

## HISTORY OF MEEKER COUNTY

Meeker County is located sixty-four miles almost directly west of Minneapolis. It is made up of seventeen and one-half townships and lays almost square. It has Trunk Highways No. 7, 12 and 55 crossing it east and west, and No. 15, 22, 24 and 4 north and south. It has about one hundred lakes of various sizes for fishing and recreation.

The City of Litchfield is the County seat and there are the following incorporated villages: Cedar Mills, Cosmos, Grove City, Darwin, Dassel, Kingston, Watkins and Eden Valley. The unincorporated villages include Corvuso, Rosendale, Crow River, Manannah, North Kingston and Forest City.

Nothing was known of the area that now constitutes the County, either by actual knowledge or tradition until some time in the summer of 1855. Two timber cruisers looking for saw timber came up the North Branch of the Crow River from the Mississippi and, by coincidence, met a party who came from Shakopee looking for sites for a mill or town site, at a point on the Crow River now known as Forest City.

### **Meeker County Is Established:**

The County was created by an act of the legislature in February of 1856. That same summer government surveyors made a survey of the County. Meeker County was named after Judge B.B. Meeker of St. Anthony. There is no record that he actually had any part in the creation of the county. County government was set up on May 6, 1856 by the County Commissioners at Forest City. The Government Land Office was set up that same season and a post office was established at Forest City.

The erection of a sawmill at Forest City in 1856 was the first industry in the County. Flourmills at Forest City, Kingston and Mannanah were put into operation in the next three years. Immigration followed quickly and by 1862 there were communities at Forest City, Kingston, Manannah, Rice Lake, Ness and Peterson Lake.

The massacre at Acton marked the opening of the Indian Wars. This occurred on August 17, 1862 and brought death to more than four hundred men, women and children in the Minnesota valley. The following year a series of fortifications were erected in the county that, for three years, served as the only protection the whites had.

### **Meeker County Grows:**

After the end of the Civil War, a flood of immigration came to the County from the northern European countries and from Kentucky and West Virginia. The year of 1869 saw the railroad come to the County and the County Seat moved from Forest City to Litchfield. The Land Office was moved to Greenleaf, which, by that time, had a mill, store, blacksmith shop, etc. Two years later the Land Office was moved to Litchfield and shortly after that, to Benson. Meeker County was no longer the "frontier."

The first money raised by taxation was used to provide schools at Forest City and Kingston. There were more than forty rural schools in the County by 1875 and eventually ninety-four rural schools furnished education to the rural areas. Litchfield High School was started in 1879. The first graduation was held in 1881. There are high schools at Litchfield, Dassel, Grove City, Cosmos, and Eden Valley. There are parochial schools at Litchfield, Watkins, Eden Valley and Cedar Mills.

### **Industries:**

Industries came to Litchfield and Dassel. Originally the cash crop was fur, then hoop poles, ties and wood products, wheat and gradually flax, barley and other grains moved in along side of wheat. The organization of a creamery in Litchfield in 1885 brought dairying for cash income. Hogs and cattle for beef entered the picture and we had a well-rounded farm program by 1890.

Originally cattle from the County were driven to market, mostly to the military units and to the Twin Cities. The cattle buyers entered the picture to ship the cattle by rail. This proved to be a somewhat erratic market and not the best for the producer. Again, a cooperative entered the picture to eventually influence cattle marketing over the entire nation. It also took H. L. Halvorson, one of the early and most successful managers, to the University of Kentucky and Illinois to lecture on this type of marketing.

The turn of the century marked a change in the economy of the County. The virgin land that produced bounteous crops of wheat, oats, barley, flax and rye over the years began to show the need for some fertilizer. About 1909, alfalfa was introduced into the County. Grimms variety would stand the weather conditions and

the course of forage was solved. New varieties followed to increase yields but this crop had taken its place in our production. Corn was gradually becoming more widely planted and increasing herds of cattle fed with corn. Red clover and small grains furnished the fertilizer. Corn filled the silos that rapidly appeared in the countryside and soon seed corn became a cash crop.

Minnesota No. 13 corn was developed by the University of Minnesota and our people started raising it almost exclusively. Northrop King contracted with farmers around Dassel to raise seed corn and around 1925 strains of hybrid corn were originated in the vicinity of Dassel. By 1950 seed corn was bringing more than a million dollars to the County and our varieties were found in all the agricultural areas of the world.

The dairy industry boomed in the early days of the 20th century. The Danes who settled in Danielson Township thought about the cooperatives in their native land and in 1893 organized the first cooperative creamery in the County. By 1920 we had 17 creameries and one cheese factory. Butter was the product that was produced for market, but the market was in New York and Philadelphia. Refrigerated rail cars were not plentiful and not dependable and freight rates were high.

About 1920, local creameries joined together to organize the First District Association. This organization fostered pool shipments by creameries, set up a quality program, and started to buy supplies collectively. Soon a statewide group, that eventually became the Land O'Lakes Creamery, came into being-the largest dairy marketing organization in the world. County local, John Brandt, helped organize the Land O'Lakes and was its president until his death.

Skim milk was a byproduct of butter manufacturing and for a long time was not recognized for its food value except for feed for calves and swine. This was equally true of buttermilk. But by 1925, the candy and baking industry was asking for both. It wasn't economical to ship all the water in the products and so a method of drying down to solids was developed. The First District Association built a drying plant at Litchfield in 1925 to dry buttermilk. Today this firm dries and packages about two train carloads of dried milk products per day.

The automobile came to the County quite early and because the people were progressively minded, we soon embarked on a road-building program that has given us many miles of good road.

The Rural Electrical Administration Act was passed by Congress in 1935. Ralph Wayne was the County Agent and he immediately saw the possibility of the use of electrical energy on the farm. With a group of cooperatively minded farmers, he organized the Meeker Cooperative Light and Power. Irving J. Clinton was selected as manager and by December 8, 1936, electric station service was made available to about 180 farms and in ten years, nearly every farm in the County and, to a limited extent, in five other counties.

#### **Influential Citizens:**

Some of our citizens entered the field of politics and served our state and nation. Among them were: Peter E. Hanson served as Secretary of State, S. W. Leavet as Insurance Commissioner and A.T. Koerner as Secretary of State. Magnus Johnson served in the US Senate and Fred Marshall served in the House of Representatives for 16 years. Charles March was a member of the Federal Trade Commission. T.G. Stitts, who came here to serve as County Agent, went on to serve in the US Department of Agriculture. Ralph Wayne also was County Agent and left to join the staff at the University of Minnesota.

In the field of sports, we have Bernie Bierman who led the Golden Gophers to fame, Shorty Almquist who played for Minnesota and Sid Hammer who played basketball for Minnesota.

In the field of science we have John O'Fallon and DeVaughn Nelson, graduates of Litchfield High School, both nationally known in the field of atomic science.