

JONI KENNEDY - INTERVIEW WITH REUBEN HEGGEN - THE MOVING OF THE TRAVERSE COUNTY SEAT

The date is June 20th, 1973. I am Research Associate Joni Kennedy and I'm in the home of Mr. Reuben Heggen in Wheaton, Traverse County, Minnesota. Mr. Heggen will tell me the story of the moving of the county seat to Wheaton.

Q. Mr. Heggen, do you know what year the county seat was moved to Traverse?

Yes, the county seat was moved in late 1886.

Q. And your father participated in the moving of the seat from Browns Valley to Wheaton?

Yes. With quite a large number of men that went to Browns Valley .

Q. Do you know about how many?

No I wouldn't. My father never told me how many. There was a considerable number.

Q. How old was your father when they moved the county seat?

Well my father was probably about 22 years old at that time.

Q. Did he ever tell you or did you ever find out what kind of feelings there were between Browns Valley and Wheaton, or why Wheaton wanted the county seat?

Well Wheaton I presume wanted the county seat because it's centrally located in the county, whereas Browns Valley was on the very edge of the county over by the South Dakota border and it made it [a long trip]. Probably the people from in the northeast part of the county would probably have at least maybe 50 miles to go to the county seat which was quite a trip in those days with the facilities they had for travel.

Q. Were there any business reasons why Wheaton wanted the county seat?

Why naturally they would like to have the county seat because the offices and the officials of the county courthouse would add to the population of Wheaton and would help them in business matters, because the people would come to the county seat on business.

Q.. Getting back to my first question, did you know or ever hear of any kind of ill feelings - were they mad at each other - the people in Browns Valley and Wheaton, over this?

Oh definitely. Browns Valley was very unhappy about losing their courthouse, and they put up quite a battle in the courts and legislature to retain the courthouse in Browns Valley.

Q. Before they actually went and took the courthouse away, do you know of any incidents that preceded the actual taking?

Well as my father told me, there was a small group, maybe four, five men who went down there to get the records and so forth, after it had been awarded by the legislature and the courts to Wheaton and there was an altercation there and the Wheaton men came back rather bruised from their experience down there; the men were very upset about it,

Q. There was a fight then (Yes) and they were beat up?

Yes they said that they were.

Q. There weren't any - was there any shooting?

70 - 5 min.

No, no there wasn't any shooting.

Q. And this was also in 1886?

Yes.

Q. And do you know what month it was when they actually went down there to take it [the court records] away?

Well I couldn't say offhand, just which month it was.

Q. Did your father ever mention the plans that they made to go down there or did they just get together?

On this, I think it was a Saturday night, in Wheaton, they passed word around to the men there, in various saloons and business places and they tood them to keep it quiet; that they were [to get] together and, and go in force to Browns Valley. And they, as I understand it, left about 10:30. I think they only had one wagon, one large wagon and the rest, most of the men had to walk to Browns Valley. I think my father said that they arrived there probably about 2:30 in the morning and Browns Valley was asleep; there wasn't any activity there. And they surrounded the courthouse, made a ring around the courthouse, spaced the men a certain distance apart and they were armed with clubs, father said; some had pick-ax handles and (Rifles?). No, no he said he didn't [see any]. He said there was rumors of some rifles under the hay in the wagon but he said he thought maybe that was only a rumor. He never saw anything- any fire-arms.

Q. Why did they have hay in the wagon?

Well maybe to sit on for those that rode in the wagon. Some of them rode and others walked. And they were told not to permit anyone to enter the courthouse or approach the courthouse. And my father said that there was only one person that tried to pass under and that he told 'em that he couldn't let 'em go by but that he'd have to restrain him; and he didn't protest - he left. But there might have been other places where they tried more vigorously to get through. But I wouldn't know anything about that. They [the men from Wheaton], had no trouble at all.

