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# The formative years of Onawa, Iowa, 1857-1912

Donald Lloyd Reed

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

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**THE FORMATIVE YEARS OF ONAWA, IOWA**

**1857-1912**



**A Thesis**

108

**Presented to**

**the Faculty of the Department of History**

**The University of Omaha**



**In Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Master of Arts**



**by**

**Donald Lloyd Reed**

**August 1966**

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Accepted for the faculty of the College of Graduate Studies  
of the University of Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Master of Arts.

Frederick W. Robinson - History  
Chairman Department

Graduate Committee

Stanley T. Beck - History  
Name Department

Paul L. Beck - History

D.M. Marquardt - Chemistry

Representative of Graduate Council

## PREFACE

Each community throughout the United States is historically important in presenting a thorough and complete panoramic sweep of the United States. Thus, the history of every community throughout this vast land should be written. Onawa was such a community.

The purpose of this narrative was to tell the early history of Onawa, Iowa, from approximately 1857 to 1912. Also, it was hoped that this writing would create a better understanding of the many problems which face a small town as it struggles to grow into a prosperous community. Formation of the community was slow, tedious work started by founding fathers and continued by each following generation. Furthermore, it was hoped that the reader's mind might be stimulated into drawing a comparison between Onawa and any small town which might be known to them.

The author's interest in this subject was stimulated by his heritage and by Mrs. Myrtle Williams, the librarian in Onawa. It has been a rewarding study because of the wealth of original documents, old newspapers, and some very interesting interviews.

My sincere appreciation to Mrs. Myrtle Williams for her untiring help, to Dr. F. W. Adrian for his continuing effort to improve the quality of the writing in this paper, and to the members of the Department at the University of Omaha for a great many helpful suggestions.

A deep appreciation to my wife, Eileen, who helped type and took care of the farm during the days the writer spent in Omaha. To my daughter, Deborah, who also helped with the chores and was extremely considerate when her father was writing and researching the paper.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE INTRODUCTION

In the 1850's, many hamlets, villages, and towns began to appear in the fertile Missouri Valley basin. Some of these hamlets were destined to grow into important cities, others just barely managed to survive, while some, over the years, completely disappeared. Onawa, Iowa, was one that survived. Furthermore, the formative years of Onawa were significant in the development of Monona County which, in turn, contributed a minor, but important role in linking together the Iowa-Nebraska Missouri River basin, a basin which became increasingly important in agriculture, industry, and transportation.

Probably the first white men to pass near the location of the future settlement of Onawa were the members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. This expedition reached the shores of Monona County on August 8, 1804. They camped three successive nights in the county; on the second night, their camp was located three miles due west of the present site of Onawa.<sup>1</sup> Captain Lewis noted that the river banks were

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<sup>1</sup>Mitchell Vincent's personal survey of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. This was a map of a portion of Monona County, Iowa, showing the course of the Missouri River in 1804. Projected from the formal notes and courses of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, January, 1895. (In the files of the Onawa Library).

lined with tall cottonwood trees and a great many grape vines were entangled in the underbrush. Although there was an abundance of wildlife, such as elk, turkey, and beaver, the mosquitoes were terrible.<sup>2</sup> During the next several years innumerable fur traders and trappers undoubtedly passed by this area, and, perhaps, an occasional trapper stopped for a time.

It was not, however, until 1851 that there seemed to have been any record of such activity. In the spring of that year, a French fur trader, by the name of Charles Larpenteur, traveled along the Missouri Valley from the Vermillion Post in South Dakota to the vicinity of the present site of Little Sioux, Iowa. The Missouri River was on a rampage, and bottom lands were covered with flood waters. Large inundated areas forced him to follow a circuitous route as he slowly journeyed down the valley. One of his camp sites was located on high and dry ground by a grove, later named "Ashton Grove."<sup>3</sup> The higher elevation of this area was an enticing site for future settlement.

That fall, Aaron Cook, his son James, and Josiah Sumner came to Monona County in an ox-drawn wagon in search of bee trees. They found an abundance of good winter feed for livestock, so they

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<sup>2</sup>Meriwether Lewis, The Lewis and Clark Expedition (The 1814 ed., unabridged; New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1961), I, 37.

<sup>3</sup>Elliott Coues (ed.), Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri, The Personal Narrative of Charles Larpenteur, 1833-1872, (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1898), II, 292-95.

returned with cattle and spent the winter herding them on the river bottoms.<sup>4</sup> The following winter, Isaac Ashton brought his family into the County and staked a claim at the grove which was soon to be known by his name. He built a home and plowed ten acres of sod.<sup>5</sup> Other settlers began to locate in the general area, and soon there was a need for more political sub-divisions in western Iowa.

When Iowa became a state in 1846, the section which later became Monona County was attached to Benton County, situated in the eastern part of the state. From 1851 to 1853, the Monona area was attached to Polk County in the central part of the state, for judicial and revenue purposes. In 1853, it became part of Harrison County, but soon a movement was started to create two counties. The preliminaries having been taken care of, an election was held on April 3 and the voters approved the organization of Monona County as a separate political entity.<sup>6</sup> Monona County was situated along the Missouri River about half-way between the northern and southern boundary of the state of Iowa.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Monona Cordon, April 6, 1861; History of Western Iowa (Sioux City: Western Publishing Company, 1882), p. 244.

<sup>5</sup>A. T. Andreas (Illustrator), Historical Atlas of State of Iowa, 1875 (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1875), p. 409. Hereafter cited as Andreas, Historical Atlas.

<sup>6</sup>History of Monona County, Iowa (Chicago: National Publishing Company, 1890), p. 166. Hereafter cited as History of Monona County.

<sup>7</sup>See Appendix I for a map of Iowa showing Monona County, p.

Besides having rich fertile soil and over 165,000 acres of Missouri River bottom land to entice farmers, western Monona County had other attractive features. It had easy access to the Missouri River, and, by 1858, steamboats were operating regularly, north from Omaha.<sup>8</sup> There were also rumors regarding the construction of a railroad in the area, and undoubtedly some people settled near the vicinity hoping that they might be able to share in the general prosperity that would result. Other people were forced into the area because of cheap land, as contrasted with the prices in neighboring areas. For example, in 1856, lots were selling in Sioux City for prices ranging from \$400 to \$1,000.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the area had a number of advantages to offer the prospective settler.

The first town established in Monona County was Preparation, located in the southeastern section of the County. It was founded in 1854 by Charles B. Thompson, a fanatical Mormon leader. Thompson had come to this vicinity from St. Louis as a result of the general Mormon migration throughout this new territory. Under the skillful guidance of Thompson, Preparation was laid out, and the land pre-empted under the laws of the United States. A church, "Jehovah's Presbytery," was

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<sup>8</sup>The Council Bluffs Nonpareil, April 10, 1858.

<sup>9</sup>Monona County Gazette, August 20, 1885.

established with Thompson as its leader.<sup>10</sup> The new village developed rapidly.

With the creation of Monona County, Thompson was elected County Judge and most of the county and township officials were members of his church. Preparation served as the first county seat of Monona County, since all official transactions for the county were carried on there. Since the court officials were the main components of all early county governments in Iowa, Thompson virtually controlled the new county. Soon, however, internal troubles in Preparation began to cause concern throughout the County.<sup>11</sup>

As additional settlers began moving into western Monona County, Isaac Ashton decided to lay-out a town on his homestead and name it after himself. On May 2, 1855, Ashton offered the first lots for sale. He encouraged settlers to join his settlement by telling of the many advantages of the surrounding territory. He emphasized the large supply of good lumber and coal in the area; also, the fact that a semi-weekly mail stage ran through the hamlet.<sup>12</sup> Prospects looked promising for the new village.

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<sup>10</sup> Alfred N. Cook and Others (eds.), Proceedings of the Academy of Science and Letters of Sioux City, Iowa, 1903-4 (Sioux City: Perkins Bros. Co., 1905), p. 95. Hereafter cited as Cook, Academy of Science and Letters.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>12</sup> The Council Bluffs Chronotype, May 2, 1855.

As the land-grabbing practices of Thompson became known, many people about the County became apprehensive. Moreover, the settlers resented having the County ruled by such a man, through a church.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the county seat was moved to Ashton, and this soon ended the premature life of Preparation.<sup>14</sup> It appeared that Ashton was to become the most important town in Monona County; however, this title was soon challenged by the formation of a new land company to the South.

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<sup>13</sup>Cook, Academy of Science and Letters, p. 112.

<sup>14</sup>Jacob A. Swisher, "The Location of County Seats in Iowa," The Iowa Journal of History and Politics (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1924), XXII, 325.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FOUNDING OF ONAWA

A group of individuals met at Ashton in May, 1857, for the purpose of organizing a land company and making plans for the establishment of a town on a ridge of higher ground, a short distance to the South. The group decided to use the name of the County and called themselves the Monona Land Company. The original members were: Timothy Elliot, Charles E. Whiting, William Burton, S. S. Pearse, J. E. Morrison, Addison Dimmick, Robert G. Fairchild, Leonard Sears, J. S. Merrill, J. B. Gard, and J. S. Roberts. Plans were made for the purchase of approximately 1300 acres of land paralleling the proposed Iowa Central Air Line Railroad, closely approximating the forty-second parallel. The location selected for the town was the result of an earlier agreement worked out between the railroad promoters and the individuals who formed the land company.<sup>1</sup>

Before the first meeting adjourned, many details were worked out. It was agreed to obtain an option on the land in order to commence

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<sup>1</sup>Monona Land Company, Minutes of the meeting in May, 1857. (In the files of the Onawa, Iowa, Library), p. 1. Hereafter cited as Minutes of Monona County Land Company.

building at an early date. To raise needed money, it was agreed to issue a minimum of two hundred and fifty shares of capital stock with a par value of five hundred dollars a share and sell lots for one hundred dollars each. The actual number of shares to be issued would be determined by the aggregate cost of the land and other necessary expenses.<sup>2</sup> If more money was needed, the company could borrow up to two and one-half per cent of the capital stock.

A building code was adopted which prohibited the use of logs or poles for construction material. Each house or store was to have at least three windows and a shingled roof. Furthermore, each shareholder would have to complete a minimum of half of his improvements by December 1, 1857, and be finished by July 4, 1858, or forfeit his shares.<sup>3</sup>

Also, the group divided into committees, each with a specific responsibility. J. Morrison and Leonard Sears were made responsible for getting the town surveyed; C. E. Whiting, L. Sears and J. B. Gard were charged with finding a suitable landing on the Missouri River; and T. Elliot, S. S. Pearse, and W. M. Burton were given the job of selecting a name for the town. At this time, Morrison agreed to have a hotel built by July 23, 1857, and the outbuildings completed by November, 1857.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid. See Appendix II for a Monona Land Company Certificate, p.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 3.



At the second meeting of the Monona Land Company, held on June 17, 1857, the new village was named Onawa.<sup>5</sup> The name was selected by T. Elliott, but its origin has been a subject of controversy. Some claimed it came from the contraction of a pioneer phrase of "On-a-way;" others maintained, however, that Elliott knew and liked Longfellow's poem "Song of Hiawatha," and derived Onawa from the Indian word "Onaiweh" in the poem. The translation of this Indian word was "wide awake." Probably the Indian version was more historically accurate.<sup>6</sup> Since Monona was an Indian name meaning "peaceful valley" what could have been more appropriate than to call the new community a "wide awake" village in a "peaceful valley."

B. D. and C. H. Holbrook were employed to survey and plot the town.<sup>7</sup> On July 6, 1857, the Monona Land Company was incorporated. C. E. Whiting was elected president; L. Sears, treasurer; and S. Pearse, secretary. The directors were C. E. Whiting, J. S. Merrill, J. E. Morrison, M. F. Moore, T. Elliott, W. M. Burton, T. H. Benton, G. Morris, and E. Mason. Simultaneously they issued Monona Land Company certificates for the promotion of Onawa.<sup>8</sup> To

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Leon C. Hill, History and Legends of Place Names in Iowa (Omaha: Omaha School Supply Company, 1937), p. 15. In checking towns and enterprises with the name of Onawa, most of them claimed they acquired the name from Longfellow's poem, "Song of Hiawatha."

<sup>7</sup> Minutes of Monona Land Company, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

comply with the law of Iowa, an advertisement announcing the formation of Onawa was published in the Council Bluffs Nonpareil for four successive weeks.<sup>9</sup> The money secured through the sale of land certificates was used for the purchase of the desired land.

In September, 1857, the promoters completed negotiations for approximately 1,310 acres of land from individual owners within the surveyed area. The price of the land varied from \$8 to \$25.83 per acre and was purchased in parcels ranging in size from forty to three hundred and eighty acres. The total cost of the land, including surveying and miscellaneous expenses, was \$23,803.<sup>10</sup>

The planning of Onawa by a group of individuals was unique for Monona County, as most of the towns in the County were planned either by a single individual or by railroad companies. The mere acquisition of land, however, did not complete the work. Setting aside land for a cemetery, the question of donating land for a school, and the disposal of lots to interested settlers continued to occupy the attention of the promoters.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Council Bluffs Nonpareil, September 5, 1857.

<sup>10</sup>Minutes of the Monona Land Company, p. 6. The individuals from which the land was purchased and the number of acres were as follows: John Graham, 290 acres; Wm. Weare, 380 acres; Bergett, 120 acres; Hoch, 120 acres; Mrs. Folck, 40 acres; Howe, 160 acres; Elliott and Burton, 80 acres; and Mrs. Morton, 120 acres. Mrs. Folck had a log cabin on her land which probably did not come under the Onawa building code.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

By early winter, 1857, Onawa began to take on the appearance of a bustling, rapidly growing pioneer village. The Onawa House, the first hotel in the town, was in operation under the proprietorship of J. Morrison. Also, there were eight houses enclosed and ten more under construction, two sawmills in operation, two stores doing business, one under the proprietorship of P. C. Latimer, and three more stores nearing completion.<sup>12</sup> S. S. Pearse had the distinction of building the first home in Onawa. As the first year ended, the future of Onawa was bright.<sup>13</sup>

As Onawa began to take form, the unique planning and surveying became more apparent. The street between the two main blocks was 150 feet wide, while the other streets were eighty feet in width.<sup>14</sup> The extra wide main street later became a trademark for Onawa, as it adopted the title of the "town with the widest main street in the United States." This claim was contested, but the slogan was never surrendered.

To live up to the Indian meaning for Onawa, "wide awake," the community immediately began planning for the education of its youth. A school, located in a frame building on the North side of main street, was started in the fall of 1857, with A. R. Wright as the first

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<sup>12</sup>Sioux City Iowa Eagle, August 22, 1857.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., September 26, 1857.

