

A HISTORY OF HERMANTOWN MINNESOTA (published in Hermantown Chalkboard)

BY ART FICHTNER (deceased 1974)

In 1867, August Kohlts, who happened to be my Grandfather, with his friend Pat Acker filed for homestead in Section 18, Township 50 N., Range 15 W.

Something should be said here about how townships originated. When the government surveyed certain areas and "opened" them for settlement, they established Government Townships each one six miles square, containing thirty-six sections of one square mile each. All townships numbered sections starting at the N. E. corner with #1 then west to Section 6, South to Section 7 then E. to Section 12 alongside of Section 1 continuing until it ended with Section 36 in the S. E. corner of the Town.

When these pioneers moved to their new homes they each had a St. Bernard dog that they hitched together on a home-made wagon and with the men packing what they could they followed a crooked trail through the woods on what is now known (though somewhat improved) as the Hermantown Road, and then cut a corner on the Five Corners Road to their property.

At this time the Government required a homestead applicant to live at least a part of each of five years, making some improvements each year, before they could "prove up" and become owner. I have been able to verify that the Kohlts family proved their property in 1872.

I have, with the help of other descendants of pioneers, and particularly Lawrence Rolla who worked for a number of years in the Auditor's Department in the County, tried to find when the Town was organized, but apparently the County has lost all records. We have been able to verify that the County received their first taxes from the Town of Herman in 1873. This would coincide with the homesteading in 1872, as the Government gives you the homestead, then starts charging you taxes on it.

We have, in the Town files, a Clerk's record book with the minutes of a Board meeting held on March 27, 1875. This board consisted of George Hull, Ernest Stresow and Olaf Gulbranson, Supervisors and Jacob Zimmerman, Clerk. It is noted that at this time Mr. Zimmerman owned the land on which the Hermantown Cemetery is located and that he donated one half acre to the Town on which the first school was built. He also donated one acre to the Town for cemetery purposes with the stipulation that any resident of the Town would be entitled to a free burial plot. Just when the first school was built we do not know, but this meeting in 1875 was held in the Zimmerman School, also known as school number 1. Several years later school no. 2 was built on the triangle between the Midway and Five Corners Roads. Records show that beginning with the annual meeting in 1892 all Town elections were held at school house no. 3 which was located on the LaVaque and Hermantown Roads.

Back to the meeting of 1875. Apparently there was a State law at this time that permitted Towns (at their option) to assess a poll tax on all male residents between 21 and 50 years of age this the board set at three days for 1875. This meant that each eligible man would have to spend three days labor on the Town roads to work out his poll tax. For the purpose of determining who was subject to this tax the Board held registration meetings on two consecutive days from 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. to register the 31 men. At this time the Town was divided into four Road Districts, each district having its own Overseer and the Board would divide this free labor together with tax money received in the R. and B. fund among the Overseers to spend on the roads. In 1875 and 1876 the R. and B. fund was mentioned only in mills but in 1877 it amounted to sixty-two dollars and was divided, \$15.00 to District 1 and two and \$16.00 to District 3 and 4.

If a man for some reason could not serve his allotted time he was required to pay into the Town Treasury \$1.50 for each day owed. This money was credited to the R. and B. fund and a man hired at \$1.50 per ten

hour day to serve in his stead. In 1893 the poll tax was reduced to two days, in 1900 to one day. It is unknown when it was abandoned.

Apparently Mr. Zimmerman was Town Clerk from the time of its organization until 1879 when he was defeated on a 21 - 10 vote. This must have been a hot election as it was not until 1892 that this number of voters was exceeded.

When the Town of Herman was organized it consisted of two Government townships - what is now the Town of Solway was then a part of the Town of Herman. I cannot find when the Towns were divided but on June 15, 1900 the two Town Boards met on the line between the Towns to decide which Town would have which half of the one mile Solway Road to maintain. They drew lots and Solway got the North half.

When the Government decided to open a certain area for development, surveyors were sent in to establish government townships. All section corners were marked with sandstone posts six inches by six inches and thirty inches long. They were set about twenty inches deep. To mark the location of a Town, the Government used township and range numbers. Townships counting South to North and range from East to West - thus Midway Town is 49 N., 15 W. - Herman is 50 N., 15 W. and Canosia is 51 N., 15 W. Likewise, Solway is 50 N., 16 W.

Much has been said about where the Town got its name. Unfortunately this cannot be proven, but we know from County records that it was referred to as the Town of Herman in 1873 when taxes were received from the Town. At this time there were very few people living in the Town. My Grandfather told me that the man who headed the survey crew in the Town was named August Herman and that the Town derived its name from him. After the pioneers got started, others followed shortly and by 1875 section 18 was pretty well settled with the Krause, Braun, Hollander and Wentzlaff families each establishing their homes on an eighty acre tract.

