

THE RAILROAD COMES TO WESTERN DOUGLAS COUNTY

A record of events as they happened in 1879-80

(Excerpts from "The Douglas County News")

Compiled by: M.L. "Bud" Greenquist. Brandon, Minnesota. September, 1988

Historical Perspective

When Settlement of Douglas County began in the late 1850s, travel to and from the markets at St. Cloud was by foot or on cart. In about 1858 the Burbank Stage Company (later the Minnesota Stage Company) established a route between St. Cloud and the Red River Valley, with one of the many rest stops, or way stations, at a place called Chippewa Station, located atop a large hill about two and one-half miles north of present day Brandon, on the northwest corner of Little Chippewa Lake. The next scheduled way station was at Pomme de Terre in eastern Grant County. Both of these stations became forts during the Sioux Indian uprising in the early 1860s.

During the 1870s the stagecoach began to disappear as the railroad began to creep westward from St. Cloud. With the railroad came all manner of goods and services for the settlers and others trying to make a living in the western wilderness. The railroad also provided much needed employment for hundreds of folks in the communities through which it passed as the surveyed landscape became busy with horse-drawn scrapers, earth movers, plows, graders, and with wagons hauling stone, gravel and dirt. Men with pick, shovel and wheelbarrows put on the finishing touches as the railroad ties were partially embedded and rails (or "iron" as it was called in those days) were laid for the westward movement of the "iron horse."

Train engine refueling stations (wood and later coal) were placed every 5-8 miles along the path of the railroad. Each refueling station became a depot and each depot became a village. Since water did not have to be taken on as often as fuel, a well was dug and a water tank built at every second or third village. All villages were given a name, sometimes that of the person who donated the land upon which the depot was built, but many were renamed later in honor of some well-known person or place. Most of these railroad villages were platted subsequent to the arrival of the railroad and incorporated as villages a few years later. The villages of Brandon, Evansville and Ashby were platted in the fall of 1879, Garfield and Dalton in 1882 and Melby in 1902.

The coming of the railroad changed many things in the lives of settlers and others. Railroad villages were busy places as new businesses came on the scene and as people gathered at the villages to trade, worship, visit or board the train for other places up or down the line. The mail came faster now and with it a complete reorganization of the local postal system, as small post offices in the homes of settler-postmasters gave way to rural distribution from central post offices located at railroad villages. Main roads for horse-drawn means of travel between railroad villages often were built parallel to the railroad tracks.

The St. Paul and Pacific Railroad reached Alexandria in the fall of 1878, where it paused on its journey to the northwest until the following spring when it resumed its movement toward Fergus Falls. These were exciting times for folks in western Douglas County. Their lives would be changed forever because of the railroad and everyone knew it. In 1879, the train reached what is today Garfield, Brandon, Evansville and Melby. By year's end the rail line stretched all the way to the Barnesville area where it linked up with the rail line from Manitoba, Canada.

Perhaps the greatest impact the coming of the railroad had upon a single community in Douglas County was in the Township of Chippewa, where the small village of Brandon had been platted ten years earlier at Chippewa Station near the juncture of Sections 4, 5, 8 and 9. In August 1879 the railroad engineers located their depot in Section 21, two and one-half miles south of the village. Because the center of trade in the township would shift to where the depot was located, elements of the original village of Brandon were abandoned or moved "lock, stock and barrel" to the railroad, where the City of Brandon stands today.

The railroad originally was called the First Division of the St. Paul and Pacific, later the St. Vincent Branch of the St. Paul and Pacific, and on March 14, 1879, the branch line of the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad. By the end of 1879 it became known as the Northern Pacific and years later, the Great Northern.

A final note, as the railroad contributed to the demise of the stagecoach, so too, did the interstate highway system contribute to the demise of the railroad as a major means of transportation in western Douglas County. Time marches on....

April 17, 1879: Another party of surveyors in charge of N.D. Miller, came up Tuesday evening to work on the railroad grade between here (Alexandria) and Fergus Falls. Everything indicates lively times along the line this season.

