

1973 - The Year of Revolving Door in Fairmont

It seems that Fairmont has always been a relatively stable community in terms of employment and employee longevity. However, 1973 appears to have been somewhat of an anomaly! A headline in the February 21, 1974, edition of the *Sentinel* read as follows: "For Fairmont area, '73 becomes the year of the revolving door." Frequent changes, particularly among the higher profile positions in the community, were comparatively rare. Nevertheless, in 1973, it seemed that people kept leaving, and new faces continued to emerge in these positions.

So, what were the changes, and who were the new faces? There were many, including a new school superintendent and a new welfare director. In addition, Fairmont had no city engineer, no county engineer, and no chamber of commerce manager. The changes that took place meant somewhat of a youth movement in many of those vacant positions.

The Fairmont Public Schools were faced with finding a new superintendent as their current Superintendent, L. H. Baumann, announced that he would retire in January of 1974. The district, with an enrollment at that time of nearly 2,500 students, hadn't faced the challenge of finding a new superintendent in nearly ten years. After interviewing candidates for the position, the board hired a young administrator named Dave Wettergren. He grew up in St. Peter, graduated from Gustavus Adolphus College, obtained a Master's Degree at the University of Minnesota, and had earned a doctorate. Wettergren was in his mid 30's when, he left his position as principal of Kellogg Junior High School in Rochester to come to Fairmont as their new superintendent.

The Chamber of Commerce manager at that time was Wayne Unze. He had come to Fairmont in 1968 as its first full-time Chamber Manager. During his five year tenure in Fairmont he launched the Festival of Lakes, in addition forty new businesses came were attracted, and Fairmont began studying downtown renewal. However, Unze decided to take a position as manager of a cable television operation in Las Vegas and left on August 1. The person hired to replace him on October 1st died suddenly of a heart attack on October 10th. Finally, after being without a Chamber Manager for nearly six months, Tom Kucera was hired for the position. He was young, at thirty years of age, and a very tall 6 foot 7 inch former basketball player who had held a similar position in Sioux Falls for three years prior to coming to Fairmont.

The county auditor's office went through what seemed like an evolution of change in a relatively short time. According to the previously mentioned *Sentinel* article, the events in the auditor's office unfolded something like this: The current auditor at that time, Clement Smith, announced his retirement at the end of July; Roger Wehner, deputy auditor, was promoted to auditor; two deputy auditors eventually resigned, and Wehner himself also resigned, which left the county with an auditor's office but no one to work there. The commissioners then asked a retired deputy auditor from Albert Lea, Mrs. Rachel Holt, to fill in during the interim. She subsequently became the acting auditor. Then, after a short time, the commissioners hired one of the original applicants for the job, Robert Katzenberger, to fill the position. Katzenberger brought a mood of stability

to the office and things seemed to settle down. He eventually rehired Wehner as his chief deputy auditor and named Mrs. Dennis Olson as deputy auditor. At that point, things seemed to be back to normal.

Other changes during that era involved a new Martin County welfare director, Robert Sullivan. He began work over six months after the resignation of Dennis Johnson who held the position before Sullivan.

In addition, Fairmont lost forty-six years of engineering experience when Wesley Youngerman and Arvel Klessig announced their retirements. Consequently, the city selected Gailen Narum, assistant engineer, to be acting city engineer. Eventually, the city hired Bob Witty of Mankato. According to the previously mentioned *Sentinel* article, he was formerly a sales engineer for North Star Concrete, and prior to that had been an associate engineer for Mankato as well as an engineer for the state highway department.

Other changes involved LeRoy Krahn replacing Oliver Anderson as county assessor. Anderson resigned to take a similar position in Red Wing. In addition, Gary Hamman was hired as Community Education Director to replace Tom McMullen who resigned to return to college.

That year, 1973, appears to have been a somewhat unstable time in terms of locally high profile positions for a community that prides itself in stability. However, it appears that the effects of this relative “instability” seemed to have been constructive for the community and county in the ensuing years, as many of the newly hired individuals remained on the job for many years and in turn had a positive impact on our area with their accomplishments.

For more information on the 1970's, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont or www.co.martin.mn.us/mchs.