An Early History of Fertile
By
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<u>EARLY MINNESOTA</u>

Early in the 19th Century, President Thomas Jefferson wanted to purchase some land from France which had recently been returned to France through a secret treaty with Spain. This land was situated in the central part of the North American continent. Jefferson also had some fear that Napoleon Bonaparte would attempt to form an empire in this territory, thus preventing the westward expansion of the new Republic, as well as endanger the young United States. After fighting a slave rebellion in Haiti in 1803, the French treasury was in dire need of funds, and Napoleon needed money to further his European Wars.

Jefferson saw this as an opportunity to encourage Napoleon to sell some of this territory. However, to his surprise, Napoleon offered the Americans the whole of Louisiana. The land transaction took place April 30, 1803. It has been considered the most astounding real estate transaction in history. For the sum of $15,000,000, the United States gained 800,000 square miles of land, which today consists of parts of some states and the whole of others. The total number of states today totals fourteen. Among those states to be carved out of the Louisiana Purchase, was what would later become the state of Minnesota.

With the addition of these new western lands, pioneers began to rapidly filter into most of the Louisiana territory. In an attempt to protect settlers and traders who were beginning to move into what would become Minnesota, the federal government established Fort Snelling in 1819 near St. Anthony. By 1858 there were enough settlers in the Minnesota Territory so that it could enter the Union as a state. Settlement was heavy in the southern part of Minnesota, but there was little interest in settlement of land in the upper northwest. It was not until 1862, when Abraham Lincoln issued the Homestead Act, that settlers became interested in this area of the state. The Homestead Act allowed 150 acres of land free to settlers provided that they live upon that land five years, build a home and make improvements to the land. More acreage could be gotten if they planted a stated number of trees.

In addition to the Homestead Act, President Lincoln sent government officials to Northwestern Minnesota to make a treaty with the Ojibwa Indians to open that part of the state to settlement, and remove them to reservations. However, there was a problem, as the Sioux Indians were also claiming possession of this region. Up until now, there were only a few people living in the northwest, and were mostly Metis, (people of French and Indian extraction). They were mostly engaged as fur traders, along with some agents of the Hudson Bay Company, who had opened fur trading centers.

The result of this meeting of the representatives of the United States Government and the Ojibwa at Huot, near present day Red Lake Falls, in 1863 was unsuccessful. Following that meeting, the Sioux and Ojibwa fought a winter war which ended in an Ojibwa victory. This time the President sent his team to meet with the representatives of the Indians at the Old Crossing on the Pembina Trail. At this meeting, the Indians gave up rights to Northwestern Minnesota, and the region was opened to settlement in 1864 following the signing of the treaty. There had been, however, by 1860 a few small settlements in Polk County.

THE FIRST SETTLERS ARRIVE IN THE FERTILE AREA

Now that the Northwest was available to be settled without the fear of native raids, pioneers began to rush to Northwestern Minnesota. There were three trails that had been used by the ox carts that moved between Fort Garry in Canada and St. Anthony in Minnesota. These trails followed the ancient trails used by native people for centuries. Now they would serve as main arteries of travel for the pioneers with their oxen and wagons who sought a new home in the north, as they moved their families and animals on these trails. One of the old Pembina Trails passed directly through the center of what would later become Fertile, Minnesota as it wound its way to Huot, and on to Pembina and then Canada.

In 1879 the first settlers to come to the Fertile area were Knute Nelson and his brother Einar Nelson, together with their uncle Lars A. Bolstad. These men had emigrated from Evanger, Voss, Norway. After a short sojourn in southern Minnesota, they arrived in Polk County on May 13, 1879. These pioneers went directly to Crookston's U.S. Land Office and returned to their claims on May 17, 1879. A few days later in June, Askeld Olsen Morvig and his brother Anders Olsen Morvig, together with Jacob Hanson Aldal, also from Voss and Bergen, arrived at the Fertile area and took homesteads next to one another, just slightly east of Jacob Aldal's claim and Knute Nelson's homestead.

From June 1879 well into 1880, people began to quickly take up homesteads in and around the Fertile area. One of the early settlers was Thomas Johnson Lensegrav and his family, who took a homestead near the Sandhill River. Another of the early settlers was Otto Kankel, a miller by profession, who had begun flour and grist mills at Fergus Falls, Elizabeth and Faith. He finally purchased some property on the Sandhill River just south of present day Fertile, where he built a flour and grist mill and later a grand home next to his mill. He had purchased this land from Thomas Johnson Lensegrav.

Also coming to Polk County in 1879 from Fertile, Iowa was John S. LaDue and his family, along with Reverend Calvin LaDue, a Congregational minister and their old father. The LaDue's took up a settlement at what they called LaDue Grove, about two and a half miles northwest of present day Fertile. John opened a little trade building in 1881, and got the right to have a post office. He placed a little sign on his store calling it "Fertile" after his home town in Iowa. By this time a branch railroad line had been built to Edna, Minnesota, a small pioneer trade center about a mile and a half south of present day Beltrami, Minnesota. Mail was picked up there and carried to LaDue Grove.