April 24, 1879: The railroad engineers have reached Evansville.

May 1, 1879: A party of railroad officials consisting of James J. Hill, John Ross, J.T. Dodge and D.M. Robbins came up on last Thursday's train and left Friday morning for a trip over the grade between this place (Alexandria) and Fergus Falls.

May 8, 1879: Last Saturday another party of surveyors passed here (Alexandria) bound for Fergus Falls to look up the best location for the railroad line.

May 15, 1879: During the past year the branch line of the St. Paul & Pacific Railroad was completed to this place (Alexandria), which is at present its terminus. The engineers, however, are about through with the survey on the line west of this place to the western line of Douglas County, midway between Alexandria and Fergus Falls and grading will commence immediately in good earnest.

The St. Paul & Pacific, in reorganizing under new management, which has resulted from the foreclosure proceedings, will change the name of the corporation to that of the St. Paul and Manitoba Railway Company.

Contract Let – The contract for constructing the branch line of the St. Paul & Pacific from this place (Alexandria) to Barnesville has been let to Harrison, Langdon & Shepard. The distance is seventy-two miles and the terms of the contract call for completion of the road by December 15th next. The average grading work per mile is 14,000 yards.

J.R. Ryan of Footville, Wisconsin, has a subcontract ten miles west of Alexandria, the heaviest grade between this place (Alexandria) and Evansville and will start from here (Alexandria) on Sunday morning with twelve teams and lumber for boarding shanties, stables, etc., and from forty to fifty men to work. All parties wishing work for themselves or teams should apply to Frank Reynolds, wages \$1.75 per day for men and \$3 for teams. Also two men and women wanted for cooks.

M. McMahan has a contract near Evansville and arrived on Saturday last with 13 men and 23 horses, with wagons, etc. and left the scene of action today.

Mr. D. Grant of Faribault, who has the contract for building all the bridges west of here, returned from a trip over the line last evening. He expects the pile-drivers, teams, etc. up this evening and will commence work immediately.

Engineer Baker was recalled from Dakota this week and is expected up with a party of surveyors tomorrow to set the grade stakes on the first twenty miles of road west.

Chief Engineer Dodge passed over the grade and has changed it somewhat in places.

Tents and camping utensils are expected the first of next week. Wheelbarrows, scrapers and plows together with two carloads of lumber came up last evening. The supplies will be furnished by the contractors, Harrison, Langdon & Shepard, who have rented the store building of Chas. Sondag, which will be in charge of Mr. Robbins who is now there.

Among the many men in town intending to make contracts, is G.C. Campbell of Minneapolis, who passes over the road today with a view of taking a large contract near Evansville.

May 29, 1879: The subcontracts for all the grading on the railroad through to Barnesville have been let.

June 5, 1879: In the matter of the right-of-way for the railroad through the farm of Capt. Whitcomb, the question was by mutual agreement, left to arbitration and the following gentlemen were chosen to decide the matter: Frank Reynolds, A.H. Taylor and C.F. Sims. They met on Saturday last and allowed Mr. Whitcomb \$446.65, which decision appears to be satisfactory to both parties.

Dissatisfaction among the Teamsters, caused by small pay and overwork, was the reason for several of them leaving the railroad yesterday.

A large number of hands working on the grade near Evansville struck for \$1.50 per day on Monday last. The contractors acceded to their demand and the men went to work again.

June 12, 1879: The railroad company has settled with R. Amundson of Evansville for right-of-way allowing him \$275 and a roadway under the track.

The depot has been located and ground staked out on the southwest quarter of Section 25, Town of Chippewa, nine miles west of Alexandria. The land is owned by S.S. Ulmer and he intends laying out a town site as soon as the necessary arrangements are completed. (Research Note: Later changed to Section 21 of Chippewa Township.

We are informed by the courteous and popular walking boss, Mr. McDonald, that Messrs. Cable and McMahon will complete their contracts of grading on the railroad next week, and all the work along the line between Alexandria and Pelican Lake is progressing satisfactorily and rapidly.