<sup>14</sup>History of Monona County, p. 308.

teacher. The school was moved to another frame building the next year, and two years later the first brick schoolhouse was constructed. At this time, Onawa was considered a part of the Franklin Township School District.<sup>15</sup> Thus, Onawa benefited from the school land grant made by the State to the Township, in 1854.<sup>16</sup>

To give additional support for education, a group of men and women formed the Onawa Educational Sewing Society on March 25, 1858. The organization wrote in its by-laws, "The object of this association shall be the promotion of the cause of education in this place."<sup>17</sup> The members met on alternate weeks at the different homes for dinner and regular meetings. To raise needed funds, a small fee was charged for the meal. Although it was never a financial bonanza, it did help to develop the educational system of the community. The organization hoped to provide items which the school board was not able to supply, something to stimulate the interest of the community in behalf of education.

In the summer of 1860, the Educational Sewing Society purchased a bell for the Onawa school. The bell was bought from Meneely

<sup>15</sup>The Alumni Scribe, Vol. I, Number 1, Onawa, Iowa, 1893. (In the files of the Onawa Library.)

<sup>16</sup>Monona County Abstract Company, School Land Title, Copy No. 3. On March 3, 1845, the United States gave to the state of Iowa the sixteenth section in every township for school purposes. If the sixteenth had been pre-empted, then an equivalent section in the same area was provided. The school lands in Monona County were selected on September 18, 1854, and registered at Kaneshville.

<sup>17</sup>Constitution and Record of the Onawa Education Sewing Society, March 25, 1858. (In the files of the Onawa Library.)

and Sons of West Troy, New York, and weighed 414 pounds. The list price was \$144.90 plus an additional \$20 for the yoke and wheel, but the citizens were able to get the purchase price reduced to \$163.

Since it was symbolic of an advancing community, the bell was hung temporarily on main street where it was rung by the County Recorder, S. S. Pearse, at seven o'clock in the morning and at nine o'clock in the evening. The bell was placed in the brick schoolhouse as soon as the building was completed.<sup>18</sup> Since this was the first large bell in the County, it gave considerable prestige to Onawa.

With the children in school and the town growing, the community braced itself for its first winter. The weather was cold and snowy, a winter long to be remembered. At times the snow was four feet deep on the level, and violent winds produced enormous drifts. It was the coldest winter to strike the area for over forty years.<sup>19</sup>

Although the winter was bleak, it did not depress the residents. A group met at the Onawa House in November and organized the Onawa Literary Club. The members decided to meet twice a week to discuss and debate political, economic, and social problems. According to all accounts, it developed into an interesting and enlightening social organization which made for unity within the community. For the first

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<sup>18</sup>Monona County Gazette, September 5, 1874.

<sup>19</sup>Onawa Republican, February 16, 1899.

Christmas in Onawa, the Club held a dinner and dance.<sup>20</sup> During the severe winter there was time to socialize, but there was no slackening in preparation of plans for the coming year.

The initial beginning had been promising. Many new homes were under construction. The abundance of cottonwood trees in the area provided a plentiful supply of lumber. This type of lumber was highly susceptible to weathering, but it was cheap and sturdy.<sup>21</sup> As additional settlers moved into the community, sawmills were kept busy supplying the increased demand for lumber.

Most town homes were built with a barn close by for a horse, cow, and possibly a few hogs. Although the cows and hogs helped to provide food for the community, they caused problems when they got loose and roamed about the streets.<sup>22</sup> Since water was needed for both the animals and people, a water well was usually located conveniently close to the house; as the wells were relatively shallow, frequently a second well was dug close to the barn.<sup>23</sup> Usually a garden

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<sup>20</sup>History of Monona County, p. 330.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>22</sup>Interview on April 9, 1966, with Bruce Harlow, a 78-year-old native of Onawa, whose father came to the Onawa vicinity in 1870.

<sup>23</sup>Water wells in the Onawa vicinity ranged from fifteen to thirty feet in depth. This is relatively shallow in comparison to the three hundred feet deep wells in eastern Monona County.

was planted near the house, while wild gooseberries, raspberries, strawberries, and grapes could be picked at random in the wooded areas. Although the pioneer family was almost self-sufficient in obtaining a food supply, the community still needed stores, banks, cafes, hotels, and livery stables.<sup>24</sup>

In the spring of 1858, B. D. and C. H. Holbrook, the surveyors of Onawa, established a real estate, loan, and abstract office. By 1865, this enterprise had developed into a bank, the first bank in the community.<sup>25</sup>

The town also attracted professional people. Dr. Richard Stebbins, the first physician in the area, established a medical and pharmaceutical practice in Onawa in 1858. He immediately erected a frame building for his new business. Dr. Stebbins became the first mayor of Onawa and was a leading businessman in the community for more than thirty years.<sup>26</sup>

The same year, Addison Oliver, a lawyer, settled in Onawa. He was a very civic-minded individual and had the distinction of being Onawa's first and only Representative to Congress. This man did a great deal to insure the continued progress of the community.

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<sup>24</sup>Sioux City Iowa Eagle, April 24, 1858.

<sup>25</sup>History of Monona County, p. 315.

<sup>26</sup>Monona County Gazette, October 6, 1873.

Also in 1858, Onawa wooed R. G. Fairchilds, a merchant and postmaster, away from Ashton. In one energetic effort, Onawa acquired another general store and its first postmaster. In 1861, S. S. Pearse succeeded Fairchilds as postmaster for the new community.<sup>27</sup>

The second hotel, called the Walton House, was erected by C. E. Whiting in 1858. Since many people were traveling through this area, the additional hotel was badly needed to relieve the pressure on the Onawa House.<sup>28</sup> Other businesses started included a tailor shop, a blacksmith shop, and another general store.<sup>29</sup> The year, 1858, was a fruitful one for Onawa.

Since the economy of the community was based on agriculture, it was not surprising that the farmers organized an "Agriculture Society" during the winter of 1858.<sup>30</sup> At first this was only a social organization, but it gradually developed into an annual agricultural fair, where farmers brought their products to compete for small prizes. The county fair became an outstanding social gathering for the whole community.

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., March 22, 1883.

<sup>29</sup>History of Monona County, p. 315.

<sup>30</sup>Sioux City Iowa Eagle, January 16, 1858.



No town was complete without some type of news media. In 1858, Charles B. Thompson, the Mormon leader from Preparation, started the first newspaper in Onawa, the Onawa Adventure. Like all of Thompson's adventures, it ceased when his religious followers threatened his life and he fled the County. In 1860, Dimnick and Butts established the second newspaper, the Monona Cordon, but it lasted only a few years. This was followed by the West Iowa Gazette which ceased publication in 1865 when the Monona County Gazette commenced a long term of service in Onawa.<sup>31</sup>

Onawa was more fortunate than many early communities in that it was on a stage line route between Council Bluffs and Sioux City. This stage line, called the Western Stage Company, made a regular stop at the Onawa House.<sup>32</sup> People gathered eagerly at the hotel to get their mail, to see who was on the stage, and to talk with the passengers concerning incidents in neighboring communities. It provided excitement and information for a news-hungry community.

The most important incident during 1858, however, was the fight for the court house. Since 1854, there had been a continual battle over the selection of a county seat for Monona County. When the County was first formed, all legal transactions for the County were handled in Preparation. From the beginning there was dissatisfaction in this Mormon village because of the unscrupulous action of

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<sup>31</sup>History of Monona County, p. 322.

<sup>32</sup>Monona County Gazette, November 8, 1876.

Thompson. This led to the formation of a committee to investigate the possibility of selecting a new location for the county seat. After due consideration, the committee decided to move the County government to Ashton.<sup>33</sup>

Early in 1858, the people of Onawa, hoping to secure the county seat, presented a petition to the County Court requesting that this matter be submitted to the voters of Monona County.<sup>34</sup> The petition bore 109 signatures. Ashton countered by presenting a petition signed by 139 citizens requesting that the Onawa petition be ignored, and the county seat be left in Ashton. Judge C. E. Whiting, one of the founding fathers of Onawa, presided over the court and accepted the petition from Onawa while refusing to consider the plea from Ashton. He ordered an election to be held on the first Monday in April of 1858. Onawa won the election and the county seat by a vote of 130 out of a possible 229.<sup>35</sup>

In June, 1858, a contract was let for the erection of a new courthouse. James Armstrong was the architect. The building was

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<sup>33</sup>The committee, also, changed the name of Ashton to Bloomfield, but switched the name back to Ashton upon discovering another town in Iowa with the name of Bloomfield.

<sup>34</sup>Jacob A. Swisher, "The Location of County Seats in Iowa," The Iowa Journal of History and Politics. (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1924), XXII, 325.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.; Sioux City Iowa Eagle, April 24, 1858.

plain and simple in design. It was to be two stories high, thirty-five by forty-five feet in size, and have a seventy foot tower in front.<sup>36</sup> Since there was no stone in the area, foundation posts were used for the base, which raised the building approximately three feet above the ground. When completed in 1858, it was valued at \$7,000 with the lot.<sup>37</sup> The building and land was donated to the County by the Monona Land Company.<sup>38</sup> The new court house was occupied immediately and soon became a center of community activities. Since it was used for "hoe-downs", weddings, church services, and a meeting place for local organizations, as well as a printing office, it was called a combination of "press, pulpit, and forum."<sup>39</sup>

The previously-mentioned Ashton-Onawa controversy did not entirely settle the question regarding the location of the county seat. In the fall of 1858, the town of Belvidere, approximately nine miles due east of Onawa, filed a petition to acquire the court house through use of the ballot; the petition was denied. Not easily discouraged, the Belvidere group filed a second petition three years later which the court accepted. Onawa won the second battle by a majority of fifteen votes

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<sup>36</sup>Monona County Gazette, August 1, 1874.

<sup>37</sup>A paper written by Dr. Richard Stebbins, the first mayor of Onawa. (In the files of the Onawa, Iowa, Library.)

<sup>38</sup>History of Western Iowa, p. 249.

<sup>39</sup>A paper written by Dr. Stebbins.

out of a total of 223. The community could not relax, however, as another village was preparing to file a similar petition.<sup>40</sup>

Arcola, a village seven miles east northeast of Onawa, filed a petition in 1862 in an attempt to obtain the county seat. Onawa won the third battle by a majority of twenty-three votes out of a total of 223.<sup>41</sup> The county seat question was finally settled and the community was able to relax and enjoy the benefits of having the court house.

The advantages derived from having the county court house were many. It gave the community easy access to all County government proceedings; moreover, it provided additional employment. The population of county seat towns usually increased as elected officials sought homes close to their work, and lawyers established offices in order to have easy access to the court house. Court sessions were, indeed, exciting and prosperous times for a town. As the judge, lawyers, jurors, and interested spectators prepared for a court session, the hotels were packed.<sup>42</sup> Besides a prosperous time for the businessmen, the proceedings were often exciting for the local citizens. Furthermore, all property owners were compelled to visit the court house at least once a year in order to pay their taxes. With the continual influx

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<sup>40</sup>History of Monona County, p. 314.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 320.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

of people, the local merchants had the opportunity to sell more of their goods and increase their profits. It was little wonder that every town desired the court house. The county seat, correlated with other community enterprises, stimulated growth in Onawa.

Thus, in less than two years after a land company was formed, Onawa was a thriving community. It could boast of having sawmills, stores, a newspaper, a number of homes, and had even gained the county seat. The community was becoming an important asset to the County and to the Missouri River basin, but could not afford to slacken progress for the next few years.

CHAPTER III  
EARLY CONFLICTS AND GROWTH  
OF THE COMMUNITY

Although the promoters of the Monona Land Company were optimistic, the first years were not without problems. The Panic of 1857 had a definite impact upon the Midwest and slowed emigration to Onawa. Others were reluctant to come because of an Indian scare to the North of the community.<sup>1</sup> Finally, political unrest throughout the country over the question of slavery retarded the westward movement. During this period many areas actually lost population.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Onawa was among this group, but it lost only three inhabitants which had little effect upon the development of the community.

For the last two years, many of the residents desired some type of self-government. In January of 1859, a petition was presented

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<sup>1</sup>Herbert L. Moeller, Our Iowa, Its Beginnings and Growth (New York: Newson & Company, 1938), pp. 65-68.

<sup>2</sup>History of Monona County, p. 312. The population of Onawa was as follows: 143 in 1863, 140 in 1865, 240 in 1867, 404 in 1869, 478 in 1870, 676 in 1873, 719 in 1875, and 882 in 1880. Census of Iowa for 1880 (1836-1880) By John A. T. Hull, Secretary of State. Printed by Order of the General Assembly (Des Moines: F. M. Mills, State Printer, to page 368, completed by George E. Roberts, State Printer, 1883), p. 546.

to the county court requesting that the village be incorporated. This document was signed by most of the prominent businessmen of Onawa and many shareholders in the land company. Upon receiving the petition, Judge C. E. Whiting set March 22, 1859, as the date of the hearing. Since there was no opposition, the town of Onawa was officially incorporated.<sup>3</sup>

The following year some progress was made in diversifying the economy of the community. Since there was no stone in the area, interest focused on the manufacturing of brick. The first brickyard was established by J. A. Scott and he supplied most of the bricks used in the early construction in Onawa. For example, the first brick schoolhouse was built of bricks from his yard.

The same year, 1860, N. A. Whiting started a wagon shop. Since the farmers needed wagons, there was a ready market for his product. Although it was the first wagon maker's shop in the County, it was not too successful. The outbreak of the Civil War probably hindered the development of other industries.<sup>4</sup>

As the gloomy war news filtered into the community and federal troops were withdrawn from the region, the community felt a need for some sort of protection against possible Indian uprisings.

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 327.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 316.

An organization, the Monona Union Guards, was formed and the members immediately began to drill. The community turned out to watch the militia drill, and patriotism ran high, but the drills, according to all accounts, were not particularly impressive.<sup>5</sup>

During the war years, a local land grab in 1863 was actually the most exciting incident to occur in the community. It was precipitated by the Swamp Land Act of 1850, which provided that all swamp land owned by the federal government would be ceded to the states.<sup>6</sup> The idea behind the act was to give the states an incentive to reclaim the overflow land and to practice improved flood control. The state in which the land was located was supposed to build roads, bridges, and construct drainage ditches as a part of the reclamation work. In order to raise funds to pay for this work, the state was to sell the land.<sup>7</sup>

There was a great deal of swamp land in the area. Onawa was situated in the center of a wide flat valley paralleled by steep, rugged clay bluffs on each side. Since two rivers, the Missouri and the Little Sioux, flanked the community, the valley was susceptible to periodic flooding during periods of heavy rain. The soil in the low areas

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 330-31.

<sup>6</sup>Roy M. Robbins, Our Landed Heritage, The Public Domain, 1776-1936 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), pp. 154-55.

<sup>7</sup>Roscoe L. Loken, Iowa, Public Land Disposal (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1942), pp. 180-85.



was a heavy gumbo type which became saturated much faster than the light sandy soil of higher ground. To add to the problem, some of the land was undermined with "hard-pan."<sup>8</sup> Since the land was flat with occasional swales located throughout the valley, drainage was extremely difficult, and swamp land was extensive.

