

## FERN TOWNSHIP

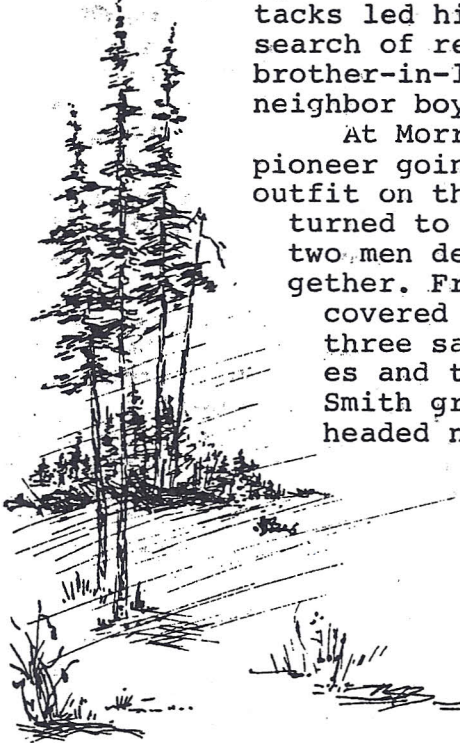
As late in our history as 1896, Fern Township, Hubbard County, was yet a nameless wilderness, home to huge stands of virgin Norway pine, a native Indian hunting ground and an abundance of wild game and wild fruit. Into this new land, two white men slashed and pushed their way with their two covered wagons and sturdy teams in May of that year. Thus began the settling of Fern Township.

Seth Smith, the first white settler of Fern Township (so designated because he filed the first claim and built the first house) came in a covered wagon drawn by four horses from southwest Minnesota, Big Stone County. Severe asthma attacks led him to the north woods in search of relief. With Smith were his brother-in-law, Gene Daniels, and a neighbor boy.

At Morris, Minnesota, another pioneer going north spotted Smith's outfit on the street. When Smith returned to his covered wagon, the two men decided to journey on together. Fred Gutzmeier with his covered wagon, trunk, bedding, three sacks of oats for the horses and twenty dollars, joined the Smith group and the two wagons headed north.

Their route took them from Morris to Alexandria, Wadena and Park Rapids. This was the end of the railroad in 1896.

They first looked at land around Shell Lake but decided against



it. Courthouse officials furnished them with plats of vacant land and suggested land north of Lake Itasca. They traveled to the headwaters of the Mississippi River where they met Mill McMullen, Theodore Wagaman and a number of other settlers. Knowing the country fairly well, they advised Smith and Gutzmeier, "There is vacant land in Township 145, Range 35, which lies about nine or ten miles north of Lake Itasca." They made arrangements with Mr. Felt, a young explorer, to meet them along a hayroad about two miles west of LaSalle Lake.

Fred Gutzmeier wrote in an early account of his search for a homestead, "Well, Mr. Felt met us there the next day. We had an early dinner and started. Mr. Felt, with a compass, took the lead. We came to the north end of LaSalle Lake and crossed the creek on a footlog. Another mile east brought us to a magnificent forest of white pine and Norway pine. Here we stopped and rested. Our guide informed us that to the north was vacant land and that a portion of the big timber was included. The land did not look good for agriculture to me. It was, and is yet, too stoney, but I visualized a flock of sheep feeding on the hillside. What really took my fancy were those big pine trees. Some of them measured four feet in diameter at the butt -- the real monarchs of the forest. Here was building material in abundance." They slashed a road through the timber the last fourteen miles to reach this site.

Mr. Gutzmeier selected four forties and they turned their attention to a claim for Mr. Smith. Walking one mile east and one mile south, they found the government survey mark. The next day they returned to Park Rapids and filed on their claims. Mr. Smith returned to Big Stone County and Mr. Gutzmeier to Montevideo, Chippewa County.

That same fall of 1896, Seth Smith returned to the homestead site with his wife, Capitola, and two and one-half year old daughter, Fern. They lived in a tent while building the log house and later, a log barn. Leaving his young daughter with a friend, Fred Coffin, a widower, accompanied the Smiths on their return trip and filed a home-



stead claim. Gutzmeier returned in November about Thanksgiving time. The area now had three land claims and two log buildings.

Shortly after Thanksgiving time, the Smiths returned to Big Stone County to settle up and finalize business affairs. Fred Gutzmeier and Fred Coffin stayed at the Smiths' cabin.

The days moved by rapidly as they cut firewood, fished, hunted, tanned buckskin and made moccasins. Mr. Smith had left one team of horses and the two men hauled hay from the Mississippi River bottom for their feed.

