

## Chapter Two

### Waumandee History

Conducting linguistic research in a specific area makes it necessary to give the reader an idea of the area itself, historically as well as geographically, since it is not a place well known to the general public. This chapter will mainly focus on the history of Waumandee including geographical and topographical details. The beginning informs the reader about the present situation before moving back in time about two hundred years, when the first pioneers arrived, making their way up the Mississippi River. The life of the first settlers will be described along with their relationships with the Indians who inhabited the land at that time. However, the Indians were slowly driven out of the area upon the arrival of the white man and they moved to territories west of the Mississippi. The building of the town of Waumandee and its development and the nationalities of the immigrants during the subsequent decades will remain the main topic.

Information on the history of Waumandee was first compiled in Kessinger (1886), *History of Buffalo County, Wisconsin*, and later in a more comprehensive work by Curtiss–Wedge (1919), *History of Buffalo and Pepin Counties Wisconsin*. There are several works focusing on the history of one or more particular families, which also contain historical information about Waumandee. Most information is kept at the Buffalo County Historical Society in Alma, Wisconsin. Additionally, there are many old letters and articles filed under the search term ‘Waumandee’, which generally do not give information on authors. All the census records from 1853 onwards are kept on microfilm. These were consulted for this research to discover where the first families had come from and also to find out which family names are still present today. Smaller contributions to the historical review came directly from people living in Waumandee.

Present-day Waumandee is a small town located in the Waumandee Valley 15 miles northwest of Arcadia, in Buffalo County,

Wisconsin. The Mississippi flows 12 miles west of Waumandee, where also the nearest still operating railway runs. Currently the population of Waumandee township is 517 people.<sup>1</sup> There are a store, a bank, a bar, a post office and a few other trades in town nowadays as well as a Catholic church and an elementary school. Most of the people are dairy farmers. Topographically, the town is located in the midst of a wide valley called Waumandee Valley through which the Waumandee River flows. Since the soil is some of the most fertile of the whole county, there is farming in the valley itself and on the surrounding ridges and side valleys which are also included in the township. Swamps are situated along the Waumandee River which provide the remaining evidence of a once existent lake that slowly filled up with silt and left the land as it is today. Economically, the town does not offer a very large variety. Reglin & Hesch, the cheese plant, Garden Valley Co-op and the Rosenow's Farms are the only companies which provide work for larger numbers of employees. Waumandee is what people there like to call 'a one-horse town'. The smaller farms were slowly swallowed up by the bigger ones as commodity prices fell and smaller farms were no longer competitive. Many of the young people do not want to keep farming and have moved to another town to find a different job. Despite the demographic decline there are still first-generation immigrants moving to this place, mostly Swiss farmers who want to keep up their farming profession and like the fertile soil and the lovely area. People are very friendly and there is hardly any crime. However, Waumandee has not always been like this.

When the first pioneers made their way up the Mississippi River and reached this area they encountered a land that was inhabited by the Sioux and which belonged to the Dakota Indians (Curtiss-Wedge (1919), chapters III and VII; Kessinger (1888), pp. 96-141). Further north there were Indians of the Algonquin tribes, the Ojibwa, who were a fierce enemy of the Dakota Indians. Yearly burning of the land

1 Current census records have been obtained from the mayor of Waumandee township personally. In 1990 the census showed a population of 521, which figure is published under: <<http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/gazetteerbl?city=waumandee&state=wi&zip=>>

by the Indians left woods only at the tops of hills, on steep hillsides and along the shoreline of the Mississippi. With the first pioneers there came fur traders. The Indians were friendly and ever since the beginning there has been a good relationship between the natives and the newcomers in this area. The Indians did not hunt for fur like the white man. They only killed what they immediately needed to eat. Wabasha, who was chief over all the Dakotas, resided in a place which is now called Winona,<sup>2</sup> situated on the west bank of the Mississippi, below the big rock, a landmark which is commonly referred to as ‘Sugar Loaf’. Because the winters were so cold the early pioneers normally tried to make it back south before the river froze and denied their passage. For they only had small rickety log huts to fight the cold if the ice trapped them before they left.

It was not until the 1850s that the first settlers arrived in Waumandee (Curtiss–Wedge, 1919. chapter VII / Kessinger, 1888. pp. 507–608, p. 651). At that time there were no steamboats cruising regularly up and down the Mississippi River, nor was there a railway. People were brought up in much smaller vessels than the later big palace steamboats. Once they reached Fountain City they had to walk from there to their new destination. They normally used the existing paths made by the Indians, until roads big enough for stagecoaches were built.

Huts and stands had to be built for the cattle they brought along for protection, not only from the weather but also from the wild beasts. In these early years bears and wolves were present. Special attention had to be paid in the winter months when there was not much food around for the wolves. In dark nights they would try to break into a calf pen or sneak right up to the house. The children of the settlers were used to playing with the Indian children and the families would exchange goods with the Indians like venison or bear meat for pork or sewing material. The first settlers still witnessed the bitter battles between the Chippewa and the Sioux. Often they lived with fear in the midst of these Indian conflicts until the Sioux finally disappeared from this area in 1862 on the outbreak of the Sioux war in Minnesota (Curtiss–Wedge, 1919 chapter XVII, p. 953).

