

“Norman County Court House” *
IN
HISTORY
OF
Clay and Norman Counties
Minnesota

THEIR PEOPLE, INDUSTRIES AND INSTITUTIONS

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AND

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* **MLHP: the following are excerpts from pages 306-307 and 309-310 of this history of Clay and Norman Counties. Though reformatted, they are complete. Spelling and punctuation are unchanged. The title has been added by the MLHP.**

NORMAN COUNTY COURT HOUSE

By the summer of 1883 the business of the county had increased to such an extent and the records had begun to accumulate in such quantities, that it was felt an effort should be made to secure permanent quarters for the county officials. The county did not yet have enough money in its treasury to build, nor did the commissioners feel justified in bonding the county for the purpose of building a court house. At this juncture O. H. Myran, who was then in the hotel business in the town, came forward with a proposition to erect a building for the county. His offer was accepted by the commissioners on July 26, 1883, and he at once began work on the building. It was a two-story frame structure and stood on the northeast corner of block 17, at the corner of Notten avenue and Second street. The building is still, standing in Ada, having been removed from its former site to the corner of Second street and Shields avenue, where it was converted into an apartment house of four suites.

Myran seemed to have associated himself with Peter Ramstad in the erection of the building, or, at least, Ramstad appears as one of the owners when the county later purchased the building. When the commissioners met in January, 1884, the building was ready for occupancy and during their session of that month, the board entered the following resolution on its records:

“Resolved, That the building erected on block 17, in the village of Ada, by O. H. Myran for the court house purposes, under contract with the commissioners of Norman county, Minnesota, be and the same is hereby accepted on the part of the commissioners, as complying fully with the contract entered into by the said O. H. Myran with said board of county commissioners on July 26, 1883.”

The commissioners entered into a three-year contract with Myran for an annual rental of four hundred and thirty dollars, payable monthly. However, before, the expiration of the three years the county decided to purchase the building, the transfer being effected at the May, 1885, session of the board. The records show that the county purchased the building and also the lot on which it stood of O. H. Myran and Peter Ramstad for twenty-four hundred dollars. The county was to pay eleven

hundred and thirty dollars in cash, assume a debt of six hundred and forty-five dollars, held against the building by Andrews Brothers and Hampson, and also assume a debt of six hundred and twenty-five dollars held by Normah Hanson *et al.*, trustees, of the Norwegian Lutheran church of Ada. This building continued to be used as a court house until it was removed to make way for the present beautiful court house. It was not long until it was seen that the county needed better quarters, but every effort to secure a new building was thwarted until 1902.

The first effort to get a new building was made at the March, 1887, session of the board of county commissioners, at which time the board entered a resolution on their minutes to the effect “That the ‘board at the July meeting make a proposition to the electors to vote on a proposition at the next general election to bond Norman county for the sum of twenty-five thousand dollars or the purpose of building a court house, jail and vaults.” Much as the county needed a new building, yet the proposal to bond the county for such a purpose was defeated and the county had to be content with the little frame structure. As the county increased in population and the official records began to pile up; it became necessary to rent additional rooms for some of the county officers. But still it seemed impossible to get the sanction of the voters of the county to, agree to bond themselves to erect a suitable building. Thus the matter went on from year to year, until the agitation in the latter part of the nineties took such formidable shape that it was seen that a building was going to be erected. No one disputed the fact that the county needed a new building, nor was it disputed that the records were unsafe in their present quarters. In fact, the county was compelled, in October, 1900, to rent a vault in the First National Bank building in which to store some of the valuable county records.

It is at this point in the history of the county that the question of moving the county seat to Twin Valley came to the front. During the year 1902 the county was in the throes of a county-seat struggle which was featured by more acrimonious arguments than the county had ever experienced thus far in its history, nor has there been anything since to equal the events of that year. The story can not be told in its every detail, but the main facts are here briefly set forth that future generations may know how near Twin Valley came to being the county seat of Norman, county.

The whole trouble arose over the proposal to erect a new court house. When it was seen that the county would be compelled to erect a new building, it was very evident that the town that secured the court house would remain the county seat. Accordingly, there began an agitation for the removal of the county seat to Twin Valley, an agitation which was waged by the citizens and newspapers with all the fervor which accompanies such a contest. In 1900 Ada had a population of 1,253 and Twin Valley contained 356 souls. As before stated, Twin Valley was in nearly the center of the county from east to west, a fact which was used for all it was worth by the adherents of Twin Valley. Strange as it may seem, the citizens of the western part of the county seemed to favor Twin Valley, and since the greater portion of the population of the county was in that part of the county it was not surprising that events turned out as they did.

