

A Brief History of the City of Stephenson

The first man to settle in what is now known as the City of Stephenson was James Valentine. Valentine came here in 1870 and established three small buildings where Day Star Restaurant is now located. It is to be remembered that, starting at the city limits of Menominee, each section on the railway was marked. This method designated the land on which the City of Stephenson is built as Section 21.

When the Chicago and Northwestern Railway commissioned to build the rail line from Menominee to Escanaba, the United States Government granted the new railway every other forty, from the city limits of Menominee to the city limits of Escanaba. The railway had to built in one year. The year of the grant was 1870.

In order to cover the approximately 60 miles, it was necessary to begin building the new railway at the city limits of Menominee and at the city limits of Escanaba at the same time, with a meeting place somewhere in the area of what is now the village of Powers.

In surveying the new route, it was noted that swamp areas of some great size were located in the direct path of the new road. As the railway had the option of using any part of the forty, it was necessary in some cases to shift the roadbed entirely clear of some forties with deep swamps.

When the roadbed was completed, the railway had the rights to sell that land that was not used and most of the unused land sold for \$1 per acre and, in swamp areas, as cheaply as 40 cents per acre.

With the establishment of the railway, which began operation in 1871, the little village of Stephenson, about half-way between Escanaba and Menominee, was at an advantage of being a necessary place for steam trains to take on a water supply. This meant that Stephenson had established a place in the life and operation of steam trains.

Tragedy struck the village with the burning of 27 buildings in the great fire of 1865. All that area from Robert Street on the south to Samuel Street on the north burned without leaving a single building standing. Business owners had little or no insurance. There was no fire protection and the only source of water was the Little Cedar River.

At this time, the City of Menominee had shifted from manual pumps to the horse-drawn, steam-operated type for its fire department. Dr. Sawbridge, along with other Stephenson businessmen, on hearing that the City of Menominee had a six-man manually operated pump, decided to go down there to make a deal for the used equipment. The purchase of used fire fighting equipment solved one of the village's major problems. But the second - where was financing to come from, remained.

In the back room of Dr. Sawbridge's drug store, on Dec. 5, 1902, five local men with a deputy from the banking department met with the sole interest of establishing a bank. Needed was \$20,000 for capital. Five local men came up with the needed cash and the establishment of a bank was on its way.

It can be noted that every year since the village-city started, there has never been one during which something has not been built, remodeled, enlarged or replaced in Stephenson.

Let's turn the page to more modern times.

The City of Stephenson has been a fifth-class city for the past 25 years. A delegation of five local men, Albert Kipfer, chairman of the county board of supervisors; Harry Westrich, president and manager of Rustic Fencing Company; Frank Bayee, editor and publisher of the Menominee County Journal; Ed Rickaby, owner and manager of the Tivoli Theatre; and Joseph Gucky, superintendent of the Stephenson School System, was designated to visit five fifth-class cities in the Upper Peninsula. (Mr. Gucky had to excuse himself from the delegation because of a meeting with school officials in Marquette on educational matters.) They started the tour in Gaastra, then proceeded to Iron River, Stambaugh, Gladstone and Norway. Their findings included information on city finances, fire and police protection, building codes, sewer, water and electric services. Each of the cities had different methods of handling departments within it. Copies of their charters were given the "tour men" to bring back to Stephenson.

A charter commission had been named to review all material and work out what would be in the new Stephenson city charter. The nine members on the charter commission were Allen Weber, Herb Corey, Francis Menacher, John Sundquist, Joseph LaComb, George Beaudoin, Donald Johnson, Carmen Anderson and Donovan Diehm.

Swearing-in ceremonies for the new council took place in the Bank of Stephenson basement Dec. 22, 1970.

The first election under the new charter was held April 7, 1970. This election was somewhat different from former ones, in that candidates were elected to the office - namely, they were elected in separate parts on the ballot - mayor was listed alone, councilmen were listed with the description of each office. Therefore, a candidate listed as a councilman could not be elected mayor. In former years, so many people were elected to the council and, after elections, the offices were directed by the appointed clerk who called the officers to be elected to the city's general council. Under the new charter system, each officer elected had to be voted on as to the office he was seeking. In this way, the mayor was elected mayor and the councilmen as a group with appointments to various city offices made by the mayor.

In the past 25 years, remarkable changes have taken place. Although some of

the events have slipped our minds, because we have been here and do not sense the time element, it seems they have been here for years. Our school has been here for years, but look at the new school - beautiful and practical. Look at the size of the bank building - how it keeps growing. Look at the various parks in the city: Erickson Park - a beautiful playground; Veterans' Park in the center of the city - alive with new people every time a flea market is held; Firemen's Park on the banks of the Little Cedar River - which, every Tuesday, is alive with men interested in besting someone in the art of horseshoe pitching (on the only good courts in Menominee County).

Take a ride around the city some evening and look at the new homes that have been built in the past 25 years. Look at the difference - 50 years ago - there were five large farms within the city limits. They are gone and in their stead are new homes, businesses and recreation areas.

We have Roubal Nursing Home, a care center for those who can no longer live at home or alone; Mapleaire Apartments with 42 housing units for seniors or those who no longer wish to maintain homes.

Take a trip down memory lane - remember the families who settled here from almost every country in Europe. They were French, Polish, Hungarian, Finnish, Dutch and more from war-torn Europe following the great wars. I remember being at citizenship meetings at the county building when some of them applied for citizenship with their handkerchiefs in hands and tears in their eyes, afraid that they might have to go back to their homelands that offered nothing in security and decent living. Many of these became the early residents of Stephenson.

Frank Bayee