2 Winona is named after Wabasha’s daughter Winona.

The first roads went from Waumandee to Fountain City, to Buffalo City, and to Alma (Curtiss–Wedge, 1919. chapter X / Kessinger, 1888. pp. 333–347). These roads were bad and hauling goods remained a problem. Only a few farmers had horses. It was normal to have a wagon pulled by oxen. The best time to haul goods was in winter when the roads were frozen, or right after it had snowed, when the sledge could be used. Since big parts of the valleys were marshland, the first roads were built over the ridges or along the sides of valleys where the ground was drier. The nearest mill was in Rollingstone, Minnesota. It took a farmer at least three days for a trip to have a load of grain ground. As soon as more fields were cleared and wheat was more widely grown in the Waumandee Valley its farmers endeavored to build a better road to Fountain City.

Life improved with the coming of the railroad along the Mississippi that connected in La Crosse to the line that went to Chicago (Curtiss–Wedge, 1919. chapter X). The railroad was opened October 14, 1858, and went from La Crosse along the east bank of the Mississippi through Trempealeau, Fountain City and Alma to Prescott, Wisconsin. It was operated by the La Crosse, Trempealeau & Prescott Railroad Company. From then on, the doors were open for a considerably better living in Waumandee.

The very first settler of Waumandee was Mathias Profitlich who came from Rhenish Prussia in Germany (Curtiss–Wedge, 1919. chapter IX). He arrived in 1853. Waumandee Valley was soon known for its good soil and more immigrants rapidly followed. By 1860 the census records<sup>3</sup> show 467 people living in Waumandee township. With a few minor exceptions the population was of German and Swiss origin. During the next ten years, possibly due to the better conditions for traveling and settling, the population more than doubled and grew to 1,129 people. It was still a predominantly German-speaking society. The population had reached its peak and from now on slowly declined. In 1880 there were 950 people. This number remained until the turn of the century but in 1910 there were but 733 inhabitants and

3 census records on microfilm at the Buffalo County Historical Society in Alma, WI.

gradually dropping there were only 693 inhabitants in Waumandee in 1920.

The main immigrant languages remained German and Swiss-German. They were followed by English, French and Polish. There were a number of people who came from Luxembourg but a reliable source stating the language of those immigrants could not be found. In Fountain City appeared a weekly newspaper which was entirely published in German until 1920 (Curtiss–Wedge, 1919. chapter XIV). By the turn of the century, however, most people in the Waumandee Township knew English and would communicate in English, rather than their language of origin. Only in later years people of Polish background moved to Waumandee. They had first settled around the village of Independence. These settlers were predominantly Catholic. There were quite a few Catholics in Waumandee itself who at that time did not marry non-Catholics, thus neither brides nor grooms could be provided by the Lutherans who lived in Waumandee. And since there were more Catholics in the nearby villages of Independence and Arcadia, people then came to or left from Waumandee. This is the main reason for the drift of Poles westward to Waumandee. There are very few Poles in Cochrane or Alma, both farther west on the Mississippi, because people there were predominantly Protestant.

The first post office in Waumandee was established in 1857 (Kessinger, 1888. pp. 650–653). Anchorage received its own post office in 1868. In 1862, Caspar Schmitz and his wife, later Mrs. Bach, came to Waumandee and began to operate a store and saloon near the Catholic church. In the years to follow two stores, two taverns and several blacksmith shops were opened in Waumandee (Curtiss–Wedge, 1919. chapter IX, XI & XII). The town grew fast. Shoe and shoe repair shops were found in town as well as other trades. A dam was built and below it a powerful mill started rolling so that soon the farmers did not have to make the strenuous trip to Rollingsstone any more. Two brick manufacturers provided the town with high quality brick which was used to build up the growing town. Soon retired people and laborers began to erect houses around the Catholic church and Waumandee started to look like a town. As a result of the growth schools had to be built. The first schoolhouse was erected on Scotch Prairie on the Bachler farm in 1857; it was a log house. But soon a

more spacious brick schoolhouse was built which still exists today. Until the districts were consolidated with Alma, Cochrane and Fountain City, there were five of these smaller schools for Waumandee and Montana.

In 1860, the first Catholic service was held in Waumandee in a chapel at a distance from the site of the present church (Kessinger, 1888. pp. 462). The latter was built in 1877 and is still there today. The school attached to it dates back to the same time. An evangelical reformed church was organized in 1859 but only survived a few years. There were also many other smaller denominations present among the settlers at all times. Still there were a large number of people who were not engaged in religious organizations and did not belong to any church. They were mostly of Swiss and German origin who came from Sauk county where they had been associated with the so-called 'Free Thinkers' which was an organization that was more involved in friendly gatherings and entertainment. These Swiss and German settlers set up a reading society, which was later called the Harmonie Society (Kessinger 1888. p. 508). They had a big library of mostly German books of a rather anti-religious tone. They set up a choir with meetings on a weekly basis. At that time there were hardly any other social activities taking place and since the need for social activities was certainly there, this choir was frequently visited and appreciated by the people of Waumandee.