The paymaster came up last evening.

June 19, 1879: The grading, including a side track for the depot in the southeast part of Chippewa Town is completed and ready for the track layers.

Track laying is expecting to begin at this point (Alexandria) about the 15th of next month.

June 24, 1879: The St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railroad is successor of the St. Paul & Pacific as of March 14, 1879.

Ford Bros., railroad subcontractors, now have engaged on their works eighty teams and want 20 more.

July 31, 1879: Track layers are about 4 ½ miles west of Alexandria. We learned that the railroad officials think strongly of running regular trains to Evansville as soon as track laying is completed to that point.

August 7, 1879: Track laid 8 ½ miles west of Alexandria.

August 14, 1879: First depot west of Alexandria located on SW quarter of Section 32, Town of Ida, 7 miles from Alexandria. Five acres for the depot grounds were donated by Andrew Sanstead and 1 ½ acres by C.G. Johnson. (Research note: This depot became known as Sanstead Station and later Garfield.)

August 21, 1879: On Monday (18th) Engineer Sewell located the 2nd depot west of Alexandria. It is to be called Brandon. It is located on Section 21 in the Town of Chippewa and is thirteen miles from Alexandria and five miles from Evansville. Mr. Sewell has had orders to lay out several squares as there are parties ready who wish to buy lots.

August 28, 1879: Track laying was resumed last Saturday (23rd) morning and the track layers reached Brandon last evening (27th).

August 28, 1879: The contractors on the branch line of the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba resume track-laying beyond Alexandria today. Fifty-three miles of roadway is graded and ready for the iron, which will be laid as fast as possible to Barnesville. Twenty-three miles of grading, including the heavy work at and near Fergus Falls will complete the roadway, but it is not expected to take the cars into Fergus Falls before November 1st.

September 4, 1879: The track layers were about one mile west of Evansville last evening (3rd) and going along at the rate of a mile and a quarter a day.

Regular trains will soon run to the new towns of Brandon and Evansville. The first freight will be taken on next Monday (8th).

Town lots in Evansville are going like hotcakes.

September 11, 1879: The plat of the town site of Brandon was filed in the office of the Register of Deeds Tuesday (Sept. 9th).

The mixed day train from St. Paul commenced running through to Evansville on Tuesday (9th) last and will run regularly to that place until the track is laid to Parkdale. The night train will not run further than Alexandria at present. Mr. Meeker will have charge of railroad business at Evansville. (Research Note: Parkdale located in Section 3 Tumuli Township was platted in 1876 as Hazel Dell, changed to Parkdale by state legislature, February 7, 1878, located a short distance northwest of Dalton.)

News from Evansville: The tracklayers are now about six miles west of here and are going at a rate of one-to-one and one-fourth miles per day. The first car loaded with merchandise came into Evansville last evening and freight will come in regularly now. Mr. S. Meeker is to be our depot agent and he will undoubtedly make a very good one. Our new blacksmiths will commence building their shop as soon as lumber can be got up here.

September 18, 1879: The track layers were within six and one-half miles of Parkdale last evening (17th).

October 2, 1879: Another change went into operation Monday (29 Sept) in regard to the running of trains. The western trains now leave Alexandria at 7 a.m., arriving in

Brandon at 8:30, Evansville 9:10 and St. Olaff at 11. Returning leaves St. Olaff at 2:30, Evansville at 4:20, Brandon 5:00, arriving at Alexandria at 6:30 p.m.

October 9, 1879: Roadmaster Myers rode up on his railroad velocipede last Tuesday (7th). It was a three-wheeled contrivance and can be run very rapidly—the motion power being furnished by the arms.

October 16, 1879: We last week made our first trip over the new road from Alexandria to the end of the track, eleven miles from Fergus; arriving at Alexandria in the middle of the night and leaving early in the morning, we can only speak of the beauty of her situation, her nicely graded principal street and our sincere regrets at not being able to renew and cultivate the acquaintance of some of her citizens.

