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EARLY OMRO

by Warren Brooks

According to the stories told by my father, a group of men, including his father, left Madison and traveled northward, crossing Ripon prairie, until they came to the Fox River, where hickory and white oak grew.

They settled on 80 acres of section 9 in the town of Rushford, in 1848. After the death of my grandfather in 1896 they moved to Omro, having purchased 25 acres of Thomas Bailey in the western addition of the village of Omro. Omro was quite a village, made up of about 1200 people, many of which were retired farmers. A number of these kept a cow staked out on a vacant lot or the roadside, and many kept a pig or a flock of chickens.

H.C. Scott owned the lumber yard and a saw mill, with a track about 8 feet high on which they moved the lumber into piles 16 to 20 feet high. This mill worked about 6 weeks every winter for a number of years. Rafts of logs came down the Wolf River to Boom Bay and up the Fox, towed by boat to Omro. There were many steamboats, The Albatros, The Fashion, D.L. Cady, The Thistle, H.C. Scott, Leander Choate, Badger State, and the Paul L.

It seems that the Omro people were very church minded. There was the First Baptist Church, 1850; First Presbyterian Church; Methodist Church; Catholic Church; Episcopal Church (1879), that Clayton Stearns made into a home some years later, giving the lovely glass windows to the Presbyterian Church. There was also an Adventist Church across the road from the present Scott Park. In later years the Lutheran and Assembly of God Churches came to Omro.

I believe the East Side School (where Mrs. Walter Lanphear now lives - 345 Van Buren Ave.) was built about 1878, and the North Side School was built about the same time. About 1903 the German Methodist Church purchased the North Side School, with Rev. Brandt as pastor, and held services there for about 12 years. Later Frank Peterson purchased it and converted it into a home.

About 1900 there was a building where the new City Hall now stands. A.H. Austria had a small feed-grinding establishment in the south end of the building and Albion Reid had an implement agency in the other end. About 1903 the feed mill on Main Street was destroyed by fire doing much damage to the City Hall. Mr. Austria purchased the East Side school house and moved it onto the foundation of the old feed mill, put an addition on the east side, and went into business. Many years later Geo. Daggett & Son bought the Austria mill, and it was destroyed in 1970. The Daggetts having purchased a new mill near the railroad.

The first High School was built in 1893 and the Webster Manual Training building in 1906. My friend Monte Brockway and I unloaded all the brick for this school as it was delivered, earning 12½ cents an hour. An addition was built north of the old High School in 1909. The

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gym was built in 1934. The Band building about 1916, and the Agriculture building about 193_. The Omro Theatre was built about 1934, was remodeled later, and is now our new City Hall.

In 1900 the city stock yards were located where the Co-op warehouse is now. Shortly thereafter the stock yards were moved to the present location. Omro was once one of the largest livestock shipping stations in Wisconsin. The local shippers were Tom Heffron, James Heffron, Frank Mahar, Ed. Reed and Gus Witt, Jess Knoll, Omro Co-op Shipping Ass'n: Fred Loker, John Haigh and G.W. Brooks. Many herds of cattle were driven from Pine River, Poy Sippi and points west by Sherman Barnard, Bing Hurlbut, and others. It was not uncommon for 8 to 10 carload to be shipped weekly. These cars had to be lined with red rosin paper in cold weather, and double-decked for calves, with bedding, and ear corn for hogs.

E.A. Earle had an office in town and sold milker machinery, had a coal yard and a grain elevator. C.H. Stevens had a coal yard and did much custom work around town. Later the Co-op Shipping Ass'n sold coal and feed.

The Omro Co-op Butter & Cheese Co. had been doing business for many years. The farmers brought in their milk and waited while it was run through a cream separator. Then they would receive their skim milk from the other side of the factory. This was a time-consuming job. Butter makers were John Berry, Chas. Wilson and Chas. Ream. (Later ones were Ralph Peterson and Irv Hanson). About 1916 a new creamery was built, after a few years of operation it was sold to the Kraft Co. who also dried skim milk for sale. Later the Kraft Co. sold the building to the City of Omro. It is now used by an industrial firm.