In 1863, the power of reclaiming and selling of the swamp land was delegated by the state to the county.<sup>9</sup> In counties where the county surveyor had not completed the platting, the county court was supposed to appoint a qualified person to examine and plat the swamp land in the area. Upon completion of this work, a report was to be submitted to the state listing all swamp and overflow land in each county.<sup>10</sup> The land had to be evaluated according to its qualities, but in no case could it be appraised for less than twenty cents per acre.<sup>11</sup> The county court had full jurisdiction over this land, but a drainage commissioner was to be elected to help in disposing of it.

After the land had been platted and appraised, the court could order the land sold. In return, the county clerk would order the

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<sup>8</sup>Soils Survey Monona County Iowa. United States Department of Agriculture Soil Conservation Service, In cooperation with Iowa Agriculture Experiment Station (Washington, D. C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1958), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup>Monona County Abstract Company, Chapter 47, Revision of 1860, Swamp Lands, Article II, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

drainage commissioner to implement the actual selling of the land. Before it could be sold, a notice had to be issued, either in a newspaper or a poster displayed at the local voting precinct, forty days before the sale. The land was to be sold at a public auction between the hours of 10:00 A. M. and 5:00 P. M.<sup>12</sup>

The commissioner was governed by strict rules when selling the land. No land could be sold for less than valuation, and the auctioneer had to give everyone the opportunity to bid. Upon completion of the sale, the purchaser was required to pay for it with cash within twenty-four hours. If this was not done, the land would be sold again and the original purchaser was required to pay the difference, in the event that the land sold for less than the original bid.

In 1861, the state transferred the control of the swamp land to the Board of Supervisors of each county and nullified all previous state laws concerning this land.<sup>13</sup> Within two years, the supervisors sold all of the swamp land in Monona County to the American Emigrant Company of Hartford, Connecticut. Since it was necessary to get the approval of the voters, the matter was placed before the people and defeated. Not easily discouraged, the supervisors brought it to vote again, in the fall of 1862, and this time it was approved.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., Chapter 8, Laws of 1861, Swamp Lands, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Monona County Gazette, September 18, 1874.

As a result, the American Emigrant Company obtained approximately 126,000 acres of land for the sum of \$2,000. The Company was also to receive any indemnity claim which the County had from the United States in relation to the swamp land. While the Company gave the supervisors the impression that 200 white settlers would be brought in to occupy the land, it was never done.<sup>15</sup> This land grab, by the American Emigrant Company, included some excellent land, some swamp land, and all subsidies from the federal government in association with this reclamation project. It was a highly profitable venture.

Another important act passed by the General Assembly of Iowa in 1862 allowed the boundary of a county to be changed, if a group petitioned the local Board of Supervisors. Since Onawa, located in the western part of the County, was afraid the population center might shift to the east, the community happily allowed land on the eastern side of the County to be petitioned out. This helped to strengthen the political power and influence of Onawa in the County.<sup>16</sup>

As the war ended and the community began to return to normality, new settlers moved into the community. With an increase

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<sup>15</sup>The Onawa Weekly Democrat, August 11, 1939.

<sup>16</sup>Arthur Frances Allen (ed.) Northwestern Iowa, Its History and Traditions, 1804-1926 (3 Vols.; Chicago: The S. J. Clarks Publishing Company, 1927), II, 825. Hereafter cited as Allen, Northwestern Iowa.

in population and new industries appearing, optimism was general.

One such enterprise was the ice business. Some homes had a private ice house, but most of the residents obtained their ice from an ice company.<sup>17</sup> When the lakes, especially Blue Lake, was frozen to a depth from two to three feet, it was time to commence the cutting of the ice. A crew of men and horses were used in this process. First the ice was marked in a checkerboard design with an "ice plow" pulled by a shod horse.<sup>18</sup> After marking, a saw was used to cut the blocks in the desired lengths. As soon as a load was cut, a wagon or sled was loaded and hauled to the ice house.<sup>19</sup>

The ice house was often constructed partially in the ground with a regular frame building from the ground up. Both sides of the studs were paneled and insulated with sawdust. As the ice was stacked in the building, sawdust was used as insulation between the rows and on top so that it would not melt in the summer. In this manner, ice was kept throughout the entire year.

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<sup>17</sup>Monona County Gazette, January 17, 1874.

<sup>18</sup>Interview with Robert Van Buren Nutt, April 10, 1966. He is a seventy-seven year-old native of the area who had participated in the cutting of ice.

<sup>19</sup>Bert Reed, my father, helped cut ice as a young man. He had the unpleasant experience of seeing a team of horses drown in an area from which the ice had been removed.

A gristmill was founded in Onawa in 1872 with the hopes of utilizing some of the grain raised in the area. Its main purpose was to grind flour for local consumption. This mill burned in 1879, and a much larger mill was built to replace it. The new mill employed seven men, used about 40,000 barrels of wheat each year, and had a gross annual sales of \$50,000.<sup>20</sup>

In the 1870's, the Onawa Manufacturing Company was established under the proprietorship of M. B. Pullen, W. C. Marr, and J. S. Maughlin. It manufactured wood mouldings, buggies and sulkies. At this time, buggies and sulkies retailed for approximately \$200.<sup>21</sup>

The Maughlin and Marr Manufactures was founded to satisfy the demands for wagons and agricultural implements. It, also, had the woman in mind and experimented with the manufacturing of a washing machine, but had little success with this venture. Closely adjoining the company was a blacksmith shop which was kept busy shoeing horses. The cost of shoeing a horse with new horseshoes was from \$4. to \$4.50. To reset old shoes, the cost was twenty to twenty-five cents a shoe.<sup>22</sup> The diversification of the industry helped to increase its success.

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<sup>20</sup>History of Monona County, pp. 319-20.

<sup>21</sup>Monona County Gazette, December 27, 1875.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., February 7, 1874.

Another agrarian-based industry, a packing house, was started in 1875 by the Pike Brothers. They constructed a building twenty-four by sixty feet on their farm. They planned to slaughter over 500 hogs per year. Although small, it would be a good outlet for local hog raisers.<sup>23</sup>

The only non-agricultural industry established was the Onawa Iron Company. Its chief product was a "flu expander," a tool used by engine boilermakers. It was eleven tools in one and was supposedly a remarkable invention. In order to stimulate interest, the company planned to show this tool at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.<sup>24</sup> Although enthusiasm was great, the tool apparently did not meet expectations, and the plant soon closed.

A building seen in most towns during this era was the livery barn. A good example was the one built in connection with the Onawa House. It was fifty-four by sixty feet in size and was two stories high. On the first floor, there was an office, harness rooms, stables for thirty-six horses, and room for a number of carriages. The second story, often called a hayloft, was used for the storing of feed. It held seventy-five tons of hay. The structure cost between \$1,200 and \$1,500 and was both an improvement and a necessity for the community.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., September 25, 1875.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., September 18, 1875.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., October 9, 1875.

Most of the livery barns furnished "dray" service for the community. This consisted of transporting goods to the stores from the depot and between different residents within the community. In the cold months, the drays were kept especially busy transporting fuel to different residences. The livery barns also kept horses that could be rented.

Probably stimulated by Granger enthusiasm during the 1870's, the first farm cooperative store was formed by enterprising farmers of the community. After careful planning, it was decided to issue 400 shares of capital stock at \$25 per share and limit each customer to five shares.<sup>26</sup> It was hoped that this store would help to reduce the cost of production for the farmer by allowing him to share in the profits of the store. The actual success of the store was questionable.

As the population and business activity of the community increased, so did the amount of mail coming into the town. For example, it had doubled during the 1870's.<sup>27</sup> To accommodate this increase, a new post office was built on Iowa Avenue in 1877.<sup>28</sup>

To help beautify Onawa, some civic-minded individuals encouraged the town to plant trees along the main-traveled streets.

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., August 16, 1873.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., May 8, 1879.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., December 7, 1877.

In 1873, at a cost of \$135, a number of maple and elm trees were planted in a regular pattern along Iowa Avenue. Four years later, twenty-one trees were planted near the depot. These trees gave a great deal of shade and beauty to the town. This work can still be seen and enjoyed today.<sup>29</sup>

To make it possible for travelers and residents to fully enjoy these sites and to walk throughout the town, wooden sidewalks were constructed.<sup>30</sup> These were highly susceptible to rot and had to be replaced periodically, but it was convenient, especially for the women of the town. As the ground was flat and poorly drained, sidewalks were a necessity in rainy weather because it was very difficult to walk in wet gumbo soil since it stuck to the feet.

To improve public health, the community established public baths which were often used by transients.<sup>31</sup> It was a place to clean up before a pleasant evening in the community. Many of the local citizens were more interested in obtaining some type of a town water system than in a few local baths.

Although there was no record of any livestock being stolen near Onawa, a Monona County Horse Thief Detective Society was

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., June 7, 1873.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., May 17, 1873.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., August 16, 1873.



organized. The organization held regular meetings to prepare for any thieves who might enter the area.<sup>32</sup> They must have believed that "an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure."

The most serious accidents in the community were caused by livestock that was allowed to roam loose on the street, or by runaway horses. Sometimes a wagon was wrecked, horses hurt, or a driver injured, but usually damages were slight.<sup>33</sup> Hogs, at this time, were causing the most damage, and the residents demanded that the town do something about it.<sup>34</sup> Eventually the town established a town pound where the marshall brought all stray animals. In order to reclaim the livestock, the owner had to pay a small fee. The dogs which were not claimed were either destroyed or sold to the Indians. The Indians paid fifty cents for a fat dog and twenty-five cents for a thin one.<sup>35</sup> These practices tended to persuade the residents to be more careful with their livestock.

While all of this was taking place, local citizens were not ignoring national affairs. The local newspaper repeatedly denounced corruption in the federal government and demanded government regula-

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., November 15, 1873.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., May 31, 1878.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., February 25, 1871.

<sup>35</sup>Interview with Bruce Harlow, April 9, 1966.

tion of big business. Many of the residents were familiar with the Patrons of Husbandry and soon organized a local Grange for the purpose of studying the problems caused by the monopolists in the East. Since the economy of the community was basically agrarian, special attention was directed toward the railroads and their unfair rate fixing. The Grangers went to great lengths to expose the abuses of the railroads, especially through articles in local newspapers.<sup>36</sup> While the Grangers nominated candidates in the local political races, they had trouble winning in the predominately Republican town of Onawa. They sponsored many Fourth of July celebrations during the 1870's. At these celebrations, many patriotic tunes were sung and played, which emphasized the relationship between patriotism and Grangerism. Speeches were given by local Grangers, ministers, and pro-Granger politicians from Des Moines.<sup>37</sup> A special emphasis was given to the need for Granger legislation.

During the same period of time, the Anti-Monopolists joined the Grangers in their battle against the monopolists. They condemned protective tariffs, fought against land grants to the railroads, and advocated increased protection of property and people.<sup>38</sup> The Anti-

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<sup>36</sup>Monona County Gazette, July 10, 1879.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., July 11, 1874.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., February 28, 1874.

Monopolists were more violent than the Grangers in their condemnation of the monopolistic practices being purposely ignored by the federal government.

Although the greenback party was never powerful in Onawa, a great many pro-greenback articles appeared in the local newspapers. The Greenbackers support of cheap money was highly agreeable to the Grangers.<sup>40</sup>

Political interest reached an all time high when two favorite sons decided to run for the seat from the Ninth Congressional District in 1874. C. E. Whiting, one of the founding fathers of Onawa, ran on the Anti-Monopoly ticket, but many claimed that he was really a Democrat. Addison Oliver, an outstanding lawyer, ran on the Republican ticket. As the two candidates squared off, the public anxiously waited for the fireworks.

Oliver adopted a platform which favored greenbacks, opposed the national bank, advocated improvement in local transportation facilities, and desired some type of state or federal control over the railroads. During the campaign, he did not let the voters forget his record in the state legislature from 1864 to 1868 or his record as circuit judge from 1868 to 1872.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., February 27, 1879.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., October 24, 1874.

Whiting had a great deal of political experience, too. He had been actively associated with the Democrats, Grangers, and now the Anti-Monopolists. In the latter part of the 1850's, he had served as county judge and had run for a number of public offices as a Democrat, but was usually defeated in the Republican dominated area. He ran on a platform that favored greenbacks, state regulation of the railroads, and pensions for veterans, while at the same time opposing a protective tariff, in the campaign of 1874.<sup>42</sup>

Soon, both parties began ignoring the political problems which needed discussing, and began slandering the character of the candidates. The Republicans capitalized on the name of Lincoln and "waved the bloody shirt." Whiting was accused of having been pro-Confederate and opposed to the war.<sup>43</sup> Also, it was continually repeated that Whiting had hired a man to serve in his place during the war.<sup>44</sup> Others accused Whiting of being financially involved in the swamp land swindle. The fact that he had been a railroad lobbyist for two years, caused some to question his real attitude toward the railroads.<sup>45</sup> Also, the Republicans associated Whiting with the "Bourbon" school of politics.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., October 22, 1874.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., September 26, 1874.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., September 5, 1874.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., August 29, 1874.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., September 5, 1874.

The supporters of Whiting fired back at the Republicans by pointing to the corruption in Grant's administration and how it filtered down to the local candidates.<sup>47</sup> They pointed an accusing finger at Oliver's acquisition of his large land holdings through tax sales.

The state of Iowa went Republican by over 40,000 votes and Oliver defeated Whiting. In Onawa, Oliver had one hundred thirty-two votes and Whiting, ninety-eight; however, Whiting carried Monona County. Oliver, nevertheless, carried the Ninth District, consisting of twenty-six counties, by 8,000 votes. Thus, Onawa had its first and only Representative in Washington.<sup>48</sup>

Two years later, Oliver was re-elected. He had a creditable record in Congress and was well-liked in western Iowa. The Republicans tried to pressure him into running for a third term, but Oliver refused. He returned to Onawa and became very active in civic affairs.

While Oliver was a Representative, an attempt was made by the Board of Supervisors of Monona County to rectify the fraud committed by the American Emigrant Company. The matter was taken to court, and in 1876, the land company settled without a trial. The County was paid an additional \$5,250, plus the return of some of the land that was not swamp land.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., October 3, 1874.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., October 17, 1874.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., January 14, 1876.

The incorporation of Onawa was followed by a period of retardation caused chiefly by the Civil War and an unscrupulous land grab; however, in the post-war period, prosperity returned and the community once again began to grow. This growth increased the desire and need for a railroad.

## CHAPTER IV

### RAILROAD BUILDING AND PROSPERITY

At the time Onawa was founded, the promoters were promised a railroad by the Iowa Central Air Line Railroad Directors. This newly-formed railroad company was waiting for federal grants to be issued to them before commencing to construct their railroad.

On May 15, 1856, the federal government issued a land grant to the State of Iowa to aid in the construction of a railroad from Lyons City, north to Maquoketa.<sup>1</sup> At Maquoketa, it would intersect with the Iowa Central Air Line Railroad and turn west to be aligned as closely as possible to the forty-second parallel, terminating at Onawa.<sup>2</sup> This generous land grant included odd-numbered sections, six miles in depth, on each side of the railroad; however, if the land adjacent to the railroad had been previously pre-empted, the railroad grants could be extended to a depth of fifteen miles.<sup>3</sup> On July 14, 1856, Iowa

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<sup>1</sup>Sioux City Iowa Eagle, August 22, 1857.