Q. Your father's first name was...?

Thomas. Thomas Heggen, yes. And he homesteaded one mile north of Wheaton here. And I could say that he never wanted it discussed; he didn't want to be implicated in this, but he did tell me the story. And he said that it was something that he thought was much better to be forgotten about.

Q. So they loaded up all the records - and the safe? - did they take the safe too?

141 - 5 min. (10 min.)

Yes. They took the safe.

Q. And the Browns Valley people didn't put up a fight?

No, they didn't. Well apparently they were caught asleep there...Very few of them got up or knew what was going on even. So they were out of town with the safe and the records before they - Browns Valley - really were aware of the loss of the records.

Q. I see. Were there any incidents on the way back?

No there wasn't. But when they came quite close to Wheaton, much closer to Wheaton than to Browns Valley, why the businessmen and saloon-keepers of the town came out with liquid refreshments for them and they sort of partied on the rest of the way into town.

Q. Was it Kool-aid or something like that or was it beer?

No - he [my father] said it seemed like they rolled out a keg of beer almost every mile the last few miles into Wheaton and the men gathered around and quenched their thirst.

Q. So they might have been drunk when they came back?

Well I doubt that. They were pretty [tough men - when it came to drinking]. After all they were - I'm not sure at that time but later on - there were 7 saloons in Wheaton, 7 churches and 7 elevators; it got to be quite a business town.

Q. Do you know where they put the county records right after they brought them back that night?

I'm not sure what building was used at that time, before they built the courthouse.

Q. Do you know what year they did build the courthouse?

No I couldn't say...It would probably be in the Traverse County records [he is referring to the Traverse County Archives], which was probably here during the WPA Project in the 30's.

Q. Did Browns Valley after that try to get the courthouse back?

No, I think it was that they were resigned to the fact that they had lost the courthouse to Wheaton. They were naturally very unhappy about it and it was something that was difficult to forget.

Q. Have you heard of any of the old-timers of either Wheaton or Browns Valley talk about the taking of the county courthouse and have you heard of ill feelings between the two towns since then?

Well I would say that when I went to high school, many years afterwards - 20 or 30 years afterwards, whenever Wheaton and Browns Valley participated in an athletic event, why usually, quite often it wound up in a sort of a brawl because they - Browns Valley fans - would shout "Remember the courthouse!" So I think because of that they severed athletic relations between the two towns for quite a while after that because they didn't get along very well. Of course, the athletes at that time, or those going to school at that time, only had heard of it from

their parents and their grandparents, but they still had that feeling - that resentment against Wheaton for having deprived them of the courthouse.

Q. This was right after the taking of the courthouse or was it a few years after?

No, I'm talking about maybe 30 years afterwards.

Q. That would make it 18...19...

Well no it would be say around in 19...from 1910 to 1920, like that.

Q. And they did actually sever athletic connections?

Yes they did. I think it was principally because of that that Wheaton didn't get along with Browns Valley as well as they did with some of the other towns that they competed with.

Q. And recently, these past few years, have you heard of any stories or have you heard of anyone taling about the courthouse being moved and any ill feelings now in the present time?

Well that's rather hard to answer. I wouldn't like to answer that but there is some feeling yet. I would say, a little feeling. It's been difficult for Browns Valley to elect anyone to county office because of their pasition over in the county, in the [southwestern corner of Traverse County]. They like votes in that section of the county to be off-set by the votes in Wheaton. And I think that's been kind of unfair that Browns Valley hasn't had more offices in the courthouse.

Q. Is there anything else that you would like to add to your story?

No I can't think of anything that I'd add to that. I wondered whether the trouble like that - the slow dying [of animosity is found in other areas]. You wonder whether now, in Ireland, the trouble they're having there with North Ireland, and if that's ever settled I would think it would be a hundred years before the feelings would come back to normal again. And [I think that the two problems are similar], in referring to how long Wheaton and Browns Valley resented that little trouble that they had.

Thank you so much Mr. Heggen.