Leaving Alexandria at seven o'clock on a beautiful morning, the journey of 35 miles to Tumuli or "St. Olaff" as it is called, was very pleasant, though consuming four hours time. The grades are easy and the condition of the track as good as any new road we every passed over. Lumber is being hauled by every train to the points where stations and elevators have been located and freight for this place is now coming to the end to the track.

At the station of Brandon we saw two store buildings just completing, which will compare well with the best buildings of that class in this town of Alexandria. The elevator and station house are in progress. This is considered to be a promising point and starts off rightly by the erection of good buildings at first.

At Evansville work is lively on the station and elevator. There is rivalry here as to the location of business, and probably stores will spring up simultaneously on both sides of the track. This station will draw a large amount of trade from the southwest, embracing a portion of Grant County.

October 16, 1879: Andrew Sanstead has laid out a town site at Sanstead Station and has already sold several lots. The citizens in the vicinity are making an effort to build a "Fremad" elevator.

November 13, 1879: Track laying was resumed from St. Olaff on Friday (7th) last and it is expected the cars will run into Fergus Falls by the 20th.

The stately situated town of Brandon, for which we augur a bright and prosperous future, is growing fast. The completion of the side-track last week gave the elevator builders an opportunity to commence work last Monday. A section house and blacksmith shop have been built. The depot is about finished, and a hotel partly erected. It has also a lumber yard. The above together with the handsome stores of Capt. Stowe and Mr. Engemoen, and several smaller buildings, such as stables, warehouses, etc., gives to the embryo town a business-like appearance.

Evansville is booming! New elevator is in process of erection. Evansville now boasts of a photograph gallery on wheels. M.C. Plummer has been quite unwell during the past week. The new drug store is closely watched for items.

Regarding the railroad watering station at Evansville..... Three holes have been bored, in all 200 feet, the deepest is 152 feet and no water is in upper or lower town. Briggs & McKillips are now engaged in boring one for the railroad company near the track. They have reached the depth of 127 feet and no water.

November 27, 1879: (News from Evansville) Water at last in the railroad well at the depth of 153 feet. "About fifty couples tripped the light fantastic toe" at the new depot warehouse on Saturday evening. Music by Messrs. Aldreen & Kron.

(News from Evansville) The joyfully anticipated railroad penetrated the borders of Fergus Falls last Tuesday. The track layers are expected to come together on Monday west of Fergus. It is gratifying to say that we are now on the grand trunk line between Manitoba and St. Paul and ere long the heavy loaded and quick succeeding trains will be heard thundering into our depot.

Mr. L.A. Pixley, the new depot agent (at Evansville), will remain in charge permanently.

December 4, 1879: Regular trains will run into Fergus Falls next week.

A "Consummation" long looked for occurred yesterday and the "hostile cities" are now connected with Manitoba by a railroad second to none in the Northwest.

Three new stores have been put in at St. Olaff. The elevator at Brandon received its first bushel of wheat yesterday. Put it down in a memorandum book, in a decade its citizens can refer to the event with pride.

December 11, 1879: The Red River is to be made navigable from Moorhead to Breckenridge during this winter. This will allow steamboats to bring out the wheat to the Northern Pacific next season.

On Monday last (8th), trains commenced running regularly to Fergus Falls and now run as follows: Leave St. Paul at 7 a.m., St. Cloud at 11:20, Alexandria at 4 p.m., arriving at Fergus Falls at 7:45 p.m. Leave Fergus Falls at 6:30 a.m., Alexandria at 10:22 a.m., St. Cloud at 3:15 p.m., arriving in St. Paul at 6:35 p.m.

The name of the first station west of Evansville has been changed from Larson to Brighton and St. Olaff to Dalton. (Research note: Speculation that Brighton may be what is now Ashby but no mention has been made in the news about the Ashby station, reportedly platted in 1879.)

Owing to the snow storm yesterday, the train going east arrived here two and a half hours late. It was found necessary to leave all the freight cars at Evansville.