<sup>2</sup>Monona County Abstract Company, Railroad Title, May 15, 1856 to May 26, 1897.

<sup>3</sup>Allen, Northwestern Iowa, I, 267-68.

accepted the land grant and transferred the land to the newly-formed Iowa Central Air Line Railroad Company.

During the winter of 1858 and 1859, the communities of Sioux City, Council Bluffs, and Onawa held joint meetings to accelerate railroad building in their areas. They hoped to develop a plan whereby the three towns would be connected by railroads within three years. To give additional encouragement to the railroads, the communities proposed to give local swamp land to them.<sup>4</sup> This swamp land grant never materialized in Monona County, but Onawa eventually secured a railroad anyway.

One of the most important individuals in the history of railroads in Iowa was John I. Blair, a member of a group who founded the Chicago and North Western Railroad Company.<sup>5</sup> Blair first considered building a railroad from Marshalltown, Iowa, to Onawa and then south into Council Bluffs.<sup>6</sup> As Blair began his first survey across Iowa on June 15, 1863, his interest was drawn to Onawa by C. E. Whiting, a member of Blair's survey party.<sup>7</sup> This party surveyed a line across

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<sup>4</sup>Sioux City Iowa Eagle, December 18, 1858.

<sup>5</sup>Ruth A. Gallaher and William J. Petersen (ed.), "Number of Towns," The Palimpsest, XXIX (January to December, 1948), 165.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Anthony L. Cassen (ed.), "Surveying the First Railroad Across Iowa, Journal of John I. Blair," Annals of Iowa, XXXV (July-April, 1959-61), 336. J. I. Blair came from New Jersey to attend the Republican Convention in Chicago in 1860. Being interested in the West, he extended his trip into Iowa and was impressed by the financial opportunity he observed. He returned to Iowa in 1862, at the age of sixty, and entered



western Iowa, closely approximating the forty-second parallel, to Onawa. As they entered Onawa, Blair was impressed with the little town and implied that it might be an ideal location for his railroad.<sup>8</sup> However, even with the survey completed and Blair's avowed approval given, Onawa was not insured a railroad in the near future.

The following year, Blair organized the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad Company, and railroad fever ran high in Onawa. Pessimism gradually replaced optimism, as the completion date was moved farther and farther into the future. To add to the community's woe, Blair decided to build his railroad to Council Bluffs rather than to Onawa. It seemed like a psychological game being directed by the railroad magnates in order to entice lush gifts from the eager communities. Blair's railroad was completed to Council Bluffs in January, 1867.<sup>9</sup>

It was not until the Sioux City and Pacific had received free right-of-way, twenty acres for a depot, and an \$8,000 money grant from Onawa, that the railroad was finally completed to Onawa from Council Bluffs, in November, 1867.<sup>10</sup> The following year it was extended

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the railroad business. He expanded his enterprise when he formed the Iowa Railroad Land Company for the purpose of disposing of railroad land grants. He died at the age of ninety-seven after building a total of 803 miles of railroad in Iowa, during his lifetime.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 332.

<sup>9</sup>Gallaher and Petersen (ed.), "Number of Towns," The Palimpsest, XXIX (January to December, 1948), 166.

<sup>10</sup>History of Western Iowa (Sioux City: Western Publishing Company, 1862), p. 250.

to Sioux City, and Onawa had a railroad running north and south through the broad Missouri Valley.

As the community had hoped, the railroad stimulated the economic development of the town and the whole valley. New markets were opened bringing larger profits to the community. With an opportunity to earn larger profits, additional settlers moved into the area, increasing local land values. Some believed the railroad guaranteed that Onawa would be able to keep the county seat, thereby adding diversity and prosperity to the community. The total benefits derived from the railroad were many; moreover, as the Missouri Valley prospered, Onawa grew and prospered, too.<sup>11</sup>

In order to attract additional business, the railroad constructed a stockyard which made it possible for the farmers to ship livestock by rail. These yards were adjacent to a railroad spur, so the animals could be driven directly into the livestock cars. The railroad, also, furnished, without charge, water, scales, and feed bunks, to further encourage the shipping by rail.<sup>12</sup> Shipping by railroad was definitely more profitable than driving livestock to market as had been done in the past.

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<sup>11</sup>Allen, Northwestern Iowa, I, 268.

<sup>12</sup>Interview with Bruce Harlow, April 9, 1966. He is a seventy-eight year-old native of Onawa, Iowa. His father was a livestock buyer, member of the city council, and sheriff of Monona County. Mr. Harlow helped his father in the livestock business.

Since most farmers sold to local livestock buyers, the stockyards were used mainly by the purchaser. The buyers were speculators, who attempted to buy the livestock from the farmer and sell for a profit to the processor. It was an interesting game between the farmer and buyer in price manipulation and stock watering, to see who could gain the biggest advantage.<sup>13</sup> The farmer, however, was usually at a disadvantage because of inadequate market news and the shrewdness of the buyer. Nevertheless, the stockyard and the livestock buyer increased the prosperity for the community through the use of the additional markets created by the railroad.

The local railroad facilities added considerably to the size of the community. The new depot, coal shed, water tank, section houses, and roundhouse increased the property valuation of Onawa. More important to the community than the buildings was the employment created by the railroad. This new mode of transportation added a needed diversification in the agrarian-based economy of Onawa.

With one railroad extending north and south, and easy access to the Missouri River, Onawa had excellent transportation connections throughout the Missouri Valley. Community interest, then, shifted in an attempt to obtain a direct east west route which would expand the hinterland of Onawa. In addition, competition between two railroads would produce more favorable rates for the community. Railroad talk

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

began to center on a railroad running east-northeast, through the Little Sioux Valley, and one farther to the east, through Maple Valley.<sup>14</sup> The westerly route from Onawa would cross the Missouri River at Decatur, Nebraska, thence west across Nebraska.

Local groups attempted to pressure the railroad companies to build another line into Onawa; however, they had little effect upon the powerful railroad magnates in the East. The Chicago and North Western Railroad Company had a monopolistic control of the Mid-Missouri Valley through its subsidiary, the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad Company. In order to prevent competitive railroads from encroaching upon their territories, the large railroads formed subsidiary branches in areas close to their own routes. The Chicago and North Western formed such a subsidiary in 1871, called the Maple Valley Railroad.<sup>15</sup> This move was necessitated by the Illinois Central's energetic move into the Missouri Valley.

The Maple Valley Railroad was to run east from Onawa to the Maple River Valley, then northeast to Mapleton, Ida Grove, and finally west into Carroll, Iowa. J. I. Blair organized the corporation with capital stock of \$1,000,000. With the beginning of the grading east of Onawa, excitement swept through the community, as it appeared the

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<sup>14</sup>History of Monona County, Iowa (Chicago: National Publishing Company, 1890), p. 338.

<sup>15</sup>Monona County Gazette, March 18, 1871.

town would soon have a second railroad. The excitement soon died when the construction was shifted from Onawa to Fort Dodge, in 1873, and the completion date was extended.<sup>17</sup>

Five years later, the Maple Valley Railroad was completed and began operating to Mapleton from the east. That same year, a bill was introduced in the United States Senate to provide for the construction of a railroad bridge across the Missouri. The bill passed the Senate, but was defeated by the House.<sup>18</sup> It appeared that the railroad would soon be built to Onawa, but no farther west.

Excitement again swept the community as rumors spread that one railroad after another was going to build through the area. First, the Eldora and Missouri River Railroad was supposed to be constructed to Onawa.<sup>19</sup> Then, the Milwaukee Railroad considered the construction of a railroad through the Little Sioux Valley. Finally, the talk shifted to the St. Paul Railroad building down the same valley from Spirit Lake, Iowa, but again, this rumor never materialized.<sup>20</sup> Whether or not the railroad companies precipitated these rumors to prevent competitive lines from encroaching on their territory cannot

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., September 6, 1873.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., March 27, 1879.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., August 23, 1878.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., May 27, 1880.

be ascertained, but the continual flow of false rumors created bad public relations in the community.

The fight for a railroad bridge was blooming into a final showdown between Onawa and Blair, Nebraska. The Chicago North Western officials favored a bridge between Onawa and Decatur. The Sioux City and Pacific, their subsidiary, favored a bridge at Blair. During 1881 and 1882, the controversy raged with the threat of the Milwaukee building a bridge near Onawa, if the Blair route was accepted.<sup>21</sup> Surveyors were busy at both sites.

Congress became involved in the controversy when a bill was introduced authorizing the building of a railroad bridge across the Missouri River. This bill was introduced on January 9, 1882, in the House; it provided for the construction of a bridge, but the exact location was not specified. While Congress studied the proposal, both Onawa and Blair publicized the advantages of their particular area. The Onawa-Decatur faction expounded the fact that the solid rock footing was found in their region, which was an outstanding base for a bridge.<sup>22</sup> Both communities were confident they would obtain the bridge.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., February 2, 1882. Decatur is located west of Onawa on the Nebraska side of the Missouri River.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., May 16, 1882; United States Congressional Record, 47th Congress, 1st Session, December 5, 1881 to February 9, 1882, XIII, 280.

By the summer of 1882, the Onawa-Decatur faction had lost the battle, and the construction of the bridge began at Blair.<sup>23</sup> It was to be built by the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad at the cost of \$1,500,000 and completed by December, 1883.<sup>24</sup> With the first battle lost, the communities of Onawa and Decatur began investigating other possibilities in order to secure a bridge.

A local group in Onawa, headed by Addison Oliver and Mitchell Vincent, organized the Missouri River and Iowa Railroad in 1883 to build from Correctionville, Iowa, to Onawa and westward to Decatur.<sup>25</sup> Another railroad company was formed in 1884, named the Nebraska Central Railroad, which planned to construct a railroad from Decatur to Onawa, thence to Mapleton. The company obtained \$15,000,000 from London to proceed with their plans. Meanwhile, in 1884, Congress approved a plan to build a bridge at Decatur.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the Chicago Milwaukee and St. Paul announced plans to build a railroad from Defiance, Iowa, to Onawa and Decatur.<sup>27</sup> The Rock Island began to obtain right-of-way in Woodbury County with future plans which included

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<sup>23</sup>United States, Statutes at Large, 47th Congress, 1881-1883, XXII, 113-14.

<sup>24</sup>Manona County Gazette, August 3, 1882.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., September 6, 1882.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., June 19, 1884.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., March 15, 1883.

Onawa. Excitement swept the community when it looked as if all railroads were headed for Onawa. Survey crews were bustling in the area.

Having been disappointed by railroad talk in the past, many were skeptical of the new rumors. Some of the newspaper men believed the Nebraska Central was merely a name used by the Chicago and St. Paul to challenge monopolistic control of the Mid-Missouri Valley by the Chicago and North Western. Others claimed the Nebraska Central was a front for the Central Pacific, or maybe a front for the Chicago and North Western, in an attempt to gain independence from the "Omaha Pool"<sup>28</sup> in order to find a shorter route to Ogden, Utah.<sup>29</sup> Whatever the reason for the increase of the railroad rumors, the railroad companies were going to force the mighty hand of the Chicago and North Western.

On July 1, 1884, the Chicago and North Western took over control of its subsidiary, the Sioux City and Pacific Railroad.<sup>30</sup> The following month they bought the stock of the Maple Valley Railroad,

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<sup>28</sup>The "Omaha Pool" was an agreement among the Union Pacific, Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy, Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific, and the Chicago North Western to set rates whereby their operation would be a financial success. They agreed to pool all business between Chicago and Council Bluffs, and the net profits were to be divided equally between the railroad companies. Benjamin F. Shambough (ed.), "The Omaha Pool," The Iowa Journal of History and Politics, XXII (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1924), 569-70.

<sup>29</sup>Monona County Gazette, April 17, 1884.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., June 26, 1884.



another subsidiary, which had been completed to Mapleton.<sup>31</sup> Because the Defiance Railroad line, backed by the Milwaukee Railroad, began surveying in the vicinity of Onawa, the pressure was on the Chicago and North Western. In 1885, the Chicago and North Western established a survey line through the Maple Valley and west to Onawa.<sup>32</sup> The construction of the railroad began in 1886, and in November, 1886, the first train arrived in Onawa from Mapleton.<sup>33</sup> At last, Onawa had a second railroad.

With additional trains entering Onawa, the Chicago and North Western had to increase its local facilities. A 40,000 gallon water tank and a ninety-six by sixteen foot coal shed were constructed. Additional employees were also needed. When the railroad obtained the mail contract from the stagecoach company, communication in the area improved.<sup>34</sup>

In 1887, the rapidly expanding Illinois Central started a survey crew through the Little Sioux Valley from Cherokee, Iowa, to Onawa with the hope of successfully competing for the Mid-Missouri Valley with the giant Chicago and North Western. The officials of the

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., August 1, 1884.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., May 13, 1886.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., November 18, 1886.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., November 18, 1886.

Chicago and North Western planned on building a railroad bridge at Decatur in order to accelerate the opening of the West for additional travelers and settlers. Since the Illinois Central was interested in building a railroad in the Little Sioux Valley, the local railroad group, Missouri River and Iowa Railroad, relinquished all interest to this territory.<sup>35</sup> By July, the new railroad agreed to build a line to Onawa and another to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to be called the Cherokee and Dakota Railroad Company. It was capitalized at \$4,000,000, and work was begun immediately.

Since it was hoped that the railroad would be completed by fall, Addison Oliver immediately strove to obtain right-of-way in the Onawa vicinity. The railroad was to enter Onawa from the northeast. Because the Illinois Central hoped to build on the west, the line was located two blocks north of the main street and ran completely through Onawa.<sup>36</sup> The depot ground was donated to the railroad by some public-spirited citizens of Onawa.<sup>37</sup> Some of the people, however, were not so generous, as they were tired of tactics used by the railroads. Farmers were complaining that the surveyors were ruining their crops by

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<sup>35</sup>History of Monona County, p. 338.

<sup>36</sup>Monona County Gazette, July 28, 1887.

<sup>37</sup>History of Monona County, p. 338.

continually crossing them. One farmer said, "One more trip through my cornfield by the surveyors and I will not have to harvest it."<sup>38</sup>

While a few tempers were riled, railroad planning moved rapidly ahead.

Mitchell Vincent, a local contractor, got the contract for the construction of the railroad from Smithland, Iowa, to Onawa, which was a total of thirty-six miles. The entire railroad from Cherokee, headquarters of this branch of the Illinois Central, to Onawa, was fifty-nine miles in length. Because the grading had to be completed within sixty days, Mitchell Vincent's company immediately began work.<sup>39</sup>

Railroad building during the latter part of the nineteenth century was done by sheer human and animal strength. Graders, mormons, dirt slips, dump wagons, and excavator graders drawn by horses or mules, were used.<sup>40</sup> Disks and plows were used to help loosen the soil before the bigger machines could be utilized. As many as twenty-four head of horses were used to push and pull some of the large machines. Besides animal strength, it took a great many men to drive the horses, dig with spades, shovels, picks, use adzes, and push wheelbarrows. An enormous amount of brute strength and hours of toil was needed to build a railroad during this era.

