Imogene

Imogene is a small community located approximately six miles east of Fairmont. Like all small towns in America, it has a history, a story to tell. Yet, many of us probably know very little about this tiny community. Although it's been in existence over 100 years, few of us are aware of what Imogene has added to the rich history of Martin County.

According to *Minnesota Place Names*, Imogene was named after the daughter of Cymbeline in one of Shakespeare's plays. It was first platted in 1899 under the name Cardona, however, residents were said to have disliked the Spanish name.[1]

On the other hand, there are also some other theories on how it was named. One is that it was named after a little girl named Imogene that had drowned in Imogene Lake. Another was that it was named by a young man with affection for a certain young lady named "Emogene," and yet another was that the name was changed from Cardona to Imogene as a result of the Northwestern Railway Line having another town named Cardona on its route.

Imogene's population was twenty-one in 1901, growing to ninety-one in 1939. However, its Centennial year of 2001, its population had dwindled back to the 1901 level of twenty-one.

Businesses in Imogene's early history included a saloon that eventually became a store, a stockyard, a water tower, an elevator, a train depot, a blacksmith shop, a barbershop, and a lumberyard. It was at one time a significant marketing location for grain and livestock, due to its proximity for livestock owners to easily drive their cattle and hogs to the railroad and ship them to St. Paul and Chicago markets. Other businesses in Imogene at one time included Blachowske Trucking, Schrock Fertilizer Plant, R & R Rentals, a blacksmith shop, a barbershop, and a post office.

In 1947, Roy and Ursula "Tootie" Loper opened Roy's Café. They sold gasoline, food, and grocery items in addition to lunches in the restaurant. The business expanded and was especially popular when Interstate 90 was being developed as the construction crews would stop for lunches and dinners. Tootie handled all the cooking and Roy entertained the customers with an abundance of card games that often lasted well into the night. The business was eventually renamed The Cozy Inn and remained a popular place for locals and those passing by as well.

The Imogene Elevator was Imogene's longest running business, being in existence for ninety-nine years. Although there is no recorded information, most sources indicate that the elevator was built in 1901. Its earliest record of ownership dates back to the Nye Schneider Fowler Company in 1903.

The elevator, considered very active and competitive, was sold to William Barrett in 1937 and was named the Imogene Elevator. After owning it for a short time, Barrett sold it to Michael J. Garry in 1939. Michael J. Garry grew up in Pleasant Prairie Township, graduating in 1898 from 8th grade in Fairmont at the age of 21. While attending school, Garry worked for Frank A. Day of the *Sentinel*. His job involved meeting all the trains and interviewing the people leaving from and arriving to Fairmont. He then brought this information back to Mr. Day for the newspaper.

Mr. Garry, who loaded the first box car of grain from Imogene, made many improvements and additions, including the erection of three large grain storage houses. He renamed it the Garry Elevator. Then, in 1950, Michael J. Garry sold the business to his son, Michael G. Garry. The Garry Elevator continued to prosper. Michael G. Garry owned the elevator for many years and he eventually sold it in 1987 to a group of buyers. It was then again renamed the Imogene Elevator and it conducted business until closing in 2000.

Perhaps one of the more interesting and newsworthy events to take place in Imogene happened in 1950. This involved a three year old boy that was trapped in a narrow ten foot deep earthen well for more than three hours before Fairmont Firemen and other volunteers were finally successful in digging him out. The boy and a friend were playing in the back yard of the boy's parent's home when they discovered a large box near one end of the garden. The youngsters, being inquisitive, pushed the box away revealing a hole approximately a foot wide. Then, the unthinkable happened, as one of the youngsters accidentally slipped and fell feet first into the hole. He was trapped and unable to free himself. Firemen were called at 12:30 p.m., arriving shortly thereafter. Oxygen was piped down to the youngster through a rubber hose, but the space was so narrow that there wasn't enough room for the hose to reach his head. By 2:30 p.m., digging had reached a depth of nine feet, parallel to the boy's head, in what was described as hard, concrete like earth. Slowly, water was beginning to seep through the dirt and there was a very real concern that the old well might collapse, thereby burying the youngster alive. Fortunately, by 2:45 p.m. he was finally pulled up through the murky abyss by rescuers, and then rushed by ambulance to the Fairmont Hospital where he was treated for shock and then released. The youngster had no serious injuries and eventually grew up to become Fairmont's City Administrator, Jim Zarling.

I would like to acknowledge the Imogene centennial book, "*A Century of Memories*," as well as Mike & Liz Garry, as the primary sources of information for this article. For more information on Imogene, visit the Pioneer Museum in Fairmont.

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[1] http://mnplaces.mnhs.org/upham/