In 1880, Mr. E.H. Cornelius, who had built a small store at Edna, sought to establish a trade center for the Norwegians who had settled near the Sandhill River. He chose to purchase the large house that had been built by Jacob Aldal on his homestead to become what would be called the Aldal store. This site was chosen because it seemed to be about the center of much of the pioneer settlements. Aldal was located about one mile east of the junction of Highway #1 and Highway #32. He then sought Knute Nelson to be proprietor of the store, and in the winter of 1881, Cornelius had Nelson circulate a petition to get support for a post office in Aldal. On his return with the signed petition, Nelson had secured 120 signatures. On April 1, 1881 Aldal now officially had a post office and general store with Knute Nelson postmaster and general manager of the store.

In 1881, Doctor Arne Nelson built a drugstore and office at Aldal, and Knute Nelson built his home there along with Jacob Aldal, who built a new home, which was later moved into Fertile. Knute Nelson's two-story home still remains on the right side of the first curve in the road as it turns north.

In the spring of 1880 there were enough people to organize a township. This was done at a meeting for that purpose at the Thomas Johnson Lensegrav home. This was held during the last part of October, about a week before the General Election. At this gathering it was unanimously decided that the new township should be named after James Garfield, the president-elect.

The first township officers elected at this meeting were: Peer Stromme, Chairman; C.O. Christianson, Knute Nelson, Supervisors; Ole Hamre, Town Clerk; Paul Johnson, Treasurer; Even Gredvig and Peer Stromme, Justices of the Peace; and Anders O. Morvig and Ole O. Opheim, Constables; Knut Bolstad, Assessor, and Johannes Borslien, H. Davey, Even Gredvig and Ole Rude, road overseers; and Jacob Aldal, Poundmaster.

Kankel's mill became a popular meeting place for those who brought grain to be ground. It was at this point that Fritz Barholz built a small boarding house in the hill north of the mill. Mrs. Barholz provided food and lodging for those who had to stay overnight. It was then that J.S. LaDue decided to relocate his little store to the Kankel mill site, which the pioneers in later years were to call "Old Fertile" as that is what they decided to call that center. Mr. A. Gilmour opened a saloon south of the hill. There now was a beginning of a second small town.

THE BEGINNINGS OF PRESENT DAY FERTILE

With the construction of a railroad line from Hawley (Manitoba Junction) north, there was some speculation as to where the route would pass. Eventually, the railroad passed between the farm of Thomas Johnson Lensegrav and the front yard of the Kankel mill and residence, making its way up the hill to pass through the center of the homestead of Ole Stromsmoe, who had a home located on what is now Lincoln Avenue next to the present day Oliver's. Both Aldal and "Old Fertile" had been passed by. Thus, out of necessity, the two small settlements found it necessary to relocate to the location where the railroad was building a railroad station.

On May 25, 1887, at the office of the register of deeds in Crookston, a plat of Fertile was drawn up under the direction of Andrew Gilken. The original Plat consisted of 19 blocks, sub-divided into 239 lots and a city park. Henry L. Gaylord, attorney, land agent, and resident of Liberty Township was placed in charge of selling the lots. Within the first week of sales, fifty lots were sold. Soon Ole Stromsmoe had sold all of his homestead land and later, Ole J. Tyssen, whose homestead was located east of what today is Mill Street, began to sell off his entire farm, except for his house and barn located in the second block east from Mill Street on Washington Ave. Northeast. His addition is known today as Tysse Addition because someone left off the "n" at the end of his name.

As soon as the lots were for sale, businessmen from Aldal and "Old Fertile" began to relocate to form the new village, which after a vote was taken, the new settlement was given the name, FERTILE. One of the first to move to this new site in 1887 was J. S. LaDue, who moved his general store and post office. He located his buildings on the northwest corner of Main Avenue and Second Street. Across the street on the southwest corner of Main Avenue and Second Street, Ole S.P. Kleven opened the first large department store in 1887. George Kronschnabel built a lumber

yard on the west side of the railroad tracks. This he later sold about 1900. Later years it was known as Steenerson Lumber Company.

Mr. Fritz Barholz moved his house to Fertile in 1887, and built a new three-story hotel on the corner of Lincoln Avenue and Second Street. This hotel boasted a fine dining room and private living quarters connected on the north side of the hotel. A stable for horses and a dog kennel was also built behind the hotel. Directly east of the hotel, Henry L. Gaylord built a two-story building, which housed a grocery store on the main floor, and private living quarters on the second floor. In 1892 the village built a City Hall next to the Gaylord building on Lincoln Avenue. A small jail was also built in 1888, behind the City Hall. H.L. Gaylord had his law office built in 1887, between his store and the Fertile House.

Dr. Nelson relocated his business from Aldal to Fertile in 1887. For a time he was in partnership with Andrew Opheim. As partners they located their new business on the corner of Mill Street and Washington Avenue, where the present old First State Bank, built in 1913 (Watershed Office) is located. The Nelson and Opheim building located on that site, was moved to make room for the new 1913 bank. Today that building is fronted on Mill Street, and was for many years the Fertile Bakery. Later Andrew Opheim built his Mercantile Company on the southwest corner of Mill Street and Washington Avenue in 1895.