The organization of Waumandee Township resulted from a resolution by the Buffalo County Board on March 13th, 1856 (Curtiss-Wedge, 1919. chapter IX pp. 98-99 / Kessinger, 1888. p. 239). On April 1st of the same year the first town meeting was held and a chairman and superintendent were elected. Until then there was no official name of the newly established town. The name Waumandee was suggested by J. Price of Fountain City and remained as such ever since. The name Waumandee is of Indian origin. However, opinions differ on its translation and meaning. On the one hand the meanings 'War Eagle' or 'War Valley' were found, while on the other the word is believed to be Ojibwa, meaning 'clear and sparkling water'.

At first, Waumandee township incorporated all of what is included today in Montana, the Town of Lincoln and the western

part of Glencoe. Montana received its own township in 1867 and Lincoln in 1871. Waumandee thus was reduced to a smaller size. The shrinking of the town and the migration of more and more citizens to the surrounding cities seem to be the main reasons for the steady decrease of number of people on the census records since 1900.

Back in these early days of settlement a farm looked different. Since modern machinery was not yet available, more hands were needed to keep a big household and a farm running. Families were bigger and it was quite common for the mother to have a maidservant in the house to help her look after the household. Accordingly, there were usually one to three men living with a family who did farm work with the father. Thus, a family with five children and three additional helpers would consist of ten people under one roof<sup>4</sup>. Usually the people who worked with a family came with them from the same place of their home country. They got married in the new place and sometimes kept living with the family or started out on their own. The wealthier farmers would also have hired stagecoach drivers.

The winters were hard and life was not as comfortable as it is today. There was no doctor in Waumandee. There is a report<sup>5</sup> of someone who was quite skilled in medical tasks who performed as a veterinarian and also as medical doctor, without ever having been educated in these fields. The people of Waumandee were thankful to have someone like him for professional medical assistance was far away. People were used to working together. They helped each other with threshing, haying and other farm labor that needed many hands. They were always very social in this respect and it is often reported in old letters and articles<sup>6</sup> that this was one of the most appreciated things. There were various places where people gathered, worked together and exchanged the newest stories and gossip. One of these places was something like a bar or a tavern dug into a cave somewhere

4 The census records show where people came from, which households they lived in and their language and occupation, whereupon these statements are based.

5 Letters and articles are collected and filed at the Buffalo County Historical Society Alma, WI. They are filed under the search term 'Waumandee' but loosely kept and author information is generally omitted.

6 Ibid.

on the road between Waumandee and Fountain City. It was run by a shady, scruffy-bearded figure who sold the strongest home brewed moonshine to the tired farmers coming back from a long day hauling goods to the market. Another meeting place was the mill. During the process of grinding their crop the farmers would sit and chat with all their friends. New machinery swept these social gathering places away. Most farmers have now their own hammermills and do not have to haul their corn to a mill to have it ground. Modern machinery makes it possible for a farmer to make his own hay without any outside help. Most of the farm work can be done alone and more efficiently. But the ones who can remember the old times greatly regret this loss.

Further development of the town and the township has led to the closing of many of the old trades. Machines replaced horse and manpower. Thus a blacksmith was no longer needed. Cars and the new roads made cities like Winona or La Crosse easily accessible for shopping. Gradually, many of the small trades died out and the town grew smaller. On the other hand, new trades opened with customers from out of town, businesses that were not directly dependent on their location. The first pioneer background was soon lost. The Indians did not move through the valleys anymore and a new era with a new society was established. In some parts of Buffalo County the Indians were present for a long time yet. They always lived in friendly agreement among the new settlers and sometimes helped them on their farms or provided different services. Waumandee has remained a preferred farming area, continually attracting new settlers and first immigrants. As more and more fields had been plowed and cultivated, erosion became a problem. The big storms washed the good soil away to the lake and eventually down the Mississippi. The water in the lake rose too high and the dam broke which was made to support the mill. In time the lake slowly disappeared and a swamp has evolved.

Today, Waumandee attracts many people for hunting purposes and during the winter months people like to go snowmobiling. The attractions have changed and diminished. There are not enough jobs around and people move to bigger towns. Waumandee remains a farming society. Accordingly, the town will probably lose more of its inhabitants in years to come.

Waumandee history tells us that the town rose very quickly and slowly declined over the past one hundred years. Agriculturally, it has always been an attractive area and is still regarded as one of the most fertile areas in Buffalo County. Many trades have risen and disappeared due to drastic changes and development in farm machinery, cars, electricity, etc., changes that covered a larger area than just the one discussed. Still, first immigrants continue to arrive, even now at the turn of the millennium. The language spoken is English, though there are still people who speak another mother tongue. They may be first immigrants or they may be children who were born here but were taught the languages of their parents. There is one example of a Swiss family where the third generation is still capable of the original Swiss dialect in a flawless manner. The ethnic backgrounds are mostly German, Swiss-German, English, French and Polish, even though Polish has not always been there. Norwegians are scattered in the area but not really predominant as in other towns of the state.