The heavy work and cold air created hearty appetites, and the two realized their store of provisions was running low. It was decided that Gutzmeier would go to the Itasca settlement to get flour and lard. They wrote letters wishing family and friends a "Merry Christmas," and descriptions of their pioneer life -- only to discover they had lost track of time and it was January 6, 1897, when Gutzmeier reached the settlement. The letters were mailed anyway.

The snow was four feet deep on the level that winter. When Mr. Gutzmeier started back the next day, he had fifty pounds of flour strapped to his back, an axe in his belt and a five-pound pail of lard plus a shotgun in his hands. He walked two miles to Robert Dunn's house, where he stopped for a drink. Dunn suggested that he leave part of the flour and he would bring it later to the Mississippi hay meadows to be picked up by Gutzmeier.

Gutzmeier continued the long and lonely road, chopping into potholes for water, only to find them filled with frozen mud. He finally reached LaSalle Creek where he rested, drank from the cold water and built a snapping fire started with birchbark. It was a calm night with moonlight sparkling on the snow. He heard an owl hoot, and in the far-off distance, a pack of wolves howling. After a pleasant rest, Gutzmeier completed the journey to Smith's log house where Coffin was preparing for bed.

They now had flour and lard for bread, potatoes in the cellar and a plentiful supply of meat.

In February of 1897, the Smith family returned.

After completing his log house in the spring of 1897, Gutzmeier went to the prairies to obtain work during the seeding time. Fred Coffin built his log house and began developing his homestead. The Smiths, busily clearing and planting their fields, found time to purchase a good milch cow. One morning the much-prized cow was missing. A diligent search followed and on the morning of July 4, the animal was found on the White Earth Reservation near Ponsford in good shape. The Indians captured her to use the milk for some bear cubs they had adopted. From then on, the cow was called "Old Squaw."

In a few years, the Brainerd Lumber Company began logging operations in the general area and provided settlers with work for that much needed cash. Smith hauled freight for the logging camps from Nary to the locations in his homestead area. His wife, Capitola, sewed him buckskin suits on her Singer Sewing Machine, providing outfits for him on his freight hauls. For the rest of his life he was known as "Buckskin Smith" -- a blonde, vigorous man of average height with a commanding voice.

By this time, there were a number of settlers in the area, the township was organized, roads were being built, a school district was organized and a schoolhouse built. The first Becida store and post office in the township, operated by Harry Blackey, was established in 1899.

In August 1903, Christ Olson and Even Nyhus purchased Blackey's business. Christ Olson was named postmaster, a position he held until the 1930's. Mr. Olson and Mr. Nyhus were brothers-in-law, their wives being Christi and Anna Engebretson Haugan from Sigdal, Norway. Mr. Blackey's store was one mile north of the still-standing former Sunny Hill School. The new owners moved the store and post office from this location to the Christ Olson farm, bordered by the highway. Years later it was moved across the road and eventually enlarged to include a country restaurant and tavern.



Seth Smith was active in organizing the township and school district. The township of Fern lies in the northwest corner of Hubbard County, surveyed in 1879 by George F. Hamilton, deputy surveyor. It was organized jointly with Lake Hattie Township at a meeting at the E.O. Howe home August 6, 1898. Howe and Smith were brothers-in-law. The township was named Fern in honor of Smith's young daughter, the area's first white child. In 1904 the southern township took the name of Lake Hattie and elected its own officials.

The first officials of Fern township in 1898 were: town board, A.A. Bayse, John Stewart, and Harry Blackey; clerk, E.O. Howe; treasurer, Lars Lind; justices of the peace, C.A. Olson and Dan Stewart; constables, W.G. Schroeder and L.E. Hanson; postmaster, C.A. Olson. John Stewart was appointed justice of the peace and Seth Smith constable when Dan Stewart and W.G. Schroeder failed to qualify.

The first school district, No. 35, was organized on petition by Seth Smith at a meeting in the E.O. Howe home June 27, 1898. The first officers were: director, Lars Lind; clerk, E.O. Howe; and treasurer, Mrs. L.E. Hanson. Mrs. Hanson was the former Julia Engebretsdatter Haugan from Norway. E.O. Howe was given the contract to build the schoolhouse and during the winter was assisted by a transient named Gust Larson, who lived in a tent during the cold, blustery months. The following summer he disappeared.

Seth Smith was given a contract to haul the building material at five dollars per load, a load to consist of at least a thousand feet of lumber or one ton of other building material. With the exception of two thousand feet of roof board from Itasca Lake, the material came from Park Rapids. The haul required three days, a distance of forty miles each way.

Another pioneer, Calvin Daniels, Smith's father-in-law, collected money for the school bell through public subscription and he donated the bell rope. On a clear winter day the musical peals from the bells of Sunny Hill School (District 35) and Malterud School (District 34) could

be heard well over a mile away, and on occasion, their notes joined across the community.

