

A. L. Ward's Account of Early Martin County

Albert L. Ward was perhaps one of the most influential people in Martin County's history 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. The following is a synopsis of his account of pioneer days in Martin County from the August 6, 1926 issue of the *Martin County Independent* and why he chose to leave New York State to come to Fairmont.

Ward characterized Fairmont in the early 1860s as being on the frontier with a line of forts, called stockades, from the north at Fort Ridgely running south to Fort Dodge, Iowa. Fairmont was the central point between them. These forts were generally made of logs and sod with a detachment of cavalry and infantry being stationed at each.

When Ward was a patient at the Soldier's Hospital in Elmira, New York, he became acquainted with some soldiers, including his Army Surgeon, that had been stationed along the frontier near Fairmont. The surgeon told him of Fairmont's beautiful location on the lakes, its healthful climate, and invigorating air. The surgeon also told Ward that he wouldn't live another year if he chose to stay in the New York climate.

Consequently, in 1863 Ward was given a furlough with permission to come to Minnesota and report to the commanding officer at Fort Snelling. Upon reaching St. Paul he was given a physical examination and told that he had better return to New York. However, after further discussion he was given a virtual release from the Army and allowed to continue as he had previously planned.

Ward made his way by boat from St. Paul to Red Wing. He then went on to Zumbrota, Faribault, Owatonna, and Albert Lea by stage. Next, he made his way from Albert Lea to Winnebago by taking a ride with a United States mail driver. This was the early spring and not a mile of railroad was in operation in the entire state of Minnesota.

While staying at Winnebago, he met a genuine frontiersman named "Trapper Johnson." Johnson provided Ward with the name of a person, Mr. Hayworth, that lived in Fairmont that was soon leaving Winnebago to go home. Taking the opportunity to accompany Hayworth and his oxen team, they left Winnebago heading for Fairmont. Ward described Fairmont at that time as being little more than a log fort with a few settlers scattered around the lakes living in log and sod houses. The south part of North Avenue, now Downtown Plaza, was mostly a slough. Ward went to the "Budd Hotel," located at the top of what is now the intersection of Albion Avenue and Woodland Avenue, on April 28, 1864.

Ward's experience in staying the night at the "Budd Hotel" was quite interesting. His description of the area was that the trees were budding into full leaf and the setting sun's reflection on the lake was beautiful. He enjoyed a hearty supper of fried pork, eggs, and corn mush along with coffee. He was told that if he wanted a bed he had better take one shortly as other travelers may be soon be arriving. He was shown a chamber serving as sleeping quarters that was accessible by a ladder. It was a full size room measuring fourteen by sixteen feet. He was told to pick out the bed of his choice. He only saw one, as the room was covered with quilts, which he took and went to bed early as he was tired from the twenty-four mile oxen team ride that day.

When he awoke the next morning he was surprised to see that the entire floor was covered with people that came in during the night and had gone to bed without waking him. He had the problem as to how to get dressed and how to get to the ladder without stepping on the people sleeping. However, they soon awakened and moved around so that he could dress and go to breakfast.

Ward then spent some time inspecting the local area looking for a place to stake a claim. He decided to homestead in the west half of section 9 in Fairmont Township.

According to Ward, the only building in the Fairmont town site at that time was Fort Fairmount. It was a log fort about fifty feet from the court house. Inside was a wooden building that, according to Ward, had been started for a courthouse but then occupied by the officers. It only had a roof, siding and floor. The horses had an enclosure along the west and the cook house and mess room was a little log building about twelve feet by twelve feet. Weather permitting, they ate and slept outdoors. In bad weather, they slept inside the wooden building.

At that time, according to Ward's account, the mail came once weekly, there wasn't a mile of established road between Fairmont and Winnebago, there were no bridges or culverts, no fences, no pastures, only one house between Fairmont and the Blue Earth River, and the cattle had bells and were trained to come home at night. He went on to say that the hospitality of the people on the prairie was exceptional. No one was ever refused lodging wherever they stopped for the night. Churches were the only places of amusement. The missionary societies supported three ministers in the county and people would travel a long distance to attend their meetings, not necessarily specifically for church attendance, but rather to have the opportunity to see and visit with their neighbors.

In summary, Albert L. Ward arrived in Fairmont in 1864 at the age of twenty-two. He was in poor health, he weighed less than 100 pounds, and he had no measurable wealth. However, he recognized the opportunity and potential of this area. He was a natural leader holding numerous public offices in the area including county attorney,

county auditor, register of deeds, superintendent of schools, postmaster, state senator, and he served as a member of the 1892 World's Fair Commission. Described as "a bundle of tireless energy," he was also a farmer, an attorney, a banker who founded the Martin County National Bank, and a newspaper man. He was obviously goal oriented, driven, and made his mark on the rich and colorful history of Martin County.

For more information on this topic, or to become a member, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