In building foundations for homes, or barns, it was customary to have a "bee" to haul stones for these foundations. The stone masons would mix the sand and lime to cement them together. They would find a seam or crack in a large stone, raise their stone-hammers, take aim and strike. The stone usually would break, and they could proceed with the building of their wall. It was marvelous to see their huge muscles stand out as they did this heavy work. Early in 1900 there were stories of a new powder that would be mixed with sand and water that would make blocks, a floor or sidewalk, and would be hard, like stone. It was the cement of our present day. Many stone foundations are still in use, but are fast disappearing.

The day of the silo was dawning. The first ones were made of tamarack lumber. These would shrink and twist and were soon replaced by cyprus staves, and then by cement.

In 1900 most area farmers raised Durham cattle. They were considered a dual breed, providing both milk and meat. Their crops were mostly corn and grain, with timothy, alsace and red clover for hay (they didn't grow alfalfa here until about 1916). They planned to winter the stock on hay and corn stalks, and milk them during the grass season.

Many farmers sowed rye early in the fall and when it had grown to 5 or 6 inches, turn the cows in to feed on it, this increased the milk

flow. The following summer when they harvested the rye it was run through a thresher. A man fed the bundles crosswise into a thresher, the stalks came out tied, and a man with 2 half-bushel baskets took care of the grain. They did not have baggers at that time. The rye straw was taken to Oshkosh where a man named Schneider ran it through a crimper for packing purposes.

There had been much talk of an internal combustion engine, and one evening a man came to our store and we ordered a 2 h.p. engine. When it arrived the freight bill was for a 700 lb. weight. Later it was predicted that one would soon be perfected that was small enough for a man to carry about.

Shortly after that J.H. Haigh ordered a 20th Century manure spreader. There was some doubt about it, but it proved to be a great success. These machines were probably new on the market about 1908. Timothy Haley ordered a David Bradley check-row corn planter. He checked in his corn that year and was greatly pleased with it. Myron Rolph ordered a C.B.Q. side-delivery rake. This rake kicked hay up like a tedder and left it in a winrow. He was very pleased with it. Geo. Morton ordered a cylinder side-delivery rake. When it went down the street many people stood along the way to watch it go by, while in gear.

About this time (1910) there were many traveling men. They were called drummers, and were considered well posted on world affairs. One day, one of these men told me that soon all our groceries would come wrapped. That there was a tough paper-like substance that would resist water, was clear and tear resistant, which was to be used for wrapping. This proved to be true.

It was not unusual to step into a store and see wash tubs and boilers hanging from the ceilings, lanterns, lamps, and crockery on the shelves, and a coffee grinder mounted on the end of the counter, and an icebox to keep the butter and other things in. Crackers and cookies came in barrels or large boxes. Kerosene, vinegar and molasses came in barrels and were kept in the rear of the store, on racks.

The I.O.O.F. Lodge No. 125 was instituted Apr. 6, 1867, and after much tribulation they built the brick building that now houses the Treleven Electric and the Variety Store. In 1912 they built on what is now the Bakery. The upstairs rooms are now used by the Odd Fellows and Rebekah Lodges. Mr. Chas. Beer started the bakery which he later sold to Magnus Bartels. A son-in-law of E.P. Ferris (Leon Norman) ran it for a while. Then Roy Shelp, who sold it to Max Bieber, and it has been in the Bieber family ever since.

The G.A.R. Hall is located at the north end of the bridge. It was marvelous to see the soldiers of the Grand Army of The Republic march across the bridge to some Church for services, then out to the cemetery to give honor to their soldier dead. (This was on Memorial Day or Decoration Day as it was often called).

The Modern Woodman of America and Auxiliary, the Royal Neighbors of America met in the rooms over what is now Finks Restaurant and Sullivan's Dry Goods. It was an Insurance and Fraternal Organization. It was a large lodge and did much good in the community. Our local

lodge folded in 1933.

The Masonic Lodge was instituted about 1867. They and the Eastern Star own their own Hall at the corner of Water St. and Madison Ave. They are an active lodge.

