

Martin County's Earliest Settlers

What must it have been like as a settler in Martin County in those early days over 150 years ago? Travel was difficult, food was scarce, and the unknown was certainly disconcerting. Who would come here and why would they have come? As is often the case, including today, those early pioneers came here for a better way of life. They wanted more for themselves and their families; consequently, they took the challenge and moved west, some eventually choosing to settle in Martin County.

One such hardy individual, with descendants still living in Martin County, was Henry Holmes Fowler. Fowler's ancestors came from England and settled in Connecticut. Henry, one of ten children, was born in 1827 in Connecticut. While in Connecticut, he learned the silver burnishing trade and also met and married his wife, Adaline Parker, in 1852.

The east was experiencing some hard times in the 1850's; there were soup kitchens, workers rioting, and very crowded conditions. In addition, eastern cities were said to be flooded with literature promoting the fine land and conditions in Minnesota available just for settling there. This prompted Fowler to head west, eventually leading him to Minnesota and to Martin County.

Fowler, who had previously visited Minnesota, set out for the west in the spring of 1857 getting as far as Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, by train. From there he set out on foot. While walking, he encountered another young man, coincidentally also named "Fowler," but no relation. Henry Fowler and the man he met on the way, George Fowler, then decided to travel together to Winnebago City, which was greatly publicized back in Connecticut. However, upon reaching their destination, they were disappointed in the city which had only a few log buildings. Although Winnebago City wasn't to their liking, the region appealed to them and they decided to continue on walking to Fairmont. There they met Fairmont's two residents, William Budd and E. Banks Hall. Budd and Hall told the Fowlers of the Chanyaska River, now called Elm Creek, which was located about ten miles north of Fairmont. Budd and Hall said it had a substantial amount of timber and would serve as a good settlement site. The Fowlers went there and found this area much to their liking with an abundance of timber as well as wild game, fish, and many fur bearing animals. Here, in what was later to become Westford Township, the two Fowlers selected quarter sections of land each under the Preemption Act, which was in effect prior to the Homestead Law, and agreed to pay the government \$1.25 per acre of land.

After Fowler had secured his land, he walked back to Connecticut to get his wife and young daughter. Then in the spring of 1858, Fowler, his wife and daughter, and several others

interested in the new land left Connecticut for Minnesota. They went by rail to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. Their travels continued by river steamboat to Mankato via St. Paul. From Mankato, Fowler hired a team of horses and driver to transport them to their site on the Chanyaska River. They arrived at their new home on May 11, 1858, the same day that Minnesota became a state.

Coincidentally, one of the individuals that accompanied Henry Holmes Fowler to Minnesota was Henry Martin, for whom Martin County was eventually named. Martin was ambitious, somewhat wealthy, and very enthusiastic about this area. He entered politics, and when the county was organized, he was present at the session of the legislature when the bill was passed creating Martin County. Consequently, as a result of his enthusiastic lobbying for the passage of that bill, he was honored by having the county named after him. However, it is interesting to note that he soon left the area and went back east. Although he owned land on Martin Lake, which was also named for him, he played no further role in the development of the county and was never actually considered a true resident of Martin County.

As very early settlers, the Fowlers were responsible for many “firsts” in Martin County. They grew the first wheat in the county, they were said to have the first cow, and their son, Charles, was the first Caucasian boy born in Martin County. In addition, Henry Holmes Fowler, along with William Budd and Benson C. Hinkle, were appointed commissioners and given the task of dividing the county into townships. Henry Holmes Fowler and his wife, Adeline, lived on their farm all their lives. Henry died in 1904 and Adaline died in 1921.

Descendents of Henry Holmes Fowler and Adaline Parker Fowler celebrated 150 years on Elm Creek in Westford Township in 2007 with over 140 family members present. Today the farm is operated by a Fowler descendent, Travis Fowler, and his wife, Jeanine who, according to a *Sentinel* article from 2007 that documented the 150th celebration, raise sheep, corn, oats and soybeans.

The early pioneers in Martin County faced many challenges and hardships. As for the descendents of Henry Holmes Fowler, they have continued in their diligent pursuit of farming up to the present day sixth generation of Fowlers. For the Fowler family, their neighbors, and Martin County, one can only speculate as to how things might be different had Henry Holmes Fowler chosen a different location in which to settle back in 1857.

For more information, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.