

BLUE EARTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

March/April 1994

Blue Earth County Historian

Past and Present Boomtown

Eagle Lake

Shirley Grundmeier

If your great-grandmother had lived in Eagle Lake a century ago, and could return today, she would never know the city. She--and your great-grandfather--would more than likely have been proud (and justly so) of the village and its accomplishments back in the years 1882-1892.

How did it differ from today? Well, let's hop onto the "Time Machine" and go back to a small village in Southern Minnesota known as "Eagle Lake."

This is how Shoemaker's Business Directory saw the village in its 1881-1882 edition:

Eagle Lake is a station on the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad 5 miles East of Mankato, with two steam saw mills, a steam flour mill being erected, a planing mill, an elevator with the capacity of 12,000 bushels, a water power mill, a pine lumber yard, an extensive wood yard,

three churches, and a population of 350.

By 1882, Eagle Lake was already a mature village, with a history dating back to 1856. The first white settlers--like the Burgess and Cummins families--arrived in wagon trains. During the next few years, the settlement underwent several name changes. It was called Burgess Mill until the railroad was built and the first post office established there in 1870.

After the railroad came, the name "Speier" was given to the village, suggested by a homesick German immigrant. Three years later, the name was changed to Eagle Lake because of the village's location in "the western part of LeRay township, on the southern shore of the lake. The village was first surveyed in 1872 and in the next year, another site was surveyed; the village is located on both surveys."



This undated and unidentified photo could be a schoolroom anywhere in turn of the century America. A caption on the back reads, "May be an Eagle Lake area school." (BECHS Collection)



Blue Earth County Historian

The *Blue Earth County Historian* is published bimonthly by the Blue Earth County Historical Society.

The Blue Earth County Historical Society is a non-profit organization and has been collecting and preserving artifacts of historical value to the people of south central Minnesota since 1901.

BECHS is the only organization or institution entirely dedicated to the collection, preservation and exhibition of Blue Earth County History.

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BECHS also operates the historic R. D. Hubbard House. Built in 1871 by Rensselaer D. Hubbard, founder of Hubbard Milling Company, the elegant mansion and nearby brick carriage house contain many displays and artifacts which are open to the public.

The Hubbard House is owned by the city of Mankato and has been operated by BECHS since 1938.

The Hubbard House is being readied for restoration and is listed on the State Historical Record, as well as the National Register of Historic Places.

Hubbard House
606 S. Broad St.
Mankato, MN
Closed for Restoration

The Mankato Free Press, in June 1882, gave Eagle Lake's population as 400, "most of whom are Americans." The town now boasted, in addition to Shoemaker's listings; "one graded school, three blacksmith shops, five general stores, drugstore, meat market, and two wagon shops."

A big industry in the area was the manufacture of sugar cane into golden syrup, with an estimated 20,000 gallons shipped from LeRay township annually. As well, corn, wheat, oats, potatoes and all kinds of cereals and vegetables grew "in great abundance."

Eagle Lake also had two hotels, popular because of their proximity to Madison Lake's Point Pleasant, "a pleasure resort of equal importance to the celebrated Lake Minnetonka. Here thousands of visitors from South and East come annually to spend the sultry months of July and August in ample accommodation not equalled outside of Minneapolis and St. Paul."

One of Eagle Lake's two hotels was the "Hilton." Probably coincidental, but one wonders if the proprietor, A.F. Hilton, had a grandson in the same business named Conrad. . .

Visitors and immigrants alike were attracted to the large tracts of timber land that were selling to settlers for \$5-10 per acre, enabling "men with limited means to secure comfortable houses at living rates." The glowing prediction was made that "the day is not far distant when the emigrant from over-crowded city and rocky

knells of New England will see in the timber towns of Blue Earth County, attractions that are not found on the treeless wastes of the great American desert."

In October of 1882, the Mankato Public Spirit noted that Eagle Lake had "an absence of old men engaged actively in business; they are all bright-eyed keen active men and all seem alive to the advancement of their town." One hundred years later, this would still be true.