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ERECTION OF THE PRESENT COURT HOUSE.

While the struggle was going on between Ada and Twin Valley the county commissioners were proceeding with their plans to erect a new building, although it was not yet definitely settled where it was to be located. They were assuming, however, that it would remain at Ada. The entire county participated in the contest over the location of the county seat, but Ada had a good sized contest of its own in regard to the site of the court house in their own town.

There were two factions, the east side of the town against the west side, the former led by F. L. Hampson, the manager of a large saw-mill; the latter headed by W. H. Matthews, a banker. Hampson offered a site on the east side and also added some other inducements which made his offer sufficiently attractive to be considered. He had platted a number of lots on the east side of the town and of course hoped to find a better sale for his lots if he could secure the court house on his side of town. Matthews came to the front with an offer of a block on the west side, a cash bonus of twenty-five hundred dollars, and a quantity of brick. Behind these two men the whole town ranged itself, and the fight was on.

The old court house, the frame structure which the county had occupied since 1884, was on a fifty-foot corner lot, and by 1900 a private dwelling house was flanking it on the one side. It was very certain that the new building could not be erected on the lot which the county owned, that is, lot 17, block 22, and yet this particular block was the logical place for the building. It is not profitable to follow the details of the local fight on the establishment of the site. The commissioners considered the Matthews offer at their January, 1902, meeting. He had offered all of block 8, twenty-five hundred dollars, 7,500 brick, and also agreed to move the sand and stone which had been placed on the Hampson lot on the east side of town. He furthermore agreed to put in sewerage and water connections to the block. But his offer was rejected Madson and Hermanson voting for it, and Bell, Tomtengen and Pfund casting their vote against it.

It should be stated that Hampson and the county had entered into a tentative agreement whereby the county was to accept his lot and he had gone so far as to get some sand and stone on the lot. The acceptance, however, was left in such a condition that the county could reject it if they saw fit. It was the general opinion that his block was unsuitable for the reason that it was liable to be flooded at times from the sluice which brought the logs from the river to the saw-mill. Thereupon his site was eliminated from consideration. In the meantime a number of business men of the town and other interested citizens were trying to secure the block on which the old court house stood. It had been represented to the commissioners that block 17 was out of the question for the reason that the block was well covered with buildings and that it would therefore be too expensive for the county to attempt to secure possession of it. But neither Hampson's nor Matthews' offers met with general approval, and it was this fact which induced a group of citizens to take it upon themselves to secure block 17. They raised a fund and in the middle of the summer of 1902 and reported to the commissioners that they were ready, to turn the block in question over to the county for a court-house site. The title to the block was guaranteed by a ten-thousand dollar bond signed by Peter Sharpe, Charles J. Lofgren, John M. Hetland, A. L. Hanson and A. J. Vangsnes.

This settled the question, and there is no doubt that the present site is the best one that could have been chosen. Now that the matter was finally settled, the commissioners were free to proceed with the letting of

a contract for a new building. At a special meeting held on August 25, 1902, the board decided to build a court house of pressed brick, with the portage entry of sandstone and the same stone to be used as trimming for the whole building. Bids were ordered advertised and the record shows the following resolution which marked the final step in the building of the, court house:

That the commissioners of Norman county build a courthouse according to plans and specifications made by Omeyer & Thori, architects of St. Paul, and that we hereby adopt said specifications and order them filed In the county auditor's office, and be it further resolved that the board enter Into a contract with Olaf Swenson, contractor of St. Paul, Minnesota, for the construction of the courthouse as per plans and specifications adopted, the first two floors to be of fire-proof construction and that the board pay the said Olaf Swenson Fifty Thousand Six Hundred and Thirty-seven dollars and fifty cents (\$50, 637.50) as per contract, this day entered into with said Olaf Swenson and filed in the auditor's office. The board considers this the best and cheapest bid, considering everything.

The heating, lighting and Plumbing cost an additional five thousand dollars. The commissioners were in some doubt as to how the building should be financed, and finally decided on bonding the county in the amount of twenty-five thousand dollars. In order to do this, however, they had to submit the proposition to a vote, but when the vote was taken on November 3, 1903, the proposition was voted down by the citizens of the county. The new building was occupied for the first time in November, 1904. As a matter of fact the court house was fully paid for within seven years after it was completed, and every cent came from the county revenue fund. It is one of the very few instances where a County has erected a court house without issuing bonds. ■

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