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<sup>38</sup>Monona County Gazette, July 28, 1887.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., July 21, 1887.

<sup>40</sup>A mormon was a dirt leveler and an adz was a broad type ax used to cut planks, ties, etc.

In October, 1887, the first locomotive on the Illinois Central Railroad line arrived in Onawa.<sup>41</sup> Although trains could travel on the track, the depot and turn-table had to be finished before regular service commenced. That winter the Illinois Central built a water tank, a coal shed, and a stockyard. Onawa had three railroads by 1887; moreover, rumors circulated that a fourth railroad was being planned for the community.

In 1888, railroad planning centered on extending the railroad west from Onawa to Decatur. The main obstacle was the Missouri River and it was questionable whether a bridge was financially feasible. The Decatur and Western Nebraska Railroad Company originated such a plan, but it failed.<sup>42</sup> The following year the Rock Island Railroad surveyed a route from Dunlap, Iowa, to Onawa, and excitement was felt throughout the community that the fourth railroad was soon coming to town.<sup>43</sup> This plan never materialized. Then, in 1891, the Illinois Central talked of extending its line to Decatur, but, as before, this proved to be only a rumor. Onawa, indeed, was forced to settle for a maximum of three railroads.

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<sup>41</sup> Monona County Gazette, October 20, 1887.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., July 19, 1889.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., July 11, 1889.

The advantages of having more than one railroad were many. Because competition between the different railroads precipitated low freight rates, the community, especially the farmer, had the opportunity to reap higher profits. This was noted as the farmers from Decatur, a town with no railroad, but easy access to one at Tekamah, Nebraska, transported their grain over the ice during the winter to Onawa to take advantage of a two cent gain, per bushel, on grain.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, they could ship cattle from Onawa to Chicago and save \$6. per car under the rates from Tekamah to Chicago.<sup>45</sup> Lower freight rates gave a definite economic advantage to Onawa.

There was a problem created by the railroad which was disgusting to many of the people of the community. The railroad gave tramps a way of travel, and "jungles" were formed near the freight yards in many communities. Onawa had as many as three small "jungles" where tramps stayed overnight, or for a longer period. They often begged for food from door to door, which was a nuisance. Some women were afraid to answer their door because of this. If the tramps could not get food, they would take an ear of corn from the stockyards or grain elevator. They parched the corn by smashing the kernels and using it like coffee grounds.<sup>46</sup> While the tramps created some problems, there were none which the town marshall could not handle.

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., February 15, 1900.    <sup>45</sup>Ibid., May 26, 1881.

<sup>46</sup>Interview with Bruce Harlow.

There were other minor problems that arose because of the railroad. One of the most common incidents concerned livestock which wandered onto the tracks and was killed. This often resulted in a lawsuit, and the farmer was sometimes able to collect from fifty to sixty dollars in damages. On other occasions, the hitting of livestock would derail a complete train, which caused a great deal of damage.<sup>47</sup> Sometimes pranksters harassed a train with some mischievous tricks. One evening a group of boys placed a huge snowball on the track. This action caused the engineer to bring the train to a screeching halt because he thought it was a rock.

As in the past with the stagecoach, the arrival of a passenger train usually attracted a crowd of people who wanted to see who came in and to obtain news of happenings in the larger neighboring cities. The influence of the railroad was being felt throughout the entire community.

Some of the financial benefits derived by the community were the income paid to the depot agents and section hands, who were residents of the town. Section hands, in the 1870's and 1880's, were earning \$1.10 and \$1.25 per day.<sup>48</sup> When an exceptional amount of work had to be done, a construction train with migratory workers was used. The migratory workers, often Italians from the Chicago area, temporarily

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<sup>47</sup> Monona County Gazette, October 2, 1879.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., December 22, 1887.

contributed to the income of the community.<sup>49</sup> The first fall the Illinois Central operated in Onawa, its payroll ranged up to \$800 per week.<sup>50</sup>

Another benefit was the demands created by railroad construction. For example, it took a great many ties to build a railroad. This demand encouraged A. T. Fessenden, local businessman, to seek a contract to supply them. After obtaining a contract to supply 16,000 ties for Omaha, he began to cut ties from the cottonwood groves in the Onawa vicinity. He used local employees, both farmers and laborers, and began shipping them down the Missouri River to Florence, Nebraska, in rafts containing from 800 to 1,000 ties.<sup>51</sup> Other opportunities were the actual building of the railroad, which used local contractors and laborers. Besides contributing to the growth of the whole Missouri Valley, it was a profitable enterprise for a young, growing community.

Although some of the railroad's monopolistic tactics and false rumors created poor public relations in Onawa, the three railroads converging on the community established outstanding transportation connections with the rest of the nation. Moreover, the railroads

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<sup>49</sup>Interview with Bruce Harlow.

<sup>50</sup>Monona County Gazette, December 22, 1887.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., June 3, 1880.

helped to provide a diversified economy for the agrarian-based community, which definitely created a more healthful business district.



CHAPTER V  
CULTURAL ASPECTS OF ONAWA IN  
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

As the town grew and developed, the residents' attention soon turned to cultural and social needs. Their thoughts quickly turned to the organization of some type of religious services for the community. This movement probably was accelerated by the gloomy atmosphere which swept the nation prior to the Civil War.

The Methodists and Congregationalists were the first to hold religious services in Onawa. On June 27, 1858, the Reverend George Gaby Rice, a Congregationalist, began holding regular services in the courthouse.<sup>1</sup> The Reverend Rice remained only one year, and Congregational services were held irregularly from 1859 to 1868, because of the difficulty in securing a full-time minister. The Reverend Black, an itinerant Methodist clergyman, also, held services in Onawa at an early date.<sup>2</sup> Although there was some con-

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<sup>1</sup>History of Monona County, p. 311.

<sup>2</sup>100 Years of Methodism in Onawa, Iowa, 1855-1955. The first Methodists' services, in Onawa, were held in association with a Mission at Smithland, Iowa.

troversy later as to which denomination held services in Onawa first, the Congregationalists were faster in establishing regular church services.

During the war years, little progress was made in strengthening religious ties in the community; however, as the war ended, and emigration to Onawa increased, an effort was made to re-establish regular church services. In the latter part of the 1860's, the Reverend George L. Woodhull accepted a call from the Congregationalists. Soon plans were underway for the construction of a church building. With a great deal of "self-fortitude," "self-determination," and "ambition," the Reverend Woodhull's plans materialized with the planting of the cornerstone on the northeast corner of Seventh and Diamond Streets on June 22, 1869.<sup>3</sup> The church was completed at the cost of \$6,000 and officially dedicated in December of 1870. Since the Reverend Woodhull had died just prior to the dedication, the Reverend Charles M. Lyman, from the Congregational Church in Dunlap, Iowa, officiated at the dedication.<sup>4</sup> Soon the Reverend Lyman became the regular minister, and he remained one of the foremost religious leaders in the community for the next two decades.

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<sup>3</sup>Monona County Gazette, December 24, 1870. Since the name of the streets have been changed in the last few years, the addresses used in this study are according to the present day appellation.

<sup>4</sup>Monona County Gazette, December 24, 1870.

With the termination of the war, Methodism was spread throughout the community by Mahlon Day Collins, a Methodist circuit rider. At this time, Collins had a 200-mile circuit to serve, which definitely limited his time in Onawa.<sup>5</sup> He traveled this circuit in the summer by horseback or wagon and used a wagon with snow runners in the winter. He was a large and colorful man, one who preached a powerful sermon and, if need be, used physical force to spread the gospel. On one occasion he manhandled a troublemaker, and, as he sat on him, he asked the congregation to pray for the sinner. It was a rough period and many ministers were not afraid to counter force with force.<sup>6</sup>

During Collins' tour of duty in Onawa, he held church services in private homes or in the courthouse. When the weather was favorable, he resorted to camp-meetings. These services were often highly emotional, and usually terminated with a baptismal service.<sup>7</sup>

It was not until October, 1870, that the first Methodist class was organized by the Reverend J. L. Walker; services were held on

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin F. Shambaugh (ed.), "The Story of Mahlon Day Collins," The Iowa Journal of History and Politics (Iowa City: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1930), XXVIII, 100.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

alternate Sundays in the schoolhouse.<sup>8</sup> Two years later, Walker was replaced by the Reverend L. H. Woodworth. Soon Woodworth and his congregation laid plans for the construction of a church just east of the corner of Twelfth Street and Iowa Avenue. Work began immediately, and the church was completed at a cost of approximately \$2,000 and dedicated on June 22, 1873, by the Reverend A. T. Mattison.<sup>9</sup> To strengthen the possibility of acquiring and holding a full-time minister, a parsonage was constructed on the adjoining lot during the following year.

A few years later the Presbyterians commenced holding religious services in Onawa. Regular service was held on alternate Sundays from September 10, 1870, to May 18, 1872, but evidently little effort was made to erect an edifice.<sup>10</sup> There seemed to be a lack of support of Presbyterianism in Onawa.

As a number of Catholics entered the community, a movement was started to establish a Catholic church in Onawa. In 1870, B. D. Holbrook and C. H. Holbrook--two Protestants--donated to the Right

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<sup>8</sup> Monona County Gazette, October 8, 1870. The term "class" refers to a group smaller than a congregation, approximately twelve people represented the ideal number. They met for prayer and Bible study.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., June 27, 1873.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., September 10, 1870, to May 18, 1872.

Reverend John Hennessy, Bishop of Dubuque, a lot for the purpose of building a church.<sup>11</sup> The promoters of Onawa desired good public relations throughout the community. Besides, emigration might be increased if different religious facilities were available.

The next year, Father James G. McNulty of Sioux City, attempted to take advantage of the generous gift by the Holbrook brothers. Plans were made for the establishment of a Catholic Church in Onawa.<sup>12</sup> The following year mass was held in the schoolhouse and plans were laid for a new church building. During the summer, construction of a church began at 912 Thirteenth Street, and the first mass was held in the new building in the fall of 1872.<sup>13</sup> Even with a new church sanctuary, services were held at irregular intervals and a full-time resident priest was not obtained until the turn of the century.

As the number of residents increased from the Scandinavian countries, a movement was started to form a Lutheran congregation. By 1873, the Norwegians in the community began to meet in different

<sup>11</sup>Father B. V. Greteman (Compiler), The Catholic Church in Western Monona County, 1870 to 1960 (Nihil Obstat; Edmundus F. Casey, Censor Librorum, Denison, Iowa, die 9a Julii, 1960. Imprimatur: Josephus M. Mueller, D. D. Episcopus Sioupolitanus, Siopoli, Die 11a Julii, 1960), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup>Monona County Gazette, March 18, 1871.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., August 10, 1872.

homes for religious services. At first, laymen presided. Soon the group joined the Cottonwood, Minnesota, Mission and was served by the Reverend Lars Lund. Later on, the members organized the Trinity Lutheran Church under the supervision of the Reverend Amund Johnson. It was not until 1888, that they commenced building a church at Twelfth and Marble Streets. The official dedication came the following year. In the beginning, the language spoken was Norwegian, but by the 1890's, it had become a bi-lingual church.<sup>14</sup>

The German speaking element in the area desired a church for their ethnic group, also. As soon as they organized, they moved at a relatively fast pace. On April 3, 1884, they commenced to build at Eleventh and Granite Streets. The church was finished and dedicated that autumn, and church services were held regularly from that time on.<sup>15</sup> The building cost \$1,500, and the interior had a Gothic appearance.

The only other religious denomination which was active during the period was the First Christian Church congregation. They first met in homes, as early as 1867. It was not until 1898, however, that they constructed a church building, located at Tenth and Diamond Streets, at a cost of \$5,000.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Seventieth Anniversary, Trinity Lutheran Church, Onawa, Iowa, 1876-1946.

<sup>15</sup>Monona County Gazette, September 18, 1884.

<sup>16</sup>Fred W. Wonder, History of the Onawa Christian Church (Marceline, Missouri: Walsworth Brothers, 1951), p. 1.

Even with the establishment of a number of churches, many desired to have a different type of fellowship. They wanted a fraternity where men with different religious backgrounds, beliefs, and professions could meet on a common basis. About 1865, a movement was begun to establish a Masonic Lodge in Onawa. Finally, on June 3, 1868, James Butts, Freeman Pierce, F. W. Snow, and others acquired a charter from the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Ancient Masons of the State of Iowa. The new lodge was named the Vesper Lodge Number 223, and regular meetings were held after this date.<sup>17</sup> The lodge sponsored dances and other social activities. The lodge numbered many of the leading businessmen of the community among its members.

Another lodge, the Odd Fellows Number 380, was formed on June 7, 1878. A. J. Morrison was the Grand Master and helped to install the first officers. These were John McCasky, the First Noble Grand; James Carmody, the Vice Grand; John Douglas, Secretary; E. W. Holbrook, Treasurer; L. H. Belknap, Conductor; and G. R. Horming, Warden.<sup>18</sup> The first meetings were held in a hall located over the Thurston hardware store.

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<sup>17</sup>Sit Lux et Lus Fuit. This was the original charter. (Located in the Lodge.)

<sup>18</sup>Constitution and by-laws of Monona Lodge 380. I. O. O. F. (Located in the files of the Lodge.)

Sixteen years later the Rebecca Lodge Number 222 was organized as a sister lodge to the Odd Fellows.<sup>19</sup> Both lodges sponsored dances and dinners in order to raise funds for civic projects and to bring the community closer together socially. Such organizations helped to make the community homogenous.

In 1887, the Knights of Pythias was organized. This lodge met in the Masonic Hall for the first year, but the following year it held meetings in close conjunction with the Odd Fellows.<sup>20</sup>

The last lodge organized in the community in the nineteenth century was the Order of Eastern Star. Guided by a committee from the Masonic Lodge, a group of thirty-five men and women were issued a charter in 1897. The Eastern Star worked in close cooperation with the Masonic Brotherhood.<sup>21</sup> This lodge, along with all of the other lodges, contributed to the building of a progressive community.

Undoubtedly the biggest event held, which was educational as well as recreational, was the annual Monona County Fair. In the years immediately following the Civil War, the Fair expanded rapidly. Soon additional facilities were needed; whereupon, a group was organized and plans were initiated for the purchase of more land, the erection of new buildings, and construction of needed fences. It was decided to

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<sup>19</sup>The Onawa Sentinel, March 27, 1924.

<sup>20</sup>History of Monona County, p. 336.

<sup>21</sup>Charter of the Eastern Star. (Preserved in the Masonic Hall.)



raise \$4,000 by the sale of stock in order to implement this development. Within one week, \$2,720 had been raised and the desired land purchased.<sup>22</sup> Addison Oliver and C. E. Whiting, who were conscious of needed civic projects, did a great deal to guarantee the success of this venture. With larger facilities available, the Fair expanded to include all types of livestock shows, agricultural implement displays, grain exhibits, culinary competitions, and fine arts. The railroads often cooperated by running special excursions to the Fair.