New industries in 1889 included a cheese factory--a "500 cow cheese factory" no less--which within a year was producing 200 pounds of cheese per day. Shipments were being made to "New Ulm and more distant points with very satisfactory results."

But not all was peace and tranquility in the burgeoning village: in August 1883, burglars entered the store of Phelps and Allyn, their take totalled \$175. The burglary occurred at 3 A.M. and Mr. Allyn probably would have heard it except that: "It had always been the custom of Mr. Allyn to attach an alarm over his bed that was connected with the doors of the store, but on this particular evening one of his horses kicked him quite severely and the pain was so intense that he could think of nothing else. Strange how things happen. This was a costly kick."

In 1890, the Cummins and Kelly store was the scene of a destructive fire, so severe that firemen from Mankato were finally summoned to help. Eagle Lake had no facilities for fighting the fire "and the efforts of those present were directed to saving goods. In

this way four or five hundred dollars worth were saved." The fire spread to adjoining buildings and homes and the "good people of the town were on the grounds by the hundreds bringing pails of water, applying it where it did the most good" and "working until they were thoroughly exhausted.

The Mankato fire department responded with great promptness but arrived too late to be of much assistance. They showed their good intentions, nevertheless."

In 1881, a new schoolhouse was built to serve the educational needs of Eagle

Lake. (The first school opened with 14 pupils in 1859 taught by Miss Hannah Haslip.) The new schoolhouse was quite lavish for its time, Having two stories with one room on each floor, a water pump in the front yard and outhouses in the back yard.

Sinks and running water had to wait until 1922 but the trusty outhouses were still in use until 1964! The spiritual needs of the growing community were met by three churches and medical needs by a doctor who had come in 1877.

Eagle Lake appeared to have

hit its peak by 1892, when R.L. Polk's Directory noted the population was 450, an increase of only 50 in ten years. A downward trend continued: in 1902, when the village voted to incorporate, its population was 367. Industry continued to decline and Eagle



The Hilton House Hotel circa 1880s. Not much to boast about as Hilton Hotels go, of course it isn't "that" Hilton. It actually looks like quite a respectable place for the period. (BECHS Collection)

Lake became primarily a residential site. By 1956, only 310 people lived there.

Let's take our "Time Machine" forward a century, to the 1980s. By 1988, Eagle Lake's population was a booming 1470. In just more than 30 years, Eagle Lake's population increased to nearly five times what it had been in 1956.

The head count had risen from 310 in 1956 to almost 700 in 1968 and an awesome 1000 souls in 1970. And the latest count, in 1990 gives a grand total of 1703. Where are they coming from?

"All over," according to Eagle Lake's city clerk, "from California, Mankato, Iowa, with most of them working in Mankato and Waseca."

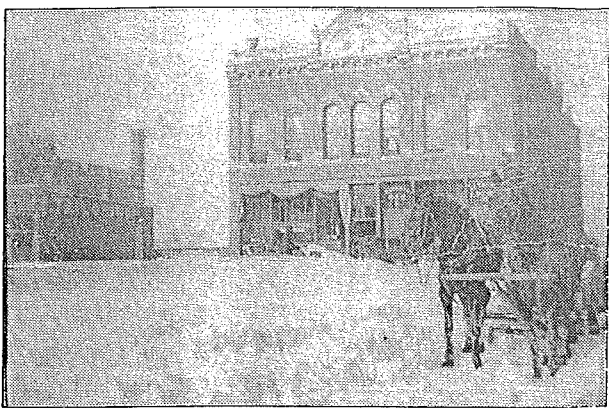
Why are they coming? Because homes and lot prices are within the average person's price range.

Also building permits aren't required to add decks for example and children are safer: "The whole South end in the summertime is one gigantic playground." And there's the neighborliness: "Everybody here wants to help. They are pretty close-knit. The older people try to get the younger people interested. A lot of work is done

here because people want to give their time for free."

