage County. Alfred Brunson explains it this way:

“This county took its name originally, from the portage between the Wisconsin and Fox Rivers. But when the county was divided, the representatives from it hailing from the north part of it, with a view, it is said, to keep the record books, and thereby save a few dollars in the purchase of new ones, managed to retain the *name* for the

¹ *Stevens Point Journal*, Feb. 11, 1905.

north part of it, in which is Plover Portage, calling the south part Columbia.”¹

In this manner, then, are the circumstances of history often traduced and hammered into place. Significantly, the name suits the county and none other would do; for it is a fact that one of the most important Indian portages in Wisconsin history ran through the central townships of the county between the Wolf and Wisconsin Rivers. In the treaty of 1837 with the Chippewa nation, the United States government texts refer to “the Plover portage”² which, from the description, almost surely refers to this territory.

From 1856 down to 1899 when the last major changes were made in township boundaries of the county, it is possible to discern a continuing struggle for territory among the several townships as each sought to gain more for itself or fought off grabs by others. In 1870 the County Board was forced to create a special committee to handle all the complaints, petitions and inter-township rivalry. It was natural that it should be this way and, while there is room for improvements in the present township boundaries, there is reason to take pride in the rather reasonable lines of demarcation finally arrived at in 1899, especially in view of the spirited competition which marked their establishment. These boundaries were goals reached not by violence but by the democratic process of give-and-take, imperfect to be sure, but in the end fair and acceptable to the greatest number. By the time the “new” courthouse of 1959 is demolished to make room for still another, or is abolished entirely under a more centralized county system, the present township boundaries may be a thing of the past; but up to now they represent the best form of county government within the limits of present judgment.

In the beginning it was logical that three or four townships were all that was needed, but as new settlers moved into the different areas of the county and be-

¹ Alfred Brunson, “Wisconsin Geographical Names,” *State Historical Society of Wisconsin Collections*, Vol. I, p. 113.

² U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology, *Annual Report*, Part 2 (1899), p. 760.

came numerous enough to organize their own townships of 36 sections, more or less, these earlier townships were reduced in size. Most of the townships have retained the records of their first town meetings together with election of officers. From these invaluable records a later generation is privileged to glimpse its own heritage and watch the pioneers of the county solemnly establish the foundation of government in a republic on the township level. It is also a privilege to note the minutes of their meetings, all following a similiar pattern of dignified legal form which reflects an abiding respect for order and the rule of law. The Anglo-Saxon instinct was strong with these pioneers, and, while the immigrants from northern Europe had their own traditions and respect for order when they came to the county, they have the Yankees who preceded them from the New England states, New York State, and the Ohio Valley to thank for leading them to an understanding of the broader aspects of democracy and the American attitude toward order — where no one trusts anyone with the employment of too much order.

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