The I.O.G.T., Independent Order of Good Templers, was located north across the street from the new post office. They had a large membership and did much good. After many years their leaders passed away and the hall was used for other things until torn down about 10 years ago. (In 1960 or so).

East of the I.O.O.F. Hall was the Larrabee Grocery, and is now the V.F.W. Hall. East of that was the People's Bank of Omro until 1929. It is now a shoe repair shop. Continuing east, the next was an eating place, and on the corner was a grocery and crockery store owned by Henry Waite in 1900. Later it was a Kroger grocery managed by Otto Meyer, followed by Sherms Grocery with Sherm Kautza managing. At present it is being used as a Beverage Mart with living apartments on the second floor.

West of the Omro Bakery is a building erected by the Root Bros. for a hardware store about 1900. Schuler & Hay managed it for a couple of years, then L.T. Abercrombe. G.W. Brooks purchased it about 1905 and ran a flour, feed and seed store, plus farm machinery until about 1918. After that it became the Mitchell building. Mitchell has a barber shop there. There is now another barber shop to the west of him. The next place west of him used to be P.M. Wright's Omro Journal office for many years where Elizabeth Smith worked as type setter. There is a dock on this property where 3 passenger boats used to unload their passengers from Berlin.

I remember Capt, Tolman and Cad Clark. One boat was called the Red Bird.

The Omro Hotel was known as the Larrabee House in 1900. It used to meet every train with a stage coach to pick up all passengers who needed lodging. There used to be weekly excursions to Oshkosh by way of the Larrabee House docks. There were many excursions to all the points along the waterfront.

The Drug Store was operated by C.D. Bowman, then Oliver Lasher, John Becker, and others. Then Minor Lloyd (who married Georgia Larrabee) sold it to Clayton Stearns who recently sold it to Charles Schmitt.

Over the drug store W.E. Hurlbut, Att. at law had his office for many years, followed by Rodney Alder. (Later A.E. Birch.) On the other side of the hall, Dr. Frank M. Russell had an office. He built a new home at the south end of what is now Madison St. (204 E. Scott), and raised wormwood on a farm southeast of Omro for medical purposes.

East of the Drug Store the Gensch Bros., Fred and Ernest, operated a hardware store. It is now a Gamble Store, operated by the Snowbergs. To the east of that was once a meat market operated by F.J. Mahar, and later by the Hoger Bros. Mr. Mahar was our postmaster. Chas. Chase had a jewelry store east of the meat market, the Deep Rock filling station

has been there for many years.

Farther east, beyond the feed mill was Bushnell Hall, and the John Crego blacksmith shop. A.L. Gibson owned a livery and sales stable north, across the street from the Masonic Hall. He sold it to Geo. Pratt, who operated it for many years.

West of the Masonic Hall are the law offices of Jansen and Wallace, built several years ago. Continuing westward was the old city hall, and years ago the blacksmith shop of John Ryan was next in line, with a shoe repair shop where the first Farmer's Bank stood, now the Wis. Power & Light Co. O.W. Barlow had a harness shop where the Farmer's Bank is at this time. There was also a Chinese Laundry, and Dr. I.H. Sheerar's dental office at this location in former years. Pelton & Winslow ran a grocery and dry goods store where the Bank is building their extension. Mr. Andringa also had a grocery here for a time, and a laundermat operated here for a time, also the J & S. Pharmacy did business in this building for several years, and the western end housed the Omro Post Office, followed by the Beverage Mart. Over this old Post Office was the dental office of Dr. Wm. Doll for nearly 50 years. He was an entertainer of unusual talent, dramatically and musically.

F.J. Mahar, Frank Stanley, Sherm Barnard, Meridan Anderson, and Ralph Lemke have been Omro Postmasters.

To the west of this building was an Insurance Agency with a platform scale in front where people could weigh their load of produce, or such. The Agency was run by John Orchard, later by Parker Bussey, now Anton Kolbus has an office there. On the corner was a grocery run by Earle & McGuire, and later by H. Siefert until it was purchased by the Omro Shipping Ass'n about 1919. To the south stood a building that housed the Citizen's Bank, later the Omro Herald with C.H. Slocum until it was purchased by F.A. Siebenson, who printed it for many years. It was then sold to Paul Kimble and was destroyed by fire a few years later.

