

The Forgotten County Commissioner

There are many ways in which to be a public servant, county commissioners being but one example. Sometimes public servants, such as county commissioners, are remembered for their accomplishments, and perhaps in some instances, for their lack of accomplishments. The following is an account of one highly respected county commissioner that served Martin County during the period in which the current court house was constructed, that being the early 1900s. Ironically, as a result of his integrity, honesty, and capabilities he might be considered to be the “forgotten county commissioner.”

Fred Miller at one time served Martin County as a faithful county commissioner, but may be recognized for more than that form of public service. Mr. Miller was born in Hanover, Germany in 1851. When he came to America, he lived in the La Crosse, Wisconsin area and later moved to St. Louis to learn the bricklaying and stone mason trade.

While in St. Louis, he married Pauline Rettke. They moved to Fairmont to farm in the early fall of 1885. They purchased land from Pauline’s brother, Carl Rettke, for \$5.50 per acre. The Millers and Rettke’s farmed in the same area. Fred and Pauline had 13 children. While the children helped with the farm work, the men would drive to Fairmont every day by buggy and build homes and other buildings.

Regarding Fred Miller’s public service, he began his first term as Commissioner of Martin County in January of 1905. For this duty, he received a salary of \$142.00 annually. During his term, the commissioners made the decision to condemn the then current courthouse and seek bids for a new courthouse. On December 12, 1905, bids for the new building were accepted. Because Miller was acknowledged as being one of the best builders and contractors in the area, he was appointed as Superintendent of Construction for the new facility and was to receive \$4.00 per day while employed in this capacity.

Although the construction of the courthouse was progressing favorably, Fred Miller handed in his resignation at the March 29, 1906, meeting of the county commissioners. One might question why Miller resigned when everything seemed to be progressing smoothly? Apparently, at some point following Miller’s appointed term as Superintendent of Construction, it was determined that according to state statute no county commissioner could be appointed by the board to any position of trust or be a party to any contract made by the board. At the time of Fred Miller’s appointment, neither the board nor Miller was aware of that state statute, and as soon as Fred Miller learned of the law, he tendered his resignation as county commissioner. The board regretfully accepted Miller’s resignation considering it a public misfortune that he could not remain a county commissioner while simultaneously acting as superintendent of the

project. However, following his resignation the commissioners took the following action in March of 1906: they reappointed him as Superintendent of Construction of the new courthouse. He was to receive \$5.00 per day for his services.

Ironically, Fred Miller passed away at his home on December 9, 1907, exactly seven days before the dedication of the current Martin County courthouse on December 16, 1907. His unexpected death came as a shock to the citizens of Martin County. As stated in the December 13, 1907, edition of the Martin County Sentinel reporting his passing, he was regarded as “one of the most intelligent, honorable, and reliable citizens of Martin County having held many positions of honor and trust in his town and country, and in every instance his good judgement and integrity were to be relied upon.”

In the December 18, 1907, edition of the Martin County Independent, A. L. Ward paid tribute to Miller as follows in his acceptance address: “To Superintendent, Frederick Miller, who gave unsparingly of his time and watched with a scrutinizing eye every piece of material used in its construction, commendation is also due. It is regretted that he did not live to partake in the ceremonies of today. Called by the Supreme Architect to the other land a few days ago, he has left a monument in this edifice, which will exist longer than any marble that can be erected at his grave.”

As a result of the aforementioned circumstances, Miller’s name does not appear in the courthouse as a county commissioner, although, his name is inscribed as Superintendent of Construction of the project.

Fred Miller is but one example of the many rugged individuals that were influential in shaping the early history of Martin County. Did he get the proper credit and recognition for his accomplishments? Probably not, but based upon what appears to have been his intentions, he was no doubt more concerned with doing the “right thing” in all his endeavors and less concerned with recognition for his accomplishments. Miller and his wife, Pauline, are buried at Lakeside Cemetery.

To learn more about Fred Miller, or to become a member of the Martin County Historical Society, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

