Early History of Martin County

As the Sesquicentennial year of 2007 rapidly comes to a close, it might be interesting to briefly review the early history of Martin County and how it may have influenced our lives today.

Martin County was part of the Louisiana, Missouri, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota Territories between 1805 and 1858. It was actually established before Minnesota became a state on May 23, 1857, taking portions of Brown County and Faribault County.

The county was most likely named for Henry Martin of Wallingford, Connecticut. According to William Budd, "The county was named for him, not because he ever did anything for the county, but because he was in a position by reason of being frequently in Mankato to influence the naming of it for him." Martin was a resident of Mankato and he hunted and fished in Martin County during that period of time. He built a house beside Martin Lake, which was also named for him, in Rutland Township and planned to settle here. However, within a year he left Martin County and returned to Connecticut.

There are some who think the county was named after Morgan Martin of Green Bay, Wisconsin. In 1846, he introduced a bill for the organization of Minnesota. As a result, members of the territorial legislature, who passed the act establishing Martin County, may have been partially influenced to consider Martin County as being named after Morgan Martin. However, most historical accounts give credit to Henry Martin as Martin County's namesake.

The first settlers in the county were Calvin Tuttle and one Mr. Rickey. They came in March of 1856 and built the first house on Center Chain of Lakes. Tuttle made a claim on Tuttle's Grove, now Tenhassen Township. Of course, Calvin Tuttle was famous, or perhaps infamous, for the fist fight with Sam Carver for the right to live in Tenhassen Township. Tuttle lost the fight, so he and his relatives moved on, eventually settling in Nebraska.

By the winter of 1856-1857, there were twenty men, nine women, and twenty-three children in Martin County. The first boy and girl born to the early settlers were Mary Virginia Britts and Charles Fowler. The first post office opened in 1858 with William Budd as postmaster. Lorraine Swearingen taught the first school in 1860. Dr. Orville Chubb built his home at 209 Lake Avenue in Fairmont, now known as the Chubb House, and Frank Day founded the Martin County Sentinel in 1874.

The early settlers in Martin County were primarily of English origin. In 1872, H. F. Shearman, a Connecticut lawyer, went on a hunting trip to Martin County. Being very impressed with the economic potential of the area, he purchased land near Fairmont and developed it into a model farm. He then went back to England and influenced many Englishmen, some quite wealthy, to invest in Martin County implying they could significantly increase their wealth. Most of the investors that took Scherman's "bait"

were recent college graduates, former military officers, clergymen, journalists, merchants, and policemen. This became the "English Colony," or "Bean Colony," as they planned to become wealthy raising beans. They arrived in the spring of 1873 and planted approximately 1,000 to 1,200 acres of beans around Fairmont in Tenhassen and Rolling Green Townships.

As luck would have it for these inexperienced entrepreneurs of the prairie, June of 1873 signaled the beginning of the grasshopper infestation in and around Martin County. It was said that the grasshoppers came like a snowstorm, completely covering the ground. This "plague" continued for several years until, in 1877, Governor Pillsbury set aside a day of prayer and fasting. On that day, the grasshoppers flew away without depositing any of their eggs. The grasshopper plague finally came to an end!

However, the effects of the grasshopper invasion were felt by the English Colony. Eventually their losses from the grasshopper infestation and partial crop failures due to unfavorable weather conditions forced most of the English Colonists to abandon their efforts to grow beans. Many returned to England, and those that stayed turned to other ventures, including business and farming.

Despite further setbacks, the colony expanded to the point that the 1880 census showed there were 219 Englishmen in Martin County. Those who stayed, such as Percy Wollaston, Frederich Wherland, the Archer-Burtons, Harry M. Serle, W. M. Hay, Joseph Ramsdale, H. W. Sinclair, and others had a definite and significant impact on Martin County and were essentially influential in shaping it, at least to some extent, into what it was eventually to become.

The early history of Martin County was a colorful time. It was marked by courageous individuals willing to brave the elements of the Minnesota prairie in order to make a better life for themselves and their families. Much of what they accomplished has in many ways influenced present day Martin County, whether it be names of geographic locations such as streets, cities, and lakes or the initiation of business interests which, although having evolved over time, may not have existed had it not been for the entrepreneurial endeavors of many of those early pioneers.

For more information on the history of Martin County, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.