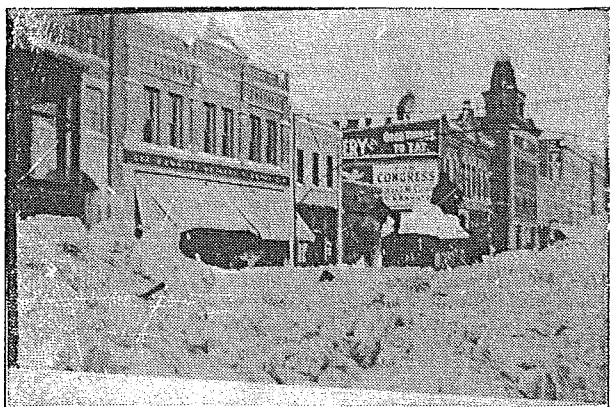
Schools, too, have kept pace with population growth, as their enrollment rose from 116 in 1980 to 162 in 1989. Over the years, children in Eagle Lake were sent to a variety of schools, especially after consolidation with Mankato District #77 in 1969. There was a time when budget needs posed the threat that Eagle Lake would not even be able to keep its lower elementary children in school locally. But now the brand new state-of-the-art Eagle Lake Ele-

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THE NOT SO "GOOD"

Past Mankato

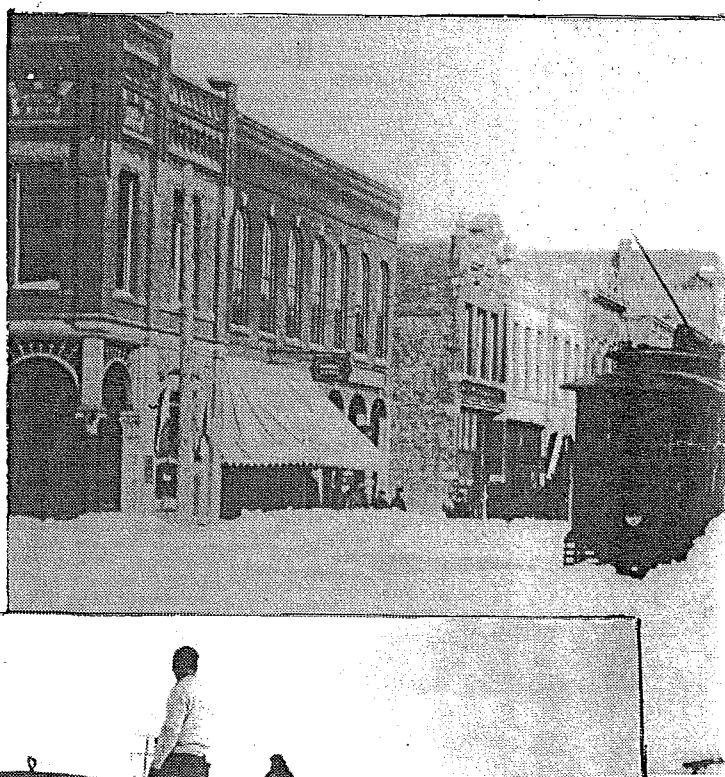


Above:
Two 1909 scenes of Front Street in Mankato. I would think with that much snow, the sleigh in the top photo wouldn't do much better than the wagon in the one beneath.

Center:
Those lightweight streetcars have all they can do to move through the heavily compacted snow in this 1908 scene of Front Street. One can imagine derailments were frequent as well as troublesome to the crew and passengers.

Ah, the welcome sight of the snowplow. Rescue is finally here! Well, maybe not. It seems as though the drifts got the best of this Blue Earth County plow truck and there it sits, stuck with the other vehicles. This photo was taken after a blizzard in 1936.

Right:
More scenes of Front Street in 1909. It looks like some of the snow has been cleared away and in the bottom photo can be seen how. Looks like the coal hauler is hauling snow today.
(All Photos BECHS Collection)



D OLD DAYS"

Winters



Jeffrey Braun

Winter in Minnesota seems to last forever so why in the world would we want to look at pictures of winter?

Well, maybe it's just to assure ourselves things could be a lot worse--although worse than a week of more than 30 below zero temperatures, I don't know.

We dug out some photos from

1908, 1909 and 1936 just as a reminder that first, winter isn't over yet and second, maybe this hasn't been that bad of a winter after all.