The old Aldal store was moved to Fertile and placed directly west of Nelson and Opheim's building, fronting Washington Avenue. It was at one time a bakery and a shoe repair shop. When the Fertile Journal first came to Fertile, it became the first Journal Office until Lewis E. George moved the Journal to a different location east of the City Hall, fronting Washington Avenue.

It must be stated that when Fertile was plated, the highway that was to pass through the center of the town, wound its way past the front yard of the Kankel mill and residence. The City fathers felt that since it passed by the mill it would be a good idea to call it Mill Street. It ran south passing the present Hamre home, past Down's Electric and under the railroad track passing by the Kankel home and mill. It then climbed up the hill east of Pleasant Hill Cemetery and came out by the present day Cenex station. The village fathers began work on this road in 1893.

In 1887, Matthews and Company built the first bank in Fertile. The location of this bank was directly across the street from Fritz Barholz's Fertile House Hotel on Lincoln Avenue. Today, this bank building is the office for Keith Christianson's business. Mr. Norman Hanson began working in the bank as cashier for this concern, and later when they sold the business, Hanson bought out their shares and became bank president. Also at this time, the Reverend Calvin LaDue built a small Congregational Church on the southeast corner of Mill Street and Jefferson Avenue. Later on, a two-room county school was moved to the same group of lots and the church was later sold to the Evanger Lutheran Church, which was built on the southeast corner of Mill Street and Jefferson Avenue Southeast in 1890. On the northeast corner of Mill Street and Jefferson Avenue, the Drengedal Lutheran Congregation, which was organized in 1881, built their church in 1887. This building was later razed to make way for the construction of the present Concordia Lutheran Church in 1931.

When George Kronschnabel discovered that there was a good clay deposit southeast of the City's park, he sold out his lumber and hardware business to John Erikson, who later on took on Mr. Vannet as a partner. In 1901 John Erikson and David Vannet built the brick block on the southeast corner of Mill Street and Lincoln Avenue. At that time it housed the Farmer's Bank, Erikson-

Vannet Hardware in the space where Thrifty White Drug is today, and in the part that adjoined the building on the north side, they had their Farm Machinery display show room.

After George Kronschnabel opened his brick yard in 1897, a building boom in the use of brick took place in the construction of Fertile buildings. One of these brick buildings built in the 1890's by Brown Duckstad housed Duckstad's Hardware Store on Washington Avenue next to today's Veteran's Memorial. This building was demolished in 2008. Andrew Opheim built his mercantile business on the southeast corner of Mill Street and Washington Avenue in 1895. Holton and Carlson also built a department store on the corner of Mill Street and Lincoln Avenue. Today the whole building is occupied by Stacy Lucken's "Antiques." Next to Holton and Carlson, Charles Tschida built a cigar factory and confectionary.

A new Post Office was built in 1912 fronting Mill Street, next to Dr. Nelson's Drugstore on its north side. Kvenvolden built a large brick structure on the corner of Mill Street and Main Avenue. Today it is used as an attorney's office and as an office for several other small businesses. When Mathews and Company sold their bank to Norman Hanson, it took the name First State Bank. However, in 1894 a two-story wood and brick bank was built directly west of the village's first bank, on the south corner of Lincoln Avenue and Second Street. It then became known as the First National Bank for a time. Directly west of this new bank, Erik J. Erikson built a potato warehouse and produce building. These remain today, but the National Bank building has been demolished, though it did serve for years as a telephone central office and as the Erikson Funeral Home.   Mr. Erik J. Erikson began the first funeral home in Fertile in the old Mathews and Company Bank after they moved into the new building next door.

There were several livery barns and black smith shops those early days, but not all lasted as long as that of Sam Rasmussen, who had his livery barn behind LaDue's Store on Second Street. Ole J. Tyssen had a blacksmith on Mill Street.

In the 1800's Fertile had a city orchestra, a Golden Coronet Band. The Fertile Concert Band was organized in the 1890's, playing concerts on summer evenings and marching in village parades. A fire department was organized, and it's Constitution and By-Laws were approved December 3, 1888. Fred Puhler of Red Lake Falls established the Fertile Journal in 1882, shortly after the arrival of the first settlers. When Fertile became established, the Journal opened an office here. Since it first opened its doors in Fertile, it has had two previous locations.

Local people formed a dramatic society and produced plays and musicals, and traveling companies produced plays in the Village Hall. The city supported two churches until 1890 when a third was built. Finally, the first of 12 additions to the village were platted on October 11, 1888 and accepted as Tysse's addition. Over the years since the acquisition of Tysse's Addition, there have been 12 new additions to Fertile. The first Village Council met on July 11, 1888. George Kronschnabel was elected the first Mayor and he held that position for eight years. The village of Fertile, lead by its first Mayor, George Kronschnabel, experienced a rapid pace of building, which led up to a modern thriving community, well prepared to enter the 20th Century. Fertile was known for its excellent educational emphasis and its industrious people. Like many other places, Fertile can claim its famous sons and daughters, but the general respect of its average citizens is even more renowned.