At the site of the Friendly Tavern was a machine shop run by Geo. Turner and Bruce Carter until about 1930. East of the Friendly where Sadie Lee now lives, was the home of Dr. J.S. Daniels. He was hard of hearing and used an ear trumpet. He was our family doctor, and highly respected by all.

In the early days, about 1900, the Northwestern Hotel was located where our new post office now stands, and was run by W.H. Hurner. They ran a coach which met the trains and gave transportation to those who desired lodging. In later years it was a boarding house. The Honorable J.N. Tittimore spent his declining years there. The next building to the south was the home and office of Dr. F.D. Fleury, other Doctors before him.

Dr. L.J. Schoenbechler's home and office on E. Main was built where Asa Wiles wagon shop stood many years ago. The lot to the west of it was once the site of Chris Peterson's shop. To the south, across the street where the Standard Station is now, was Frank Stanley's wagon and repair shop. } blacksmith

What was known as the Woolen Mill, now Geo. Daggett & Son, was built

about 1860, and to the east was a cheese factory. To the east of that building is the present Butkiewicz & Sons Machine Shop.

The County Board, at the Nov. 1919 session, was petitioned to start cementing Hwy 21 from Omro to Oshkosh, as far as \$65,000.00 would build. Later the bonds were taken for this amount.

At a special Session in May 1921 they decided to proceed forthwith to construct an 18 foot roadway during the 1921 and 1922 seasons, beginning where the concrete ends and proceeding east as far as \$125,000.00 will go, to be constructed by the County under direction of the Road & Bridge Committee, making a total of \$200,000.00. The Omro-Oshkosh crew did the work at a cost of \$30,000.00 per mile. (Earle Tice of Omro says he worked on this road for 40 cents an hour, 10 hours a day.)

In Nov. 1920 they bonded the County for Highways, the Omro-Oshkosh road for \$182,000.00; Omro-Poygan road for \$135,000.00; Omro-Aurora-ville road for \$225,000.00; Omro-Winneconne road \$150,000.00; Omro-Eureka road \$196,000.00; Omro-Elo \$250,000.00. Assessed against the village of Omro for .93 of a mile of road at \$1,000.00 a mile, \$930.00 against the town of Omro 1.02 mile; (Omro-Oshkosh) road, \$1020.00 also assessed part of special benefits to be collected when road is completed. Town of Omro \$1,500.00. Town of Algoma \$1,600.00. Transferred from the Omro Bridge fund the balance of funds remaining in the fund, 2/3 to Omro-Oshkosh Hwy, and 1/3 to the village and town of Omro 50% each. Dated Nov. 19, 1921. Frank Stanley was on the Board from Omro.

In the Nov. 16, 1922 County Board reports they decided to hire motorcycle policemen, the salary not to exceed \$225.00 per month. They were also authorized to buy a 10 ton tractor for grading and snow removal, not to exceed \$7,500.00.

Omro-Oshkosh road, 6½ mile of concrete completed.

Some of the patrolmen were: (1920)

Omro-Oshkosh road, Myron Coats salary	\$1,019.00
Omro Wautoma " Ed. Coats "	\$1,027.25
Omro-Poygan " Ed. Collins (to Poygan Church, Krings Cor.)	\$1,014.80
Omro-Berlin " E.R. Westover	
Omro-Waukau rd. to Eureka, Ernest Steeps.	

In 1900, just north across the street from our new City Hall was the Charlesworth Furniture Store and Mortuary until he sold it to E.C. Heuer. It later became the property of Joe Plansky. To the north of this property was a barber shop owned by Mr. Everts which later became the property of Mr. Plansky. Continuing north was the telephone office for many years. It became a barber shop in later years. To the north of this, the telephone office, was the jewelry store of Chas. Chase. Next was the millinery shop of Mrs. Hoover. Then came a Cafe run by Robert Chatterton for a few years, then by Robert Ames. There was a small book store next to the Cafe where Mr. Damon sold books as those of Frank Merrywell, Fred Fearnot, Dick Tracy and Diamond Dick. The school and even our parents objected to our reading such stuff.