Paging through old copies of the Mankato Free Press, I remembered why I much prefer summer to winter in Minnesota.

Blizzard tales about stalled trains and closed roads were abundant.

One report told of a Chicago and Great Western passenger train more than 72 hours late arriving in Mankato from Osage, Iowa.

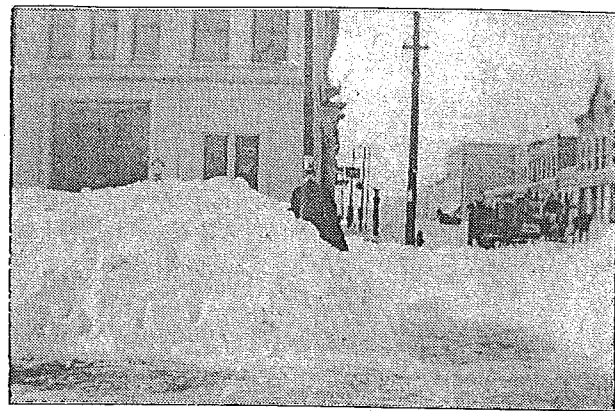
Along the way, the train encountered drifts more than 300 feet long and 10 feet deep. The train was only an hour late between Osage and Simpson, but suffered broken windows in the cab.

The story said the cab was so packed with snow inside, the crew was nearly smothered. (Having worked on a steam locomotive I can imagine it was no easy task with a cab full of snow.)

The train eventually stalled in a drift near Simpson and had to wait more than a day for workers to arrive and dig it out.

Passengers and crew had to wait out the storm inside the passenger cars the best they could.

There seemed to be no end to



the stories about the railroads just plain shutting down and leaving trains where they stood as well as downed telegraph lines and closed highways.

During a time when telegraph and railway were the life-blood of the community this could definitely cause some problems.

Today it seems nearly everyone owns a four-wheel-drive and barely thinks twice about venturing out during winter weather.

Heavy snowstorms seem less prevalent now, maybe we can consider ourselves lucky. Maybe it's just that technology has allowed us to cope with winter weather more easily. Whatever the case, we can look back at these photos and think, "Hey, it could be worse."

The Life of C. A. (Gus) Johnson

The Blue Earth County Historical Society will honor the C.A. (Gus) Johnson Family at it's annual Heritage Dinner April 28, 1994.

C. A. (Gus) Johnson, the son of Charles A. and Paulina Johnson, was born August 18, 1893 in Lake Crystal. Johnson's family also included a brother, Albert and two sisters Maimie and Ida. Gus lost his father when he was six years old and since that time earned his own living and assisted in caring for his mother.

Johnson graduated from the Lake Crystal High School in 1913. He attended Hamline University, St Paul, for a year, and later Mankato Normal School where he prepared for a teaching career. Following teaching at Lake Crystal rural schools for a few years, he enrolled at the University of Minnesota Law School.

His education was interrupted by World War I, when he enlisted in the Army in 1917. At first no recruiting officer would even listen to him because of his size, but with his determination and the assistance of county officials,



he finally was accepted by the Army. After the war he completed law school in 1920 and began practicing in Lake Crystal.

In 1930 Johnson was elected Blue Earth County Attorney and served in that post for eight years. He also served as attorney for various villages and townships.

In 1936 he joined the Mankato law firm of Schmidt, Thompson and Farris. In 1946 it became Johnson, Gallagher and Farris. He formed his own law business in 1951 when his son Charles joined him in their office in the Graif Building. The firm was moved to its present location at 600 South 2nd Street in 1958. He officially called a "semi-retirement" on January 1, 1975.

Johnson served in the

Legislature from 1962 to 1972.

He was co-author of more bills than any other legislator and he tried to get to every committee session that was considering one of those bills.

The story has been told that on occasion, it was not unusual for "Little Gus", who was both a night owl and early riser, to nod off to sleep during the legislative session. The chairs on the floor of the House swivel back and forth, and from the balcony it would be

observed that when one statesman would stand up to speak on one side of the House, all the chairs would swivel in that direction. At times, however, only one chair remained positioned in the opposite direction. It was, of course, Gus - sound asleep.