Another important question which arose concerned the school system. A movement was started to create a separate school district for the town itself. In 1868, the voters approved the separation of the town from the Franklin Township School District and the creation of an Onawa School District. Almost at once, the new district was faced with a problem created by an increasing enrollment and inadequate facilities. In 1872, the residents voted to build a new schoolhouse.

A contract for the construction of a new building was awarded to M. B. Pullen on a bid of \$16,000. The structure was to be seventy-two feet by forty feet in size, with three stories. It took two years to complete the building, and the actual cost exceeded the original estimate by \$4,000. It required approximately 800,000 bricks, 400 barrels of lime, five car loads of pine lumber, and 75,000 feet of cottonwood lumber. The building was heated by a modern "Hawley Tubular" type

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<sup>22</sup>Monona County Gazette, March 18, 1871.

iron furnace.<sup>23</sup> The basement ceiling was nine feet high, but the rest had fourteen foot ceilings. The rooms were large and decorated with ash wainscoating, and the style of the building was a modernization of "French Renaissance," trimmed in stone. The wood trim and the bricks were manufactured in Onawa. The final step in the construction was to transfer the bell from the old to the new building. The school was then ready for students.<sup>24</sup>

To go along with the new school building, an enlarged curriculum was planned. Latin, Greek, geometry, astronomy, natural philosophy, botany, algebra, higher algebra, higher arithmetic, zoology, English, chemistry, physical geography, trigonometry, American literature, psychology, logic, geology, and a number of history and English courses were offered. The Superintendent, J. W. Love, had a Master of Arts degree and taught some of the higher level courses.<sup>25</sup>

With the construction of additional buildings in the town, the question of what to do in case of a fire became important. In 1871, the Excelsior Hook and Ladder Company was organized.<sup>26</sup> During the first year, it was actually an "ax and bucket brigade," but the next year a hook and ladder truck was purchased for \$175.<sup>27</sup> That winter the

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., November 7, 1874. <sup>24</sup>History of Monona County, p. 325.

<sup>25</sup>Catalogue and Report of the Onawa City Schools for 1875-76, J. W. Love, M. A., Superintendent and Principal.

<sup>26</sup>Monona County Gazette, May 18, 1872.

<sup>27</sup>History of Monona County, p. 328.

volunteer fire department had the opportunity to use the new equipment as a devastating fire broke out in Onawa. The fire fighters fought hard, but were handicapped by the lack of an adequate water supply. It looked as if the fire might sweep through a complete block of the business district, but it was contained to three businesses, and the loss was limited to an estimated \$15,000.<sup>28</sup>

After the fire, the city decided to purchase a "hand fire engine, hose cart, and a quantity of hose." The next disastrous fire occurred in 1879 when the gristmill caught fire. As the grain burned, the heat became so intense that it was difficult for the firemen to fight the fire. They were also hampered by the cold weather and a shortage of water. The mill was completely destroyed and the loss was estimated at \$15,000.<sup>29</sup> In both instances there had been an insufficient water supply. This deficiency precipitated plans to drill additional fire-wells. A number were drilled, one was even located in the center of Iowa Avenue, in order to provide additional protection to the business district.<sup>30</sup>

It was not all work for the volunteer firemen, as they also engaged in sports and provided entertainment for the residents. Firemen from different communities met regularly and engaged in various

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<sup>28</sup>Monona County Gazette, January 10, 1874.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., January 9, 1879.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., January 24, 1874.

athletic contests. One of the main events was the hose race, where the teams competed as units for different trophies. The people of Onawa usually had plenty to cheer about, as their team won a great many trophies in local and state competition.<sup>31</sup> Besides athletic events, the firemen sponsored yearly dances to help raise money for the fire department.

During the 1880's the community organized a number of other forms of recreation. A polo club was formed and Onawa engaged in spirited matches with neighboring towns.<sup>32</sup> For the gun enthusiasts, the Onawa Glass Ball Shooting Club provided regular competitive "shoots." This appealed primarily to men, but women were not excluded.<sup>33</sup> In the summer there were horse races for the men, and an occasional circus for the children. The ladies had their reading, sewing, and church clubs. During the winter months, spelling bees were quite popular. These were usually held in the schoolhouse, and both the adults and children participated to see who was the best speller in each age group. After the competition ended, usually food was served, and the rest of the evening was spent visiting.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., July 10, 1879.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., February 26, 1885.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., July 14, 1887.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., May 31, 1883.

For music enthusiasts, summer concerts were given by the local band. In 1887, music facilities were improved with the erection of a new bandstand.<sup>35</sup> When the Onawa Concert Band was not performing in Onawa, the group was presenting concerts in neighboring towns. This type of entertainment was enjoyed by all.

By 1890, the opera house had become the chief center of entertainment. There were concerts, stage shows, and plays. Stock companies traveled a circuit, which included Onawa, presenting various types of plays. The price of admission was from ten to thirty cents.<sup>36</sup> When a special program was presented, such as the Mozart Symphony Club of New York, the price was raised to seventy-five cents.

At other times, local talent performed at the opera house. For example, on one occasion, the local dramatic club presented a play "Over the Hills to the Poor House" which the audience thought hilarious.<sup>37</sup> Dozens of different activities were held in the opera house, including box suppers and political rallies. Attendance was usually very good.

By the end of the century, Onawa could boast of a variety of churches representing a considerable range in religious thinking, and a number of active lodges. The community had an opera house,

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., July 14, 1887.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., April 30, 1896.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., April 5, 1894.

**and the Monona County fair grounds were nearby. The community could now offer recreation and entertainment for people of different ages and varying tastes.**

## CHAPTER VI

### ONAWA AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

The economic, social, and political problems facing Onawa in the latter part of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century were similar to other agriculturally-based county seat towns in Iowa. The population increase created a need for bigger churches, libraries, and schools, as well as a larger business district. Since there was always a desire for industry, the leaders continually attempted to attract manufacturing interests. At the same time, agriculture was facing a long period of decreasing farm prices and sporadic droughts. However, a more pressing problem arose in 1889 over the possible removal of the county seat.

The community was shaken when the town of Mapleton, second largest community in the County, challenged Onawa for the distinction of having the courthouse.<sup>1</sup> Since the old courthouse was becoming obsolete and run-down, Mapleton, approximately twenty-two miles northeast of Onawa, filed a petition to acquire the county seat, in 1889.

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<sup>1</sup>History of Monona County, p. 325.

Mapleton promised to raise \$25,000 to construct a new courthouse; Onawa countered by offering to raise \$12,500 in order to retain the county seat.<sup>2</sup> In November of 1889, an election was held, and Onawa won by a majority of over 200 votes.

After winning the election, Onawa began planning for a new courthouse. The Board of Supervisors studied numerous plans and decided to build one similar to the Adam County, Iowa, courthouse. On May 23, 1891, the contract was let for the new building at a cost of \$30,000.<sup>3</sup> It was to be constructed of brick, three stories high, plus a full basement, and a room in the tower which could be used for storage. The following spring, the structure was completed and occupied. This new courthouse ended all threats from neighboring towns.

In 1884, The Onawa Sentinel was established by W. A. Green, who had been a newspaper man in Whiting, Iowa. His humble beginning was a one-page newspaper printed by an old "army press." Nonetheless, it grew into one of the leading papers in the County.<sup>4</sup>

By 1887, there were a few private telephones in use, such as between a proprietor's store and his residence;<sup>5</sup> however, it was

<sup>2</sup>Monona County Gazette, May 16, 1889.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., May 21, 1891. This courthouse was still being used in 1966.

<sup>4</sup>History of Monona County, pp. 320-21. This paper was in operation in 1966. No files were available prior to 1906.

<sup>5</sup>Monona County Gazette, April 21, 1887.



not until 1900 that Fred Marquis began the first telephone exchange which offered service to everyone. Telephone rates were one dollar a month for the residential area, and one dollar and a half for the business district.<sup>6</sup>

The year of 1889 was a vintage year for the business district of Onawa. A beautiful building was erected by the newly-formed Onawa State Bank. The front of the building was built of irregular-shaped Sioux Falls granite cemented in a planned pattern. For interior beauty and heat, a fireplace was built, something which was not found in many business structures.<sup>7</sup> The exterior was Romanesque, which made for an impressive appearance.

The construction of the largest and first brick hotel began the same year. It was located on the main street, near the railroad, which made it ideal for travelers. The following year, a grand ball and banquet was held to celebrate its opening.<sup>8</sup> With these new buildings, the main street began to have the appearance of a modern town.

Although some new businesses were being built, Onawa still needed additional industry. Consequently, a group of civic-minded individuals formed the Onawa Improvement Company in May of 1889.

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<sup>6</sup>Minutes of the City Council Meeting, Book Number I, January 4, 1897 to March 19, 1906, p. 75. (In the files of the City Clerk.) All records prior to 1897 were destroyed.

<sup>7</sup>Monona County Gazette, December 13, 1888. Many believe this building was the most attractive on Iowa Avenue.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., May 15, 1890. The hotel was still in operation in 1966.

Their specific object was "to assist in the up building of the manufacturing and business interest of Onawa and vicinity."<sup>9</sup> Addison Oliver, the Holbrook brothers, and G. W. McMillan headed the organization, and plans were made to sell \$250,000 of capital stock.

In the beginning it appeared that the project was going to be a success. On July 13, 1889, a company was organized, with the help of the Improvement Company, for the purpose of "manufacturing and selling of butter, cheese, and other dairy products."<sup>10</sup> Capital stock was set at \$50,000, which was to be sold in shares of \$100 each. The board of directors were F. G. Oliver, Addison Oliver, D. A. Pember, J. K. Craford, and J. M. Jividen.<sup>11</sup>

Plans moved ahead with the construction of a twenty-eight by fifty-two foot building. It was located four blocks south of Iowa Avenue on Tenth Street. By fall, the business was in operation; it was not a success, however, and within two years there was talk of converting it to a steam roller mill.<sup>12</sup> These plans never materialized, and the business soon failed.

Not easily discouraged, the Improvement Company began investigating other sources. A canning factory was contacted and the

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., May 2, 1888.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., August 15, 1889.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., February 12, 1891.

officials appeared interested, but nothing came of it. Then an attempt was made to induce a flour mill at Lincoln, Nebraska, to locate in Onawa. The Improvement Company emphasized the fact that Onawa had three railroads and was located between two thriving cities, Omaha and Sioux City.<sup>13</sup> Again, this effort failed.

One successful venture during the period was the formation of the Onawa Marble Company, which handled and engraved tombstones. This business never grew into a booming enterprise, but it remained for a number of years.<sup>14</sup> The Improvement Company worked continuously, but the results were seldom successful.

Another organization formed was the Building Association. Its specific objective was to help the laboring men to become homeowners.<sup>15</sup> The average cost of a new home in 1890 ranged from \$1,000 to \$1,500, and older houses sold from \$250 to \$1,500.<sup>16</sup> This organization would have been a great asset for the community, but it had a short life.

Interest was not centered on material things alone. For example, the clergy continually preached against the evils of alcohol. Soon, a temperance movement was started in Onawa. This movement

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., April 13, 1899.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., July 12, 1894.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., February 17, 1887.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., September 11, 1890.

gained momentum in the 1880's and clashes broke out between the "wets" and the "drys." In August, 1886, a Methodist minister from Sioux City, very active in the temperance movement, delivered an impassioned sermon in Onawa in which he expounded upon the evils of liquor. The following week, he was killed by an unknown assailant in Sioux City.<sup>17</sup> The Onawa Temperance League demanded that action be taken against the local saloon operators, but the town officials ignored their pleas.

In Onawa the movement reached a climax in 1900, when the local Temperance League ordered all saloons to close. In response to the demand, saloons did close for a few days; however, they re-opened when the State Supreme Court handed down a decision affirming the legality of selling liquor.<sup>18</sup>

Another way undertaken to combat alcoholism was by training the youth. An unsuccessful attempt was made in 1888 to establish a branch of the Young Men's Christian Association.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, efforts were made to organize a library association in order to provide entertainment through reading, but neither plan succeeded.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., August 5, 1886.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., February 1, 1900.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., March 15, 1888.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., July 5, 1888.

The farmers were also facing adversities as one problem after another plagued them. The price of their products had been continually decreasing since the late 1870's. For example, in 1879, corn had sold as high as seventy-five cents a bushel, while ten years later, it had decreased to sixteen cents.<sup>21</sup> Hog prices had fallen from six to three dollars per hundredweight during the same period. The number of exceptionally dry years in the late eighties further aggravated the situation. Farmers became so desperate that they burned corn for fuel when it was available.<sup>22</sup>

Addison Oliver believed the farmer should increase the diversity of his operation by harvesting the wild hay which grew on the lowland to the east of Onawa. This hay reached a height of six feet, and made excellent horse feed. Previously, loose hay had been difficult to transport, and this lowered its value as a cash crop. With the increased use of the hay baler in the 1880's, however, hay could be transported much easier and more profitably.<sup>23</sup> The price of hay varied with the supply available, but is usually averaged from eight to fifteen dollars per ton. Oliver said, "Corn is king, but grass is the power behind the throne."<sup>24</sup> Some farmers did take advantage of this

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., November 21, 1878; December 26, 1889.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., January 28, 1886.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., December 1, 1881.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., September 22, 1887.

opportunity and profited from the hay business; however, most of them continued to rely on grain farming and suffered a great deal from low prices.

In desperation many Monona County farmers began to listen to the Populists. The Onawa Sentinel became the leading mouth-piece for the local Populists, with numerous articles advocating reform.<sup>25</sup> As the Populists gathered strength, a rally was held at the George Reed grove in 1894 in order to stimulate additional support for the party. By the time of the election in 1896, the Populists in the community were vigorously supporting William Jennings Bryan for President and Democratic candidates, generally, for county offices. Although there was strong Democratic support in the rural areas, the town people still were Republicans. While the vote in Onawa favored McKinley by 217 to 211, the county overwhelmingly supported Bryan by a vote of 2,558 to 1,527. Furthermore, all county offices were won by Democrats due in part, no doubt, to the fact that the Democrats and the Populists ran on a fusion ticket.<sup>26</sup>

Three local newspapers stimulated a great deal of interest in the election. Just prior to 1890, the Democratic party had encouraged W. H. Wonder to start a paper in Onawa to be called the Onawa

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., August 9, 1894.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., November 5, 1896.

Weekly Democrat.<sup>27</sup> Of course, the Democrat gave Bryan full support. The Monona County Gazette gave McKinley their backing, while the Sentinel supported Bryan by way of the Populist party. Thus, the residents of the community were kept well-informed regarding controversial issues.