In 1902 Sunny Hill School was moved west across Hennepin Creek to the hilltop where it now stands. The building rested on a full basement housing a furnace, plus a new woodshed to the west and new entryway to the east; a proud asset to the community.

When the original school opened in 1899, Cora Crawford of Park Rapids, who was later to become county superintendent of schools, was the first teacher.

In 1922 the district divided and a new district was organized in the western half of the old district. A large, white, stately building was erected and became known as the LaSalle School. The first officers were: clerk, Adolph Knutson; director, E. Covey; and treasurer, Harry Glassco. Doris McCrady of Bemidji became the first teacher of this district which disorganized in 1933. Both Sunny Hill and LaSalle Schools are now owned by sportsmen and used seasonally.

District 42, known as the Sankey School, was organized in the fall of 1900 at a meeting in the Charles Trog spacious log home. Their first officers were: clerk, Mrs. M. Minor; treasurer, Mrs. Gene Preston; and director, F. Sankey. The first school session was held in a log building while Mr. Sankey built a roomy frame building for the school. A third bell was heard in the community. Alvin Stowell, nicknamed "Squinty," taught in the log school. The new school was ready for its first term and teacher, Agnes Ayers, in the fall of 1901. Years later the building burned and the forest reclaimed the land, obliterating the building site.

A fourth district, No. 34, was organized with part of it lying in Rockwood Township where the building was placed. This was called the Malterud School as three brothers, John, Jacob and Carl, owned farms surrounding the school. The building is now a private home.

Fern Township had now grown from three homesteads to a populous community and other events



became firsts. Even Nyhus and Knute Nyhus each gave an acre of farmland for the Becida Cemetery. It lies on a gentle slope overlooking a valley to the east and south, with a woodland to the north. A sandy country road parallels the western boundary, which serves as an approach. The first grave was that of Selmer, infant son of Knute and Inga Nyhus, who died in July 1902. Although it was already in use, the cemetery was surveyed in June 1905 by Lewis Berg, county surveyor.

The first death in the community was that of Cyril Fontaine, infant son of the storekeeper and postmaster Harry Blackey and his wife. The baby died on a cold winter day in December 1900. His grave was later moved to the Becida cemetery. P.W. Martin, the local schoolmaster, delivered the sermon as there was no minister in the area. Mrs. Smith was with the Blackey family during this tragedy and helped prepare the baby for burial. There were no flowers, so geranium leaves were laid around the head of the infant. Mrs. Smith was pregnant and didn't want to touch the body but her fingers did. She always felt this resulted in a small polyp by her son's ear, a birthmark he carried for nearly all of ninety years.

The first white child born in the community was Edith Lind, December 1897, the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Lars Lind. Lars Lind thought he was the first settler in the community until he met Seth Smith on the shores of Hennepin Lake while hunting. In this get-acquainted meeting, it was discovered that Smith filed on his homestead in May 1896, and Lind, who came from Fertile with his wife and three daughters, filed in the fall of 1896. Although the two settlers were only four miles apart, they didn't meet until the spring of 1897.

Sometime in 1897 or 1898 a wedding of Miss Bayse and Mr. Weekly took place. The second wedding caused some stir when Harry Day and Ruby Jackson borrowed Wilson Minor's horse and buggy and eloped. The happily married couple returned the get-away rig to hearty congratulations.

Knute Nyhus brought the first grain binder into the community which now had productive grain fields. The first threshing machine was a horse-powered Bell City separator bought in 1899 collectively by most of the settlers in Fern Township and some in Rockwood Township. The thresher was sold in 1906 after the harvest season and was known to be still in use in the 1930's.

The first clover huller was bought by Dan Stewart and Seth Smith in the fall of 1913. This was a productive area for clover, and at one time flax was grown.

In the early years, a successful sawmill was owned and operated by Dave Olson, brother of Christ Olson, and Gilbert Jacobson. It was later sold to F. Sankey, who continued the successful operation; the pioneers were now replacing the log cabins with two-story frame farmhouses.

In the spring of 1897, Mr. and Mrs. Stewart and their two sons, Daniel and Jack, arrived from North Dakota, having filed on their homesteads in 1896. The first papers filed at Crookston were lost and they refiled at Park Rapids. Their two-story log house built that May was partly blown away in July 1903, by a rare tornado.

Other arrivals in 1897 were E.O. Howe, Calvin Daniels, L.E. Hanson and Harry Blackey and their families. Others who followed in the next two years were C.A. Olson, E.K. Nyhus, F. Sankey, Erick Isaacson, Gust Jacobson, Gilbert Jacobson, Frank Jackson, Knute Nyhus, M.N. Silverberg, Cap Day, Wilson Minor and Will Preston, all with family members.