Johnson was married three times. He married his first wife Susie Mullenix in 1920. He married Bernice Schwanke, his second wife, in 1931 and they were divorced in 1939. He married Anne Ehlaman in 1941. Johnson had three children, Charles A, Carl A, and Brenda.

C.A. "Gus" Johnson was 83 when he died on May 5, 1977, and with him went a legend that will end, and one that will carry on with memories.

• New Archives Computer

The archives computer system recently developed severe memory problems and since the computer was seriously outdated, the decision was made to purchase a new system. The cost of the new computer system was approximately \$1500.

We also increased the amount of memory, updated the DOS program and added Windows. The increased memory will be a blessing as we add new items to our collection. The staff is overwhelmed by the increased speed of the new system!

As with every non-profit, an expense of this amount causes extreme pressure on the already strained operating budget. We appeal to you to help BECHS recover from this expense. Please use the enclosed form with your donation and send it to:

Heritage Center
415 Cherry St.
Mankato, MN 56001

Thank you!

• Family Research Classes

Back by popular demand! Because of the wonderful response to the first series, Pam Brunfelt will once again present her classes on **Documenting a Family Genealogy and Preserving Family Documents**.

The series is scheduled for **Thursday, May 12 and Thursday, May 19, 7:00 p.m. at the Heritage Center**. The cost is \$10 per class. Be sure to register early as space is limited.

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mentary School, with the capacity for 300 students, will allow the children to remain in their own community through the fifth grade.

This is not to say that Eagle Lake residents don't support whatever school(s) their children attend. On the contrary: a few years ago, when four of the local girls who spearheaded the girl's basketball team at Mankato's East High were on their way to the State Tournament some 200 Cougar fans from Eagle Lake cheered them on.

Such camaraderie doesn't happen overnight. But it happens more often in a town where the Jaycee Women put out a booklet called "Welcome! to Eagle Lake." Spelled out among its many pages of services are such things as the "Kiddie Pop-In Babysitting Co-op," the "American Legion Auxiliary Tiny Tots," the "Golden Eagles Senior Citizens Club," and Tee Ball, Little League, 4-H Club, Brownies, Girl Scouts, Cub Scouts, Campfire, American Legion Post 617, Auxiliary and Junior Auxiliary, the

Jaycees, Jaycee Women, and the Lions Club.

And there are still at least three churches even after a hundred years. And there's a listing of some 40 successful local businesses, most of whom supply services or products relating to residential life in the Eagle Lake Community. (And there's always Mankato, now just three miles away!)

Yes, great-grandmother and great-grandfather would find it hard to recognize a familiar landmark in today's Eagle Lake. But it would be easy for them to find the old familiar values among the people who live there now, where the "quiet neighborly community" still exists, with "many citizens involved in organizations aimed at the betterment of the whole community." And who are just as proud of Eagle Lake as their forbearers were.

Membership News

Thank you to the new and renewing members.

Security State Bank
John & Kathy Dorn
Darell & Lucy Apitz
W.C. & Marge T. Ries
Douglas Johnson
Rick and Mary Hanna
Phyllis R. Abbott
Joyce Wenner
L.W. Andreas
Eddice Barber
Bernlei Welgt
Roberty & Luella Rose
Braam Accounting
James Hardware
Carl W. Peterson
Joyce Schoettler
Eleanor & John Wittrock
Betsy & Jim Winn
Ernest Hansen
Donald Cramer
Judith Voss

Marlyss Johnson
Duane Dubke
Shirley Schuab
Doris Berger
Claire Faust
Lorraine Wolverton
Kato Mayflower
Jack & Shirley Higginbotham
Richard F. Huettl
Ken & Arlene Brown
Mr & Mrs Arnold Meyer
Don Kvasnika
Glenn E. Bartsch
Mr & Mrs Sal Frederick
Carlyn Severson
Clarence & Olga Vaubel
Inella Burns
Mildred Thro
Nadine Brown
Stanley Steel

Neal & Kay Lund
Mr & Mrs Harley Mohr
Leona Schweim
Karin Merkert
Deil & Flo Lahann
Forrest & Georgia Rettmer
Iris Nigg Lundin
Elmer Goodrich
John & Faith Close
Ethel R. Medalen
Lois M. Kvitek
Tom Salsbery Family
Rev. W.C. Gullixson
Gary Schweim
Tony & Sharon Knapp
Kelton & Dorothy Gage
Arn & Margaret Kind
Frank & Judy Kraft
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Heritage Center

415 Cherry St., Mankato

Exhibit Gallery 1-4 p.m.