It is expected that through trains will be put on this line between the 15th and 20th, two gravel trains being at work ballasting the road as far as possible between Fergus Falls and Barnesville.

December 18, 1879: Trains commenced running from Fergus Falls to Barnesville yesterday. Leave Fergus Falls at 7:30 a.m., arrive at Barnesville 10:30 a.m.. Returning leave Barnesville at 12:30 and arrive at Fergus Falls at 3:30.

The number of loaded cars standing on the three side tracks at the (Alexandria) depot, gives the observing stranger an idea that Alexandria is chock full of business. And that idea is not dispelled on arriving at Main Street, which is so crowded at times with farmers teams as to render it almost impassable. Alexandria is truly "booming", partly because her merchants throw their banners to the breeze.

40 below at Evansville.

(News from Evansville)...A new wagon shop is to be erected near the blacksmith shop in the spring...Mr. O.N. Ostrom, agent at grain house, arrived with his family last week and will occupy his new residence as soon as completed...Many farmers complain of attacks on their sheep-fold by wolves...Mr. M. Meeker now occupies his new hotel which is a model of its kind, and managed to the satisfaction of his many patrons. (Research note: Mr. Meeker was the former depot agent in Evansville)...New buildings loom up in every direction – many more expect to build in the Spring...Martin Nelson intends to remove his family from Alexandria next week to this place (Evansville) to occupy his new residence.

December 25, 1879: (News from Evansville: Diphtheria is somewhat prevalent. Carpenters are at work putting the water tank in place and will soon have it ready for use.

January 1, 1880: Through trains were not run on Sunday as announced, owing to the incomplete condition of the roundhouse at Fergus Falls.

January 8, 1880: The water tank (at Evansville), which is the largest of its kind this side of St. Cloud, is nearly ready for use. A gentleman from St. Paul arrived on Tuesday morning to put the pump in working order. The well which is 185 feet deep contains eighty feet of water, making one of the best wells on the line. The water is raised by an immense windmill.

January 15, 1880: The fare from Alexandria to St. Paul is now \$5.60.

The first through train on Monday morning contained a badly demoralized sleeping car. Between St. Vincent and Fergus Falls, a gas meter in the car exploded with the noise of a cannon. Windows and mirrors were broken, the doors blown off and a

large hole made through the roof. Nine passengers were in the car and came out unharmed.

Last Thursday evening as the freight train was booming along between Melrose and Sauk Centre, the flange of one of the hind wheels of a car broke off, throwing the two wheels from the track. In this condition the train ran six miles and in crossing the Sauk River bridge a tie was broken and nearly all the spikes in one rail broken off. The train arrived safely at Sauk Centre when the accident was discovered.

January 22, 1880: Brandon not only has a large elevator, but a warehouse also under the charge of Lew Goodsell of Fergus Falls.

Competition raised the price of wheat to \$1.08 at Brandon Tuesday.

An engine is employed near the (Evansville) depot in furnishing power to a circular saw, engaged in cutting up an immense pile of wood for the railroad company.

The snow fences along the railroad west of Alexandria were all completed last week.

Town lots in Brandon are in good demand and quite a number have changed hands lately.

February 19, 1880: A misplaced switch at Evansville threw the engine off the east-bound freight train from the track Tuesday (17th). Damage slight.

OLD TIME STEAM LOCOMOTIVE TAKING ON COAL IN 1880 **A picture taken in Evansville**

Here is a picture taken in 1880 of a locomotive taking on coal at the coal supply bins in Evansville. The bins were located about a block and a half west of the depot. The water tank and the depot can be seen at the far right in the picture. Before coal could be secured, the engines had to take on wood every few miles. It was said that there were railroad yards scattered along the right of way all along the line to keep the locomotives supplied with wood. Water did not have to be taken on as often so water tanks were from 10-15 miles apart. The tracks lay in exactly the same place today as when they were completed through Evansville in 1879. The men in the picture could not be identified.

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