COUNTY SEAT FIGHT A BITTER STRUGGLE

The histories of many area counties feature battles for the location of the county seat. Clay is no exception. Having the county's capital could bring jobs, trade and prestige to a town. Through the 1870s, the village of Glyndon tried several times to wrest the seat of government away from Moorhead. Each effort failed but they give us a chance to look at some interesting aspects of how local politics and community development worked a century and a quarter ago.

First, a little background on the long standing rivalry between Moorhead and Glyndon. Both towns, of course, were established when the Northern Pacific Railway laid tracks from Duluth through Clay County in 1871. But the communities were very different from the beginning. Everyone knew that a significant town would develop where ever the NPRy crossed the Red. The railroad's subsidiary, Lake Superior and Puget Sound Land Company, intended to lay out and sell lots in this community. To keep the location a secret until they could secure title to the property, the NPRy set out false survey stakes to a fake crossing in present day Oakport Township. Hundreds of prospective settlers and businessmen (and many gamblers, prostitutes and other nere do wells) flocked to the site. In October 1871 the real crossing was revealed and the hordes abandoned Oakport for Moorhead. (The ruse location became known as "Bogusville.")

There was no need for secrecy at Glyndon. There a private colonization company, the Red River Colony headed by Luman H. Tenney, had acquired the townsite from the NPRy. Tenney planned to make Glyndon a temperance colony (no liquor allowed) and sought colonists from upstate New York and New England. A handful of sober citizens trickled into the village.

Through the winter of 1871-1872, crime was a major problem in Moorhead. No organized government existed. After a series of shootings early in 1872, citizens petitioned for and received permission to form a county government. Moorhead became the new county seat. A log jail and two-story wood frame courthouse followed.

Although both towns' creation depended on the arrival of the NPRy, the railroad's real goal was a transcontinental line to the Pacific Coast. Locally, however, the real prize was trade with Winnipeg. Moorhead's success hinged on steamboat traffic on the Red River. Glyndon, on the other hand, held a key advantage: a second north-south running railroad. The St. Paul and Pacific Railway intended to connect St. Paul with a Canadian railroad at the international border. The crossing with the NPRy was at Glyndon. In 1872 the new line was quickly building north and south from the budding townsite. When completed, the problematic and seasonal river traffic would never be able to compete with the railroad. Further, the small but rapidly growing population of farmers in eastern Clay County had little reason to support the river town. Glyndon's future looked bright.

In August 1872, E. B. Chambers, editor/publisher of the Glyndon *Red River Gazette* launched an attempt to move the county seat to Glyndon. The attempt went nowhere but gave Moorhead a scare. That fall, the St. P. & P. Ry ran out of money and quit

laying rail. Instead of a railroad with international importance, Glyndon wound up with a section of track running from a nondescript spot on the prairie five miles south of town to an equally unimpressive spot forty miles north of Crookston.

In 1874, Glyndonites made another attempt. On June 4 George Sargeant bought the NPRy's large colonists' reception house at Glyndon and offered it to the County for use as a courthouse if the county seat was moved to Glyndon. Twelve days later, the Lake Superior and Puget Sound Land Company (concerned that the removal would hurt their chances at selling Moorhead lots) made a similar offer of a block of land on the northwest corner of today's 8th St and 1st Ave N. The county chose the Moorhead offer and later that year built a two-story brick jail on the site.

Thwarted again, the Glyndonites' ambitions simmered for several years. Then, on April 5,1878, the County Commission (in a meeting unattended by the Glyndon area Commissioner, George S. Barnes) voted to let bids on a one-story, brick courthouse to be built on the Moorhead lot offered by the LS&PS Land Company in 1874.

Moorhead's newspaper, the *Clay County Advocate* (the only newspaper published in the county) failed to mention the letting of bids in its write up of the Commissioners' meeting. Glyndonites saw the affair as an attempt to secure the county seat for Moorhead once and for all. They decided to act.

When the bids were opened at the October 1878 Commission meeting, Commissioner Barnes of Glyndon "presented a petition of citizens of the County remonstrating against the erection of such or any building by the County, and urging the purchase of safes in which to preserve the County records, and moved that no action upon the bids submitted, be taken prior to April 1st, 1879." The petitioners planned to ask the State Legislature to allow a vote on the county seat question in the general election in November 1879. The Legislature would be in session between January and March 1879. The petition to stop the building would buy them time. But Barnes' motion lost two to one with Hawley Commissioner Andrew Glasgow voting with H. A. Bruns of Moorhead. (Glasgow's vote may not have been popular back home. In the November elections, he received only 21 of the 285 votes cast in his district.)