Tuesday - Friday

Research Center 1-4 p.m.

Tuesday - Saturday

Hubbard House

606 S Broad St., Mankato

Closed for Restoration

Blue Earth County Historical Society
415 Cherry Street
Mankato, Minnesota 56001
(507) 345-5566

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BECHS News Brief

• Hubbard House

The restoration of the second floor walls and ceilings are nearing completion and work will soon be starting on the plaster work on first floor. The servant's stairway has been opened on second floor and work will continue to restore the staircase for daily use once again.

Silk and linen wallcovering, from the Scalamandr'e Company of New York, has been ordered for the front parlor. The reproduction of the wallcovering will take approximately six months to make, at a cost of approximately \$18,000. There will be additional costs to install the new fabric.

The design on the corners of the library ceiling will be redone by Kristen Amanda, a Twin cities artist. The \$6,000 reproduction of the original library carpet, which will reflect the painting on the library ceiling, is also on order with Scalamandr'e.

The Hubbard House has always possessed many beautiful features and the restoration will only help to enhance the original beauty of the house.

• Women's History Month

BECHS will pay tribute to Women's History Month by presenting "Celebrate Women". The style show is a historic program with a narrative presentation of women in business. The program begins in 5th century Egypt and ends in 20th century America, bringing to life women who im-

proved the world in which they lived. The parade of models will appear at 1 p.m. Saturday, March 26, at the Summit Center, 518 South 5th Street, Mankato. The cost of tickets are \$5 per person and must be purchased in advance by calling the Heritage Center (345-5566) or Summit Center (345-5262). Coffee and dessert will be served at the conclusion of the program.

• Heritage Dinner

Call in today to reserve your tickets for the **Annual Heritage Dinner**. BECHS will be honoring the C.A. "Gus" Johnson family on Thursday, April 28, at the Mankato Mall. Social Hour begins at 6 p.m. Dinner and program will follow at 7 p.m. Betty Cords has worked with the Johnson family to develop an interesting program. Dinner will be catered by Meray's. Tickets are \$22.50 each and must be picked up at the Heritage Center by April 22. This annual event is a major fundraiser for the society, so please call 345-5566 to reserve your tickets for this entertaining evening.

• Young Historians

Young Historians is a monthly program developed for 3-6 grade students. This program is free to members of the Society and \$1.50 for non-members. To register for the March and or April Young Historians please call 345-5566 during business hours.

March Young Historians will meet at the Heritage Center on Saturday, March 26, from 2:00 - 4:00 p.m. The program will be a hands on project with an Easter Theme.

Refreshments will be served.

Spring planting is the theme for the **April program** on Saturday April 23. Participants will learn about the different types of herbs and will take home a small plant for their garden. The program will once again be held at the Heritage Center from 2-4 p.m.

• Annual Plant Sale

The annual Plant Sale is set for Saturday, May 7, 9 a.m.-2 p.m. on the Hubbard House grounds. This is a wonderful opportunity for you to purchase some hard-to-find perennials and some perky annuals. As you thin out your gardens this spring, think of BECHS, and bring the excess to the Heritage Center as donated goods for the Plant Sale. We can also use volunteer workers for the day of the sale. Please call Linda at 345-5566 if you would like to donate plants or work at the sale.

• Grandma's Attic Sale

Saturday June 25 from 9 a.m.-4 p.m. the Heritage Center will host "Grandma's Attic and Bake Sale." Please call 345-5566 if you have items to donate or would like to help price goods.