

Great Northern Railroad Came to Benson 96 Years Ago

The City of Benson, with a population of 3,678, is located in southwestern Minnesota approximately 125 miles northwest of the Twin Cities and 40 miles east of the South Dakota border. Three trunk highways; federal route 12 crossing the state in an east-west direction, state highway 29 south from Alexandria and state highway 9 southwest from Morris, pass through the city.

As the urban center and county seat of Swift county, Benson has assumed governmental functions along with its position as a retail-wholesale trade center serving the surrounding rural population. The county is located in a prosperous agricultural region as evidenced by the large proportion of land used for agricultural purposes.

Benson is centrally located among the population centers of west central Minnesota with nearly 75,000 persons living within a 30 mile radius and approximately 125,000 persons living within a 40 mile radius.

Less than one hundred years ago the land on which Benson is now situated was a flat endless prairie of tall grass, dotted by many small lakes and sloughs which have since been drained. This region was the disputed land of the Chippewa and the Sioux, with raiding parties of each tribe making life quite perilous for any person.

The first white man to traverse the Benson area was Gideon S. Pond, the Indian missionary from the Lake Harriet Mission station, in what is now Minneapolis, who accompanied an Indian hunting party up the Chippewa river in order to study their habits and customs.

However, it was not until after the Great Sioux Uprising in 1862 that western Minnesota was made safe for white settlement. The first white settler in the Benson area is thought to be Ole Corneliusen, a Norwegian who arrived on foot from Olmstead county in 1866. A month or so later Lars Christenson came with a group of settlers from Wisconsin by ox team, some of which settled at Camp Lake and others along the Chippewa river which they called Six Mile Timber. By this time the railroad had been extended from Minneapolis to Delano resulting in a more rapid settlement of western Minnesota.

By 1869 the St. Paul and Pacific railroad had reached Willmar and the following year it arrived in Benson. This railroad became a part of the Great Northern in 1885.

It might be pointed out that my locating sites at intervals of approximately eight miles, the railroad company determined the number of future trading centers in Swift county to be four; Kerkhoven, DeGraff, Benson (named by the railroad in memory of a prominent politician and citizen of Anoka) and Randall (which was destined never to leave its prairie stage since its location was changed by the first settlers and renamed Clontarf by the patriotic Irishmen.) Only Benson and Kerkhoven saw any development during the first six years.

Benson's first general store was a sod structure built in 1869 by A. W. and W. V. Lathrop, and a second general store of sod was constructed later that year. For a year or more no rails were laid farther west, and Benson became a lively town as the terminus of the railroad and the point of transshipment to the famous Red River carts. These two-wheeled carts, built entirely of wood and rawhide and pulled by a single ox, usually travelled in a train and the squeak from their unoiled wheels could be heard for miles. The Red River carts carried goods from Benson to Fort Abercrombie, about 15 miles downstream from the present city of Wahpeton, where goods were again transhipped down the Red River to Fort Garry (Winnipeg).

During this time Benson served as a market for the territory 100 miles to the west, north and south; wheat was hauled in from Lac qui Parle, Chippewa, Big Stone, Stevens, Pope, Douglas and Yellow Medicine counties and goods for the household and field purchased for the return trip. Prices were high at this period with a barrel of pork costing \$40, 100 pounds of flour \$5, very poor butter was 50-cents a pound and eggs were a luxury and potatoes very scarce.

In February of 1870, by an act of the Minnesota state legislature, the 21 northern townships were removed from Chippewa county to create Swift county. There is some dispute as to whether the new county was named after the governor of the state by that name or the state representative from Chippewa county, also named Swift. The first county



THE NEW AND the old. This photo, taken shortly after the present court house was completed in 1897, shows the old court house at the left. This became a run down apartment building later and was razed.

board met in the Lathrop Brothers store in January of 1871. Municipal government of Benson began functioning in April of that same year, with an incorporated area considerably larger than at present.

Within five years the population of Benson had grown to 300, with four general stores, two drug stores, two machinery houses, three hotels, one bank and two saloons. In one of the general stores, A. N. Johnson and Co. sales ran up to \$60,000 in the last eight months of 1875. During the same period there were sold in Benson alone one and one-half million feet of lumber; 1,260,000 shingles, 170,000 laths, 380 reapers, mowers and harvesters, 240 seeders, 10 threshing machines, 160 plows, 137 wagons and 61 sulky hay racks. It was distinctly a boom period.

The first hotel, known as the Emigrant House, was constructed by the railroad company to accommodate railway workers and travelers. In 1876 an addition was made on the hotel and it was renamed the Pacific House. In 1900 the structure was moved to a lot behind the light

plant and called the Columbia Hotel. The three story brick, 45 room Paris Hotel was then constructed on the previous site.

The first school classes were held in the Emigrant House in 1870, with Mrs. Charlotte Knowlton as teacher. The following year a one story frame structure was erected on the northeast corner of the courthouse block to serve as the school. The first graduate received his diploma from Benson high school in 1890. In 1904 the Northside school was constructed followed by the Southside school in 1913 and the Northside elementary school in 1958.

Early life in Benson also included some hardships, such as the small-pox epidemic of 1872, the grasshopper plague of 1876 and the fire of 1880. The fire was started by a cigar butt which was dropped and rolled through a knothole in the floor of Joe Foutain's saloon. The smoldering cigar soon burst into uncontrollable flames that resulted in severe losses to 29 concerns, destroying an entire business block. As a result, the volunteer fire department was organized by the village council on June 18, 1881.

Public utilities and services have been available to Benson residents for many years. The waterworks was constructed in 1895. In 1894, 4,000 feet of sewage pipe was laid down. Cement sidewalks began to be constructed in 1901. The first telephone was operated between the office and home of Dr. C. L. Scofield in 1893, three years before the original Bell patent expired. In 1904, after 10 years of development as a local exchange, the Benson Telephone Company incorporated, taking the name "Swift County Telephone Company". The power and light plant was built by private investors just before the turn of the century and was purchased by the city in 1902. The public library was established in Benson in 1911 through a \$7,500 donation from Andrew Carnegie and many generous gifts from local citizens.

The following year the Swift County Hospital was constructed at a cost of \$15,000 and had an original capacity of 20 to 25 patients, however, a new city-county hospital was built in 1949 at the cost of \$400,000. Benson also has three new medical clinics all of which have been completed since 1958.

The turn of the century also saw the first "horseless carriage" in Benson. J. B. A. Benoit, who had been in the bicycle repair business and became interested in the new invention in 1901, purchased a lathe and began to build an automobile, completing it in April of 1902. This open two-seated rig was equipt with a five horse power Dyke engine which could propel the car at the rate of four to 20 miles an hour. Its first run to Clontarf, a distance of about 6 miles was completed in only 28 minutes.

Benson growth has been at a steady rate with the exception of the 1920 to 1930 period. Benson's population at 10 year periods has been as follows: 1880—457, 1890—877, 1900—1525, 1910—1677, 1920—2,111, 1930—2,095, 1940—2,729, 1950—3,398, 1960—3,678.