

## The Story of Lithograph City

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# The Story of Lithograph City

BY SUZANNE BEISEL

*Pictures from the Des Moines Register*

There is a field in the northern part of Floyd County under which lies the remains of one of Iowa's more tragic towns. This plowed-under town once had the potential of equaling Newton, Fort Madison, Amana, and Cedar Rapids with their industries, but progress and scientific advancement were too untimely.

Around 1910 a geologist, Clement L. Webster of Marble Rock, strolled along the banks of the Cedar River with his girlfriend near the border of Floyd and Mitchell Counties, and came upon some unusual stones. He kept his discovery of the stones a secret and did a great deal of research on them. As it turned out, he had discovered a very valuable rock which was part of a large limestone deposit in the area. At that time this rock, lithograph stone, was extremely important to the graphic arts.

One hundred and fourteen years before Webster's walk, a Bavarian by the name of Alois Senefelder discovered lithography, the simple method of printing on stone. This became very popular throughout Europe and eventually the United States. Up until the time of Webster's discovery, the stone used in this art was a porous limestone coming exclusively from Bavaria. Importing it to the states was a very expensive process, to Webster's finding was somewhat of a gold mine.

In 1914, Webster decided that it would be lucrative to launch a settlement on the site where he found the stones, about 14 miles northwest of Charles City, and market it for lithograph work and monuments. Since the stone, equal in quality to that of Bavaria, could be sold cheaper in America because of the saving on import costs, it seemed to be a good investment. Before then it had only been used for foundations in farmers corn cribs and such, making them worth several hundred dollars.

Webster found backers and his venture got under way. Tractor trains brought building materials from the nearest railroad station, Orchard, Iowa. By 1915, the town consisted of 15 houses, a hotel, museum, dance hall, blacksmith shop,



Like Tractor-Train Used by Webster

stone polishing plant, lumber yard, general store, and several foundations.



Litho Hotel and People Who Built Town

Webster's museum in this little community rapidly became nationally known. People from everywhere in the United States came to see the building which was crowded with semiprecious gems, minerals, and specimens of all of the soils, subsoils, clays, sands and gravel in Iowa. It also housed one of the finest collections of crystals in the country, specimens of all sizes of lithograph stone found in the area and various types of marbles. It was reported that after only a few months



Litho City in 1915 Including 15 Houses

of completion, about 5,000 people had visited the museum and an estimation of 300 cars from other states had been there.

The plant in the town included one of the largest stone-crushing establishments in the state and facilities for cutting and polishing stone and marble.

Shortly after the town began to prosper, someone discovered that zinc and copper could be used in lithography in place of stone, providing the same quality of printing at a much lower cost. Suddenly the demand for lithograph stones came to an end taking Lithograph City with it.

After 1915, residents of the town changed its name from Lithograph City to Devonia and struggled to keep it going, but they failed after a short two year existence. Their efforts to obtain a post office there failed also. The town died completely, and, the *Des Moines Register and Leader* reported that by 1938 it was completely plowed under. Since it had no post office, it is rarely listed with ghost towns or abandoned Iowa towns and is rarely found on maps.



After the Town Failed

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