Local improvements of the 1890's were numerous. The most revolutionary was the coming of the electric light. In June, 1893, a contract was let for the construction of an electric light plant.<sup>28</sup> Excitement ran high throughout the community and the local newspapers published comments such as, "Walking in the light" and "Onawa will soon have no use for the present street lamps." In February of 1894, the lights were turned on.<sup>29</sup> In residential sections the rates were fifty cents per month for one office or bedroom light, but in the business district, where lights were burned longer, the charge was fifty per cent more. As the demand for electricity increased, the original plant was replaced in 1901 by a new and more modern plant at the intersection of Iowa Avenue and Eighth Street, on the west side of the Chicago and North Western Railroad track.<sup>30</sup> In both plants the genera-

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<sup>27</sup>The Onawa Sentinel, March 27, 1924. The Democrat was still publishing a weekly paper in 1966.

<sup>28</sup>Monona County Gazette, June 1, 1893.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., February 15, 1894.

<sup>30</sup>Minutes of the City Council Meeting, Book Number 1, January 4, 1897 to March 19, 1906, p. 139.

tors were belt-driven by a steam engine, and the by-product of steam was used to heat the buildings. By 1900, electric rates were changed to one dollar a month for the use of one light, and seventy-five cents for each additional light.<sup>31</sup>

While the advent of electricity probably decreased the immediate demand for kerosene, this proved to be only a temporary setback. In 1897, the Standard Oil Company installed two oil tanks with a capacity of 200 barrels each. The company anticipated a market for 30,000 barrels of kerosene per year in the area.<sup>32</sup>

There were other changes around the turn of the century. For example, the Illinois Central Railroad delivered one hundred cars of gravel at six dollars a car in 1897 for street improvements. Concrete sidewalks were rapidly replacing the old wooden walks. In order to accommodate the waste created by an increasing population, the city dump was expanded.<sup>33</sup> As the community grew, so did the demand for services.

The people were still interested in a bridge across the Missouri. In 1896, the prospects appeared promising when a pontoon bridge was brought up the river and assembled at Decatur. By autumn the bridge

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>32</sup>Monona County Gazette, February 15, 1894.

<sup>33</sup>Minutes of the City Council Meeting, Book Number 1, January 4, 1897 to March 19, 1906, pp. 15, 16, 38.



was ready for traffic, but it operated only until the river began to freeze. Then it was removed and the following spring it was not reassembled.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the excitement of having a bridge was short-lived, and the residents of Onawa had to be content with the Decatur ferry.

The ferry had been in operation for a number of years. It operated from the first of April until the river froze in the fall. The ferry docked on the Iowa side at a hamlet called Tieville, approximately six miles due west of Onawa, and transported everything from humans to livestock.<sup>35</sup> On one occasion, 481 cattle were driven from Wayne, Nebraska, to Mills County, Iowa, and were all transported across the river on the ferry.<sup>36</sup> After the river froze, travel between Onawa and Decatur was carried on over the ice. Even without a railroad going west, the community had excellent transportation connections with most areas in the Midwest.

A devastating fire struck the town in 1890. It destroyed an entire row of stores on the south side of Iowa Avenue, and, to make matters worse, the following month the gristmill burned, at an estimated loss of \$15,000.<sup>37</sup> Although the local fire department fought hard to con-

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<sup>34</sup>Monona County Gazette, November 19, 1896.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., September 15, 1881.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., March 13, 1890.

tain the fire, it could not be stopped. Although the loss was partially covered by insurance, the fire still adversely affected the economy of the town.

Another adversity that continually plagued the community was floods caused by the Missouri and Little Sioux Rivers. It was decided to attempt to reduce the flood threat and drain the lowlands in the area. A number of proposals were made, but Mitchell Vincent, local contractor and surveyor, seemed to have the most practical plan. He believed the Little Sioux River should be straightened so the water would run faster, and, thus, it would drain the land at a more rapid rate. Also, dikes should be constructed on each side of the river in order to increase the capacity of the river. For drainage, Vincent advocated the use of canals and ditches. His plans were supported by the railroads, as well as the county officials. The ditches were dug and dikes were built, but this still did not entirely solve the problem.<sup>38</sup>

Still another problem was related to the increase in population. As the population grew, so did the school enrollment, and it soon became necessary to increase the size of the school building. Since the old building was in excellent condition, it was decided to built a sixty by one hundred ten foot addition onto the front, at a cost of \$23,000. Now, there were ten rooms for the grade school and six rooms, plus a large assembly, for the high school. The total valuation was \$43,000.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., April 13, 1899.

<sup>39</sup>Onawa Weekly Democrat, November 29, 1900.

More people created a need for larger churches. By 1900, the Congregationalists began planning the construction of a new and larger church. It was started the following year on the corner of Ninth and Diamond Streets. The church cost \$12,868, and was officially dedicated on January 12, 1902, by the Reverend J. A. McNamara.<sup>40</sup>

The same year the Methodists built a new church on the adjoining lot, west of the original church. The new church cost approximately \$10,000, and \$1,500 had to be borrowed, since some of the subscriptions were not met. The church was dedicated on December 14, 1902, by the Bishop, John W. Hamilton.<sup>41</sup> Within four years the note was paid off, and a grand celebration was held to commemorate the burning of the mortgage.

Five years later, a movement was started to add courses in industrial arts and home economics to the regular school curriculum. Addison Oliver donated \$10,000 which was to be used to erect a two-story building, forty by fifty feet, for that purpose.<sup>42</sup> This addition was needed for the approximately 150 high school students.

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<sup>40</sup>The Onawa Gazette, January 17, 1902. The name was changed from the Monona County Gazette on April 18, 1901.

<sup>41</sup>Onawa Weekly Democrat, December 18, 1902.

<sup>42</sup>The Onawa Sentinel, September 12, 1907.

Oliver was still not satisfied, because he wanted a library for the students and adults of the community. The first library, named the Franklin Township Library, had been founded in 1868. That same year it was renamed the Onawa Library and moved to the schoolhouse. These early efforts were doomed to fail because of inadequate financial support which was based on subscriptions.<sup>43</sup> Further support was given to the library when a "philanthropic" gentleman from Primghar, Iowa, offered to give \$500 to each of twenty-five counties in Northwest Iowa, this offer included Monona. This was a generous gift, but it was not enough to provide Onawa with a new library.<sup>44</sup>

It took the generosity of Addison Oliver to provide Onawa with a reputable library. After the Congregationalists built a new building, Oliver purchased the old structure and presented it and \$4,000 to the town council for the purpose of starting a public library.<sup>45</sup> Oliver insisted that before his offer was accepted the matter be presented to the voters. At the next election the residents expressed their desire for a library and a willingness to accept the donation.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Monona County Gazette, May 11, 1899.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., May 13, 1899.

<sup>45</sup> Minutes of the City Council Meeting, Book Number 1, January 4, 1897 to March 19, 1906, p. 139.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

To give further support, the town council passed a motion to appropriate for the library \$500 per year for the first five years, \$750 per year for the next five years, and \$1,000 each following year. Also, the council agreed to furnish free lights and water. By the winter of 1903, the library was officially opened, with Maudé Oliver as the first librarian.<sup>47</sup>

Still not completely satisfied, Oliver wanted a bigger library with more volumes. His wishes were gratified when the town of Onawa was offered a Carnegie grant of \$10,000, provided the council would agree "to maintain a free public library at a cost of not less than one thousand dollars a year and provide a suitable site for the library."<sup>48</sup>

The same month, December, 1907, Oliver donated an additional \$10,000 for the construction of a building and "adequate" interior furnishings.<sup>49</sup>

In addition, he donated a \$10,000 mortgage, which he held on some local land, drawing five percent interest. This grant was to be used as an endowment with the interest to be used to purchase books.<sup>50</sup> The city agreed to furnish free steam heat which would be piped to the library from the power plant. Furthermore, free lights and water would also be furnished. The following year Oliver donated another \$5,000.

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>48</sup>Minutes of the City Council Meeting, Book Number 2, April 15, 1906 to May 3, 1915, p. 49.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 57. The mortgage was paid and the money was in government bonds in 1966.

The Holbrook brothers, earlier, had donated land for a library. The alleys adjoining these lots were given to the library by the town council. Then Oliver donated an adjoining lot, which gave the library almost a complete block.<sup>51</sup> This made it possible to beautify the grounds.

To raise additional money, the city sold the old library and applied the proceeds to the new structure.<sup>52</sup> In the fall of 1908, the cornerstone was laid for the new library. Patton and Miller, architects from Chicago, designed the building, which was sixty-three by forty-three feet, two stories high, with a half basement. The general construction contract was awarded to W. G. Merten of Emerson, Nebraska. The exterior was brick, rubble, and cut stone, with a tile roof, while the interior was finished in marble and wood.<sup>53</sup> The building was completed the following year and opened to the public.

The enlarged facilities engendered local interest. For example, the number of people using the library increased from 767, in 1903, to 2,567, in 1909, and the circulation of books increased from 10,328 to 20,368.<sup>54</sup> During the same period, the number of volumes increased from 2,075 to 5,904. This was a great innovation for the educational system in Onawa.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>53</sup>The Onawa Sentinel, December 14, 1911.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

By 1912, a distinct change was noticeable in Onawa. An occasional automobile appeared on the streets and the local newspaper contained automobile advertisements. On the farms, an occasional steam engine was used to pull large "gang" plows. East of Onawa, steam dredges were employed to excavate drainage ditches. Mechanization was beginning to have an impact upon the community.<sup>55</sup> Onawa was faced by a new challenge, not one of survival, but rather one of readjustment to meet conditions in a changing society.

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<sup>55</sup>ibid.

## CHAPTER VII

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The Missouri River made its broad, rich valley accessible to the pioneer who was traveling west in search of cheap, rich land. The topography of the area, the acres of extremely tall grass, and the abundance of alluvial soil attracted settlers. With an anticipation of an influx of emigrants into the region, a group of men met at Ashton in the spring of 1857 to lay plans for a new town. Before the meeting adjourned, a location was selected and plans were made for the purchase of the land. Onawa, a unique Indian word meaning "wide awake," was chosen as the name of the community. With the preliminary plans underway, the founding fathers' attention turned to raising needed finances for their venture.

Soon streets were laid out, and houses and business establishments were under construction. Although the stagecoach operating between Sioux City and Council Bluffs began making regular stops at Onawa, the promoters of the new town realized the limitations of the stagecoach and attempted to attract a railroad to the area. To induce the railroads to build, the community had to rely on generous land and money grants from the federal government, plus additional local



gifts. Even with these subsidies, ten years elapsed before the first locomotive steamed into Onawa.

While the promoters knew the economy of the new community would be based on agriculture, they desired as much diversification as possible. Their first goal was to secure the county seat and acquire the many benefits to be derived from it. Since C. E. Whiting, a founding father, was the county judge, it was not difficult to arrange for an election to decide the issue. The vote favored Onawa, and from 1858 on, it had the advantage of being the focal point for all county government operations. Nonetheless, Onawa had to constantly guard against attempts to acquire the courthouse, by neighboring communities.

Since Onawa was paralleled by two rivers, the Missouri and the Little Sioux, there was a considerable acreage of overflow land, which came under the jurisdiction of the Swamp Land Act. This act precipitated some anxious moments in the community because the American Emigrant Company purchased a large parcel of land in the vicinity. This was an unfortunate incident which probably curtailed the growth of the community for a short period of time, but the residents overcame this setback and moved steadily ahead.

By the fall of 1867, Onawa had its first railroad. With it came additional settlers and the development of Onawa as the chief trade center in Monona County. It seemed as if the building of one

railroad stimulated the interest of the rival companies, as they wanted to share in economic advantages of the valley. Within twenty years, Onawa had three railroads converging on the community from every direction except west. The only transportation to the west was by a ferry.

Realizing the handicap of having an economy relying basically on agriculture, the most difficult task facing the community was obtaining some type of industry. Some local manufacturing enterprises were started, but they never grew to any extent. To stimulate industrial development, a group of civic-minded residents formed the Onawa Improvement Company with the specific object of starting and encouraging new enterprises. The promoters expectations were never realized; in fact, most of their ventures failed, and the community was forced to continue to rely almost entirely upon agriculture.

Local politics always aroused widespread interest, but in the 1870's the residents became seriously concerned with national politics. Two favorite sons, C. E. Whiting and Addison Oliver, ran against each other for a seat in Congress. Oliver defeated Whiting in a hard fought battle; however, both of these men contributed a great deal to the success of the Onawa venture.

As the town grew, the demand increased for adequate schools, churches, lodges, and entertainment. The first school was started in

1857. As the enrollment increased, new districts were formed, new schools were built, and the curriculum enlarged. The founding of the Onawa library also contributed to the education of the students.

The people of Onawa did not neglect the spiritual desires of the community. Since there were a number of ethnic groups in the area, Onawa soon had six different sanctuaries. Correlated with this growth was the founding of a number of lodges which met for fellowship and often gave needed support for small civic projects.

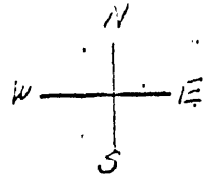
For entertainment, the resident enjoyed horse races, athletic events, literary meetings, music and stage shows. There was entertainment available for different ages and varied tastes.

One problem which always harassed the area was flooding and poor drainage. The land was so flat that flood water continually limited the agricultural output. Also, floods created added expense by damaging railroads, dikes, and roads. There was a continuous effort to straighten rivers, dig drainage ditches, and till low areas, but the success of such operations was limited.