The center of social and political events of the township was the multi-purpose town hall, which later shared this importance with the church which was built during the late forties and early fifties. This landmark building was used for church services, funerals, Lutheran confirmations, board meetings, elections, fund-raising local-talent-dramas, Farm Bureau and 4-H meetings, wedding showers, dances and general meetings. It is still in use but on a limited



basis.

L.E. Hanson was given the contract for site clearing. The original building was 20'x36'; in 1912 eight feet were added to the south side, making it 28'x36'. In 1928, a kitchen 16'x18' was added onto the east end. At one time, when sleighs and wagons were used, a stable was adjacent to the hall for sheltering the horses during meetings.

Social life in Fern Township kept the settlers in touch with one another through the townhall activities. Nearly all were related through bloodline or marriage and a close-knit community emerged. The women would gather at the townhall, put on the coffee pot, and begin cleaning the hall in preparation for the next activity; if it were a funeral, black drapes would be at the windows; if it were church, chairs would be set up; a hunters' dinner, tables would be arranged; a dance, all chairs would be placed along the walls. In the early days, brass spittoons would have to be cleaned. Memorial Day was a community potluck and a half day's work in the cemetery down the road from the hall. Sometimes a memorial service would be given. After the Becida Lutheran Church was built, many of the activities moved to the church, including the hunters' dinner in the fall.

The telephone party line played an important role in the community. A long-short-long ring meant an emergency, and everyone available ran to the phone ready to help. The most common emergency in the spring was the ever-present brush or grass fire when dead grass was being burnt off yards and roadways.

Search parties for lost or missing people were organized by use of the emergency telephone ring. And then, of course, it was fun to listen. One of the neighbors had a cuckoo clock brought with her from Sweden, and when it "cuckooed" the people on the line would ask, "How are you, Caroline?" and she would answer, "Just fine," and join in the conversation.

Quite often there would be a number of the neighbors on the line at one time. The party line

at that time was not just a very important link with one another, but a source of security and help. The community grew and prospered, but it also knew its tragedies. Long remembered events were the sudden and tragic deaths.

In the early 1900's, Ed Korsdalen, an amiable bachelor, hanged himself; but it forever remained a mystery because he had set and wrapped his bread dough for rising and then took his life.

Ben Williams, a popular youth, slipped and drowned while playing on the logs in the Mississippi River one mile north of his home, May 1911. His father, Charles Williams, was a Civil War veteran.

John Stewart, a young farmer from North Dakota, was killed by lightning while walking behind his team in the field, July 31, 1911.

Eugene Preston was accidentally shot while deer hunting with friends, October 1916. Fortunately, it was never known who fired the fatal shot.

Anton Hanson, brother of Ed Korsdalen, was accidentally killed when his gun discharged while he was climbing through a wire fence, January 1933. When he did not come home for supper, his three sons began the search and found their father.

Byron Edwards died under a sleigh loaded with hay on a Mississippi River meadow, January 1933.

Clifford Barr was found in Diamond Lake; he was missing one weekend when it was thought he was at a friend's house. An autopsy report stated that death was from heart seizure; this was September 30, 1945. Again, the community poured out to search and help.

Time has changed the community and only a few of the old names remain. Of the first four settlers, Smith died in Coquille, Oregon, in 1944, at his daughter Blanche's home; Gutzmeier died at the Herb Rohn farm, about a mile from his homestead, while sacking grain from his threshing machine in late August 1947, and is buried at Akeley, Minnesota. Lars Lind sold his



farm to Fred Barr and moved to Bemidji, and Fred Coffin lived out his last years with his daughter near Minneapolis and died during the World War Two years.

Fern Smith Schroeder, the first white child in Fern Township and for whom it was named, now lives in Roseburg, Oregon, and contributed much information to this history of the township. She was one of the early country school teachers, teaching her first year, when she was seventeen years old, in the Lake Hattie Township. Her second position was in the old Maltby School. Years later this school building was moved to our community to become the sanctuary of the Becida Lutheran Church.

The Becida area was one of the last to receive a blacktop road, and with that step forward, the pioneer spirit was replaced with twentieth-century mobility. The four school-houses are no longer gathering places as students are bussed to other centers. People have homes in the area but work elsewhere, so farming bees are no longer necessary. Private telephone service has replaced the party lines and its cozy chattiness. One young man works as far away as Saudi Arabia and commutes on a regular schedule - taking less time than it took Buckskin Smith to haul materials from Park Rapids.

It is said, "One can never go home again, except in memory." And so it is with Fern Township and the early days.

Verna Barr Haines.

Acknowledgments:

Fern Smith Schroeder, for her letters, papers and photograph of the first log home in Fern Township which her parents built in 1896, while living in a tent.

The late Fred Gutzmeier, for his account of the pioneer days in the township.