Glyndonites regrouped. On February 11, 1879 citizens met in the offices of the newly established Glyndon *Red River Valley News* to discuss the situation. M. M. Gragg, Luman H. Tenney and *Red River Valley News* editor/publisher Luther Osborn were appointed a committee to draw up a petition to submit to the State Legislature calling for a November vote to move the seat to Glyndon.

If smug Moorheadites snickered up their sleeves, they had a nasty surprise coming. Within days the petitioners had gathered over 515 signatures, almost all from the eastern and middle sections of the county. This in a county with only 900 registered voters! Farmers in the rapidly growing east had little sympathy for the river town. Moorhead was a long way to go to conduct legal business; Glyndon was more centrally

located. And the County Road between Moorhead and Hawley (now US Highway 10) was plagued by an often impassable swamp three miles west of Glyndon.

Shocked Moorheadites met in the Bramble House Hotel to plan a counter strategy. They drafted a remonstrance – a petition opposed to the removal petition. They collected about 300 signatures in western Clay County.

Representative Solomon Comstock of Moorhead was the natural one to carry the removal petition to the legislature. The other Representative from the 41st District, Michael Anderson, was from Fergus Falls; the lone Senator, Andrew McCrea, was from Perham. Saturday evening, February 22, a contingent of Glyndon residents met Comstock at the Glyndon depot while he was on his way home from St. Paul. They asked for his support and he gave a short address. What he said was not recorded verbatim. The Glyndon *Red River Valley News* reported that Comstock "gave unreserved expression to the sentiment and promise that, if a majority of the people of Clay County desired a county-seat election, so far as he was concerned, they should have it." The St. Paul *Pioneer-Press* reported from Glyndon that, "Representative Comstock, though a Moorhead man, made a speech from the cars here Saturday night, pledging his co-operation in affording the people an opportunity to vote on the question." But the Moorhead *Clay County Advocate* said, "We are authorized by Mr. Comstock to say that he made no such speech, and that all he said was: 'If an actual majority of the people of the county want to vote on the matter, I shall not stand in their way.'"

Comstock was in a tough position. He was "a Moorhead man" to be sure. One of the city's earliest residents, Comstock had built a successful legal practice in Moorhead and had become wealthy buying and selling its real estate. He still owned much land there. Moving the county seat would hurt him professionally and personally. Having Moorhead's county seat status in limbo over the course of the coming building season would stymie the city's rapid growth. Yet here Comstock was faced with a petition signed by nearly 60% of his county's legal voters asking him to do just that.

As Comstock was addressing the crowd, the Moorhead contingent was canvassing eastern Clay County for signatures. Their success or lack of it there became a matter of contention. The remonstrators claimed another 300 signatures. How does one get 600 signatures on a petition in direct opposition to another petition that gained 450 when there are only 900 registered voters in the county? The remonstrators claimed that many signers of the removal petition had been led to believe the election would let them chose Hawley or Muskoda as county seat and were upset when they realized that the choice was either Glyndon or Moorhead. This may be true. But the removal advocates provided compelling evidence of fraud on the part of the remonstrators. For instance, pasted to the remonstrance was a list of 27 names of voters from Lund Township (now Tansem Township). Above it was a sheet with this written on its top: "At a town meeting held at the town of Lund against moving county seat to Glyndon, Feb. 22d, 1879." Just below, written in a different hand was: "Forty-one registered. I hereby certify that within is a true and correct copy. Peter Hanson, Town Clerk." Hanson later wrote to the *Red River Valley News* that no such meeting had ever taken place and claimed fraud. Also

writing in were several Lund residents whose names appeared on the remonstrance who also claimed that no such "meeting" had occurred.

Comstock spent part of Sunday, February 23, conferring with his Moorhead constituents as to a plan of action. On Monday he carried both petitions to St. Paul. The next step would be to bring the matter before the House Committee on Counties and Towns. The seven-member committee would vote whether or not to send the proposed legislation to the House for a floor vote. Comstock delayed for a week, while both sides lobbied furiously. Comstock refused to carry the legislation unless the proposed election was moved from the November General Election date to a special election in May. This would spare Moorhead a summer of limbo. The Glyndon contingent would not bite. They may have been concerned that farmers, busy with spring work, would not vote or that the County Commission might not appropriate money for a special election.

Finally, around March 3, with only a few days left in the session, they approached Representative Anderson. He agreed to submit the election bill to the Committee. Over Comstock's objections, the seven voted unanimously to send the bill to the full House. It was debated March 5. But without Comstock's support, the proposal was doomed. The House voted to delay the bill indefinitely. Moorhead had won.

Comstock returned to Moorhead to cheers, fire works and a brass band. Glyndonites were furious. For six months the *Red River Valley News* editor Luther Osborn bitterly denounced Comstock in weekly columns. But the die was cast. Glyndon never again threatened Moorhead's hold on the county seat.