The Cafe and book store burned down and a building erected later was used as a shoe repair shop run by Valentine Kloster. What is presently Zweiger's Hardware was a dry goods store run by Mr. and Mrs. F.A. Cole. The Mrs. sat on a high platform in the center of the room so she could see what was going on all around the store.

North of that building was James Sharp, then Ed Leaman who had a Restaurant. Those 2 now a part of Charlie's Tavern.

In 1900 there were 6 saloons on what was then Water St. (now Main). Elmer Brazee who ran what is now Charlie's. Other saloon keepers were Fred Glines, Will Oatman, Frank Oatman, Euch Tritt and Frank Case where Frank Peter's Plumbing shop is, including his store, the adjoining room and the vacant lot next to it. The building next to the vacant lot now housing the Bowling Alley was built by Elmer Brazee for a bottling plant and was once Clint Tice's Meat Market. There was a fountain back of this plant that was piped to a steel watering tank at the street where folks watered their horses.

The saloon keepers paid a license fee of \$500 a year and in later years it was raised to \$750. The public had the right to vote the saloons closed which they did much of the time. I believe Fred Glines got special permission to open a saloon north across the corner from where Charley's tavern is now, providing he would start a Hotel there also. It lasted only a short time when the saloons were voted out. Later it housed the Kroger Grocery Store for several years with Mr. and Mrs. Meyer in charge. More recently it was Sherm Kautza Grocery.

Where the Bowling Alley now stands was a Harness Shop owned by A.B. Russell. It was vacant to the west until we come to the flat owned by Dora Loker about 1922. Dr. M.H. Lambrecht put up a two story building and drilled a fountain to the back of the lot. On west was the Wilson building, composed of 3 stores at the front and one at the back. The east section was a saloon run by Frank Case and Frank Oatman. At the center and back were rooms rented by G.W. Brooks and used as a Feed Store and Implement Agency. The west area was occupied by C.H. Slocum as Editor of The Omro Herald. The store was torn down (by Mr. Weingarten, I believe) to make room for a gasoline station (pumps).

South of the Wilson building on what is now called Jefferson Ave. was a residence where Barnes lived, later owned by Bert Hess. Farther south was the home of Geo. Davidson (later Kings). These residences and those to the east including the Plansky property, Chase Jewelry and on north to the Zweiger Hardware have been razed to make room for Sherm's Super Market and parking lot.

I have been told that a Mr. Gould built what is now the Omro Hotel and that this same man built the Blackburn residence (246 E. Scott) once owned by Geo. Stearns, and that this house was built of brick which came from the Brick Pond on the western edge of the former Ed. Erickson property now owned by Al Koehne. This brick pond area was dangerous, was fed by fountains. In plowing that field several years ago I found many brick throughout the area. Mrs. Geo. Stearns has a brick which was once in the Red Brick school.

West of the Omro Hotel was a brick feed stable run by Dr. O.H. Eliason who later became a State Veterinarian and fought hard for the eradication of T.B. in cattle and won. In about 1903 he drove into Omro with a Model T Ford Roadster which was quite an attraction. It had no top and the tires were very small.

West of Eliason stable is a stone blacksmith shop built by A.F. Pine, and is now owned by Louis Kubasta. West of that was the Power & Light Company plant which furnished lights for the village and run by Wm. Cady and Orlie Mills. This area was later used as a boat landing site, and has now been absorbed in the building of our new bridge.

Warren Brooks served on the Winnebago County Board from 1949 to 1967. He urged me (Mariam J. Smith) to write a history of Early Omro, and offered to help in any way he could. He composed the preceding account, his wife, Edna Baldry Brooks, typed it. It was given to me in 1972. This information and many other facts about Omro that Warren recalled have been included in the manuscript of "Early Omro."
