

## Albert L. Ward – A Martin County Leader

A number of people have had a significant impact on the early development of Martin County. One of these individuals, Albert L. Ward, was perhaps one of the most influential in terms of his contributions to the development of both Fairmont and Martin County. Ward spent 67 years in Martin County, during which time he was a farmer, a banker, a lawyer, and a businessman, as well as serving in a number of public offices. He was obviously an entrepreneur well ahead of his time.

Ward left New York State in 1864 and eventually ended up in St. Paul. He was informed that the city of Owatonna had great prospects for the future and that it was a fine community. Mr. Ward decided to go there and see for himself. While at Owatonna, he met the brother of a schoolmate who told him about his visits to other parts of Minnesota. As a result of this information, Ward decided to head for southern Minnesota, and ended up in Winnebago City for the night. While there, he located the U. S. Land Office to see about some government land, and selected 160 acres that he desired as a homestead. He then inquired as to how to get to Fairmont. He was told by “Trapper Johnson” that a man came to Winnebago City a short time before with an ox team and would be heading back to Fairmont the next day.

Albert L. Ward met the individual with the ox team, and was provided transportation to his Fairmont. He arrived in Fairmont on April 28, 1864, at age twenty-two. He was in poor health, weighed less than 100 pounds, and had no measurable financial resources. However, he recognized the opportunities and potential of this area.

Upon arriving in Fairmont, his journey led him to a stockade where soldiers were watering their horses in Lake Sisseton. About all that made up Fairmont at that time was the fort. He was quite impressed by the beauty of the lake and the surrounding area, and was won over by the Sisseton sunset. He then found lodging at the Budd Hotel, which was operated by Mr. and Mrs. James Swearingen, located at the present intersection of Albion and Woodland Avenues.

Although his army service had contributed toward his deteriorating health, the money due him from his military service, \$85.00, provided him with the resources to pay the \$14.00 filing fee for his homestead, and also left him enough money to buy seed, build a house, and start farming. Thus, the

beginning of one of the most influential individuals in Martin County's history was gradually starting to take shape.

Ward's first house was made of rails banked with dirt and covered with hay. His second house was made of boards over studs with a board roof covered with sod, and a chimney of clay plastered over a wooden framework.

Having the character of a natural leader, Mr. Ward almost immediately assumed a position of prominence in the county. He was soon holding public offices in the area. Some of the positions he held were county attorney, county auditor, register of deeds, superintendent of schools, postmaster, state senator, and he was a member of the 1892 World's Fair Commission.

Ward's first business venture was merchandising with his brother, Rueben Ward. However, he soon decided to pursue banking and law, and left the merchandising business that he was involved in with his brother.

Perhaps Ward's favorite endeavor was farming. The May 29, 1931, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel* stated the following: "Mr. Ward rarely sold any of his thousands of acres of land, after an experience in 1895 or 1896." The experience Mr. Ward had is as follows: "Someone had bid him the then large price of \$30.00 an acre for 80 acres in Rolling Green. He accepted the offer and indicated to his friends the some 'darn fools' think land is worth \$30.00 an acre. A few weeks later, the same piece of land was resold for \$40.00 an acre. Ward sold no more land." He was also the largest landholder in Martin County, with between 6,000 and 7,000 acres. It was estimated that at one time he owned 17,380 acres, stretching from New York to Western Canada.

Mr. Ward sold his interest in his law firm in 1874 and concentrated his efforts on banking. He founded Martin County National Bank, which received its charter in 1875, and is now known as Profinium Financial. Albert Ward was described as "a bulwark to financial institutions of this county in 1893, the year of the panic," as stated in the May 29, 1931, edition of the *Fairmont Daily Sentinel*. The article further states that because he loaned other banks so much money, he became short of cash. This, however, wasn't a problem for Mr. Ward in that he was in such good standing with financial centers that he had no trouble procuring additional funds.

In addition, Ward was the president of the Jackson County State Bank in Lakefield, the Sherburn State Bank, and was involved in other banks as well. He was also the president two newspapers, the *Martin County Democrat* and *The Martin County Zeitung*, a German newspaper.

Ward was described as “a bundle of tireless energy.” He would rise at daybreak and direct the operation of his 1,000 acre farm, and be at the bank by 7:00 a.m. When he got things going at the bank, he would then oversee operations of his machinery warehouse. In his spare time, he would write editorials for his newspaper and practice law.

Albert L. Ward was born in Cattaraugus County, New York in 1842. In 1862 he enlisted in the Union Army. He married Charlotte Jennings, a native of New York, in 1873. They had four children. May, who became the wife of U. J. Pfiffner of Fairmont; DeForrest, who became a lawyer; Charlotte, and Lydia. Ward passed away on May 28, 1931, in Fairmont.

To find out more about Albert L. Ward, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.