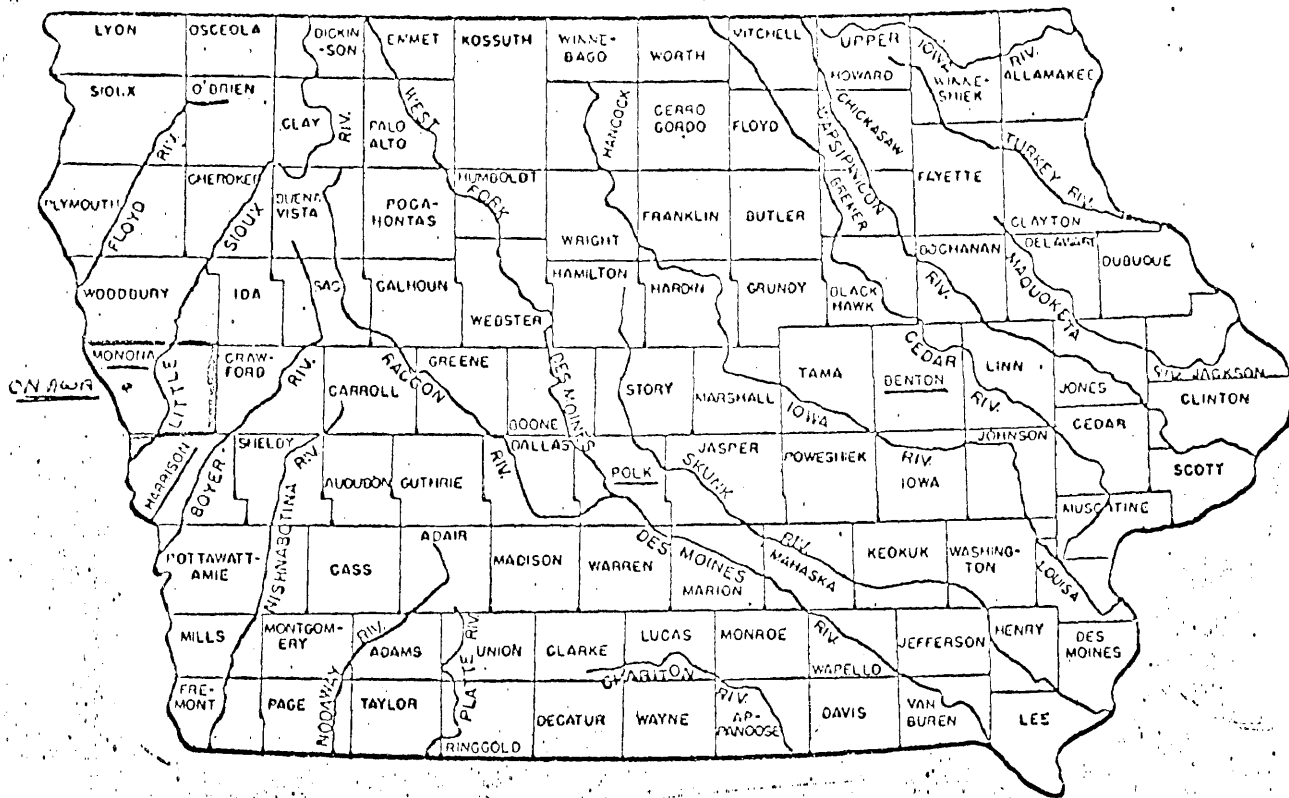
Obviously the history of Onawa was important not only to those persons whose background lies in the community and the surrounding area, but also to the student in search of specific patterns of development in the Middle West. The community was a typical river bottom town which was plagued with the many struggles which confronted most Missouri valley communities. Since it was an agricultural town,

there was a continual struggle to add diversification to the economy whereby a more healthful economy could be enjoyed. Although all of its ventures were not successful, the most serious problems were solved and Onawa has become an important, well-established county seat town in the long Missouri Valley Basin.

APPENDIX I



COUNTIES AND MAJOR RIVERS OF IOWA



Allan G. Bogue, From Prairie to Corn Belt, Farming on the Illinois and Iowa Prairies in the Nineteenth Century. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 11.

# MONONA LAND COMPANY.

## ONAWA.

The objects of this Association are—The promotion of ONAWA, (Monona County, Iowa,) Holding and Dealing in Real Estate, and the Establishing a Ferry on the Missouri River. The Articles under which this Company is Incorporated, are as follows:

ARTICLE 1st. This Company is known as the MONONA LAND COMPANY, and the principal place of doing the business of said Company shall be at the Town of ONAWA.

ARTICLE 2d. The minimum Capital Stock of this Corporation is ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS, (all paid in) which may be increased to double that amount by a majority vote of the Stockholders.

ARTICLE 3d. Said Capital Stock is divided into Two Hundred and Fifty Shares of Five Hundred Dollars each.

ARTICLE 4th. The indebtedness of this Corporation shall not at any one time exceed two and a half per cent. on the Capital Stock.

ARTICLE 5th. The business of this Corporation shall be conducted by a Board of Directors, nine in number, five of whom shall be residents of Monona County, who are elected, by ballot, annually on the second Monday in October; but said Board shall continue in office until a new Board is elected and qualified. In the election of Officers each Stockholder shall be entitled to one vote for every Share by him owned: *Provided*, that no Stockholder shall cast at any one election more than one-tenth of the whole number of the votes of the Corporation. The Secretary shall give thirty days notice, in at least one newspaper published in the County, of the annual election of said Board. In case of a vacancy occurring in said Board, the members shall proceed to fill it by the appointment of another Stockholder as Director. All Officers shall be Shareholders. Shareholders may vote by proxy: *Provided*, such proxy be made in writing to the President of the Company.

ARTICLE 6th. Within ten days after the election of a Board of Directors, the members elect shall assemble and elect a President, Secretary and Treasurer. The Secretary and Treasurer shall not be members of the Board of Directors.

ARTICLE 7th. The President and Secretary shall sign all conveyances, assignments, and all bills of sale. They shall sign, and the Treasurer counter-sign, all issues of Stock. No issue, sale, conveyance, or assignment of Stock is binding upon the Corporation, or recognized as such, unless due record is made by the Secretary in a book kept for that purpose. It shall be the duty of the President, or in his absence the Secretary, at the request of ten Stockholders, made in writing, to call a meeting of the Stockholders of said Corporation.

ARTICLE 8th. The Secretary shall keep a minute of all meetings of the Board of Directors, and of the Stockholders, and perform all other duties usually pertaining to said office.

ARTICLE 9th. The Treasurer shall disburse Monies only upon written orders of the President, signed by the Secretary. He shall keep a full account of the finances, and report the same to the Board of Directors annually, and as often as by them requested. He shall give a bond, with good security, in such sum as the Directors may from time to time deem necessary.

ARTICLE 10th. By a vote of two-thirds of the Stockholders present, there may be assessed upon each Share, a tax of two per cent upon its issued value; but if such assessment is made at a special meeting, the notice calling such meeting, shall state the object of the call.

ARTICLE 11th. All Deeds, Bonds and other writings conveying a title to land belonging to the Company, shall be held by the President in trust for the Company.

ARTICLE 12th. Every Shareholder shall build a house or store, with not less than three windows and a shingled roof. No house or building to be built of poles or logs.

1	Share not less than	14X16	and not less than	8 feet posts.
2	" " " "	14X18	" " " "	9 " "
3	" " " "	15X20	" " " "	10 " "
4	" " " "	15X22	" " " "	12 " "
5	" " " "	16X24	" " " "	12 " "
6	" " " "	18X26	" " " "	16 two stories.
7	" " " "	18X28	" " " "	16 " "
8	" " " "	20X30	" " " "	17 " "
9	" " " "	22X32	" " " "	17 " "
10	" " " "	24X34	" " " "	18 " "

Half of the above improvements to be done before the 1st of December next, and all completed before the first of July, 1858, or the Share or Shares shall be forfeited. All forfeited shares go to the Company.

ARTICLE 13th. On the first Monday of July, A. D., 1868, this Corporation shall cease to exist.

Donations of Lots will be made by the Directors as they deem it advisable for the best interests of the Company.

OFFICERS:

CHARLES E. WHITING, *President.*

LEONARD SEARS, *Treasurer.*

SAMUEL PEARSE, *Secretary.*

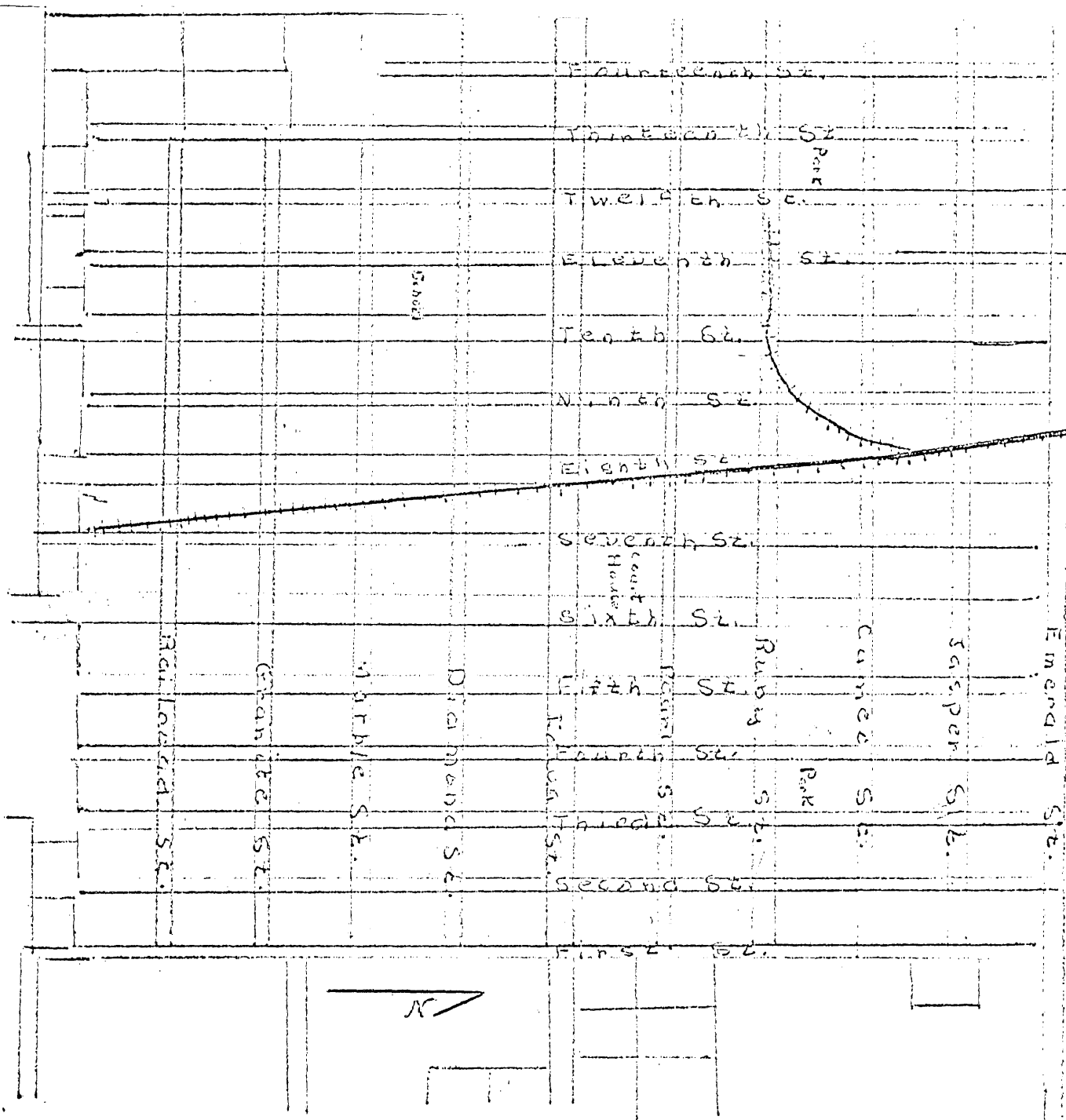
BOARD OF DIRECTORS.

C. E. WHITING,	T. ELLIOTT,
J. S. MERRILL,	W. M. BURTON,
J. E. MORRISON,	T. H. BENTON,
M. F. MOORE,	GOUVENER MORRIS.
E. D. V. MASON.	

The above Town is situated about half-way between Council Bluffs and Sioux City, at the terminus of the Iowa Central Railroad, three miles from a good landing on the Missouri River, and is surrounded, as far as the eye can extend, with the most beautiful and productive country in the West, with Timber, both hard and soft, in abundance.

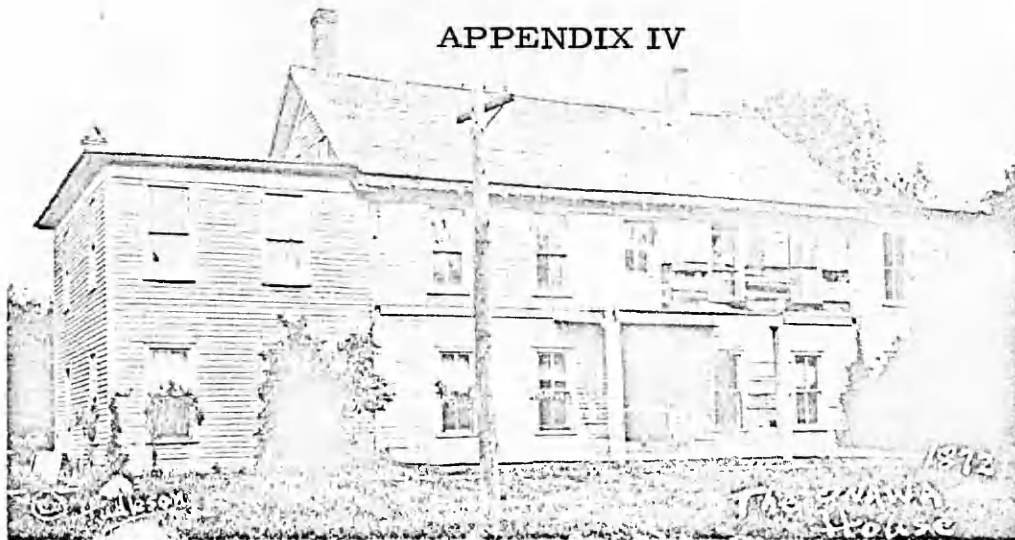
APPENDIX III

STREET MAP OF ONAWA, IOWA

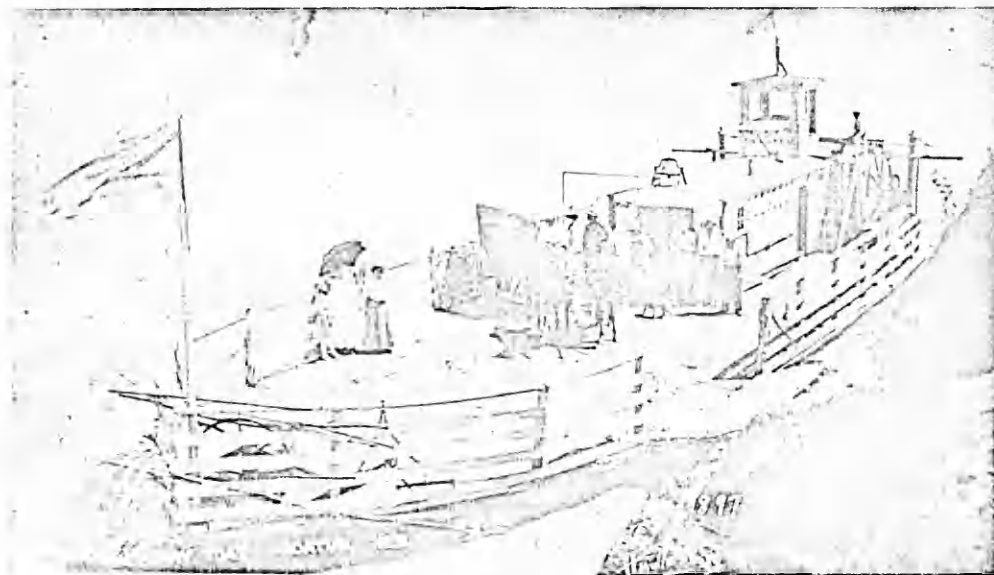


ONAWA DEMOCRAT  
 Commercial Printing Newspaper  
 Onawa, Iowa

## APPENDIX IV



The Onawa House in 1872.



The Decatur ferry boat in 1897.



William Jennings Bryan at a silver rally in Onawa's main street in 1896.



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