During this time another so-called road was opened from Fon-du-Lac along the general route of the present Midway Road all the way through Hermantown. Apparently this was the route used by the Gulbranson brothers when they homesteaded in section 32 in about 1871. Very shortly after this Adolph Bjourlin, John Brinteson and Christian Zebott moved into sections 30 and 31. In 1874 the three Wagner brothers and their two sisters, Mrs. Zakowitz and Mrs. Salzman settled around the LaVaque and Morris Thomas Roads. Some other pioneers that I date by what-time they showed up in Town politics were Gustaf Janzig, Treasurer in 1876 and Jacob Zimmerman, Clerk prior to 1875 on two adjoining eighties in Section 28 west of the Ugstad Road. Peter Hanson, Treasurer in 1879 and James Lindberg, Constable in 1877 on adjoining eighties in Section 25. Peter Hanson was the Grandfather of Clarence Engwall and James Lindberg built the timber house on the Carlson Greenhouse property - it is still there.

The Martins and Stebners moved to adjoining properties on the Maple Grove and Stebner Roads about 1877. I can find no record of anyone in the North side of the Town before 1891 when the Eriksens, Abrahamsons, Ugstads and Carlsons established homes there. The old Swan Lake Road, running in the general line of the Miller Trunk Road was built through to the Pike Lake area before 1890 but there were no north and south roads to connect the Town, so most of the development in that part of Town was on either side of the Swan Lake Road. The Town developed quite fast during the eighties, but it should be noted that few if any considered a home site less than 80 acres. So much for pioneers, though many more could be mentioned.

In the summer of 1892 the Duluth, Missabi and Northern Railroad was built through Hermantown and in October of that year the first-train load of ore was shipped through Hermantown to Proctor and on to

Duluth. The Railroad Company built a small depot at the Midway Road and with two passenger trains daily people could avail themselves of rail transportation to and from Duluth. At this time Adolph Bjorlin, one of our pioneers, built a small general store at the intersection of the Midway and Morris Thomas Roads, In 1893 the railroad got a mail contract and a post office was established and named Adolph in his honor. The railroad also built a spur, where the Standard Oil tanks now are and as the farmers cleared more land a great many cars of logs, ties and fence posts were loaded and shipped.

In the early years, Town Board meetings were held in the Clerk's home and in 1891 the Board decided to buy a desk that could be locked for the Clerk. The desk together with a swivel office chair was bought for \$23.50.

It was about 1892 when the timber barons came into Hermantown and bought all the white pine stumpage they could get. They offered fifty cents per square foot for what they accepted. They did not cut a tree under eighteen inches diameter at the stump and when the large trees were fallen they were cut into sixteen foot lengths up to twelve inches diameter, where it was left as tops. When the pick-up crew came along any tree that showed a hollow of several inches was passed by. The worst part of it was the great amount of young trees that were broken down in the process. If I may get a little personal here and say that my Dad had about fifty acres of virgin pine and he figures that if he sold, he would get about \$15.00 to \$18.00 and although money was very scarce, he figured that if he sold he would have no useable timber left to cut lumber for future building so he did not sell. In 1919 I cut about ninety M. feet of lumber off the place including one pine that measured 57 inches at the stump and 106 feet to a six inch top.

It was before 1880 that Oluf Gulbranson bought a tract of land on the S. W. corner of the intersection of Midway and St. Louis River Roads where he built a flour mill run by a mill wheel in the Midway River. While this was in the Town of Midway, he ground flour for many of the pioneers in Hermantown.

In 1885 the Board let a contract to Gustaf Janzig to fence the cemetery, 48 rods of fence consisting of 7 foot sound cedar posts with six inch tops set eight feet apart, two feet in the ground, four 1 x 4 boards with an extra board on top for the sum of sixty dollars.

In 1891 the Town Board received notice from the County Auditor that the Morris Thomas, Hermantown, Maple Grove, Midway and Swan Lake Roads were now completed and in good condition and that henceforth the Town would be responsible for their upkeep. It is worthy of notice that in 1891 the Clerk ordered legal blanks and stationery from the same Walter S. Booth that we are buying from at present.

In 1892 a large rendering plant was built on the N. W. corner of the Hermantown and Stebner Roads. Here all kinds of animal carcasses were processed and the fats were extracted, put into wooden vats and shipped to some soap factory. This business caused a continual argument with the Town Board about keeping the place in a reasonably sanitary condition until 1899, when the plant burned down. The boiler, the size of a small box-car was left there until it mysteriously disappeared during the shortage of steel during world war one. The business was reopened in a more modern way in Duluth and was the forerunner of the Elliott Packing Company.

In 1894 there were 114 voters registered in the Town for the general election and the Board ordered the Constable and an assistant constable to be on duty at the election. I note that at this election the number of votes cast and counted were - males 97, females none. I think this was a very good vote considering that there were only walking trails north to south across the Town to get to the voting place on the LaVaque and Hermantown Roads. At this time there were no LaVaque, Ugstad or Arrowhead Roads. The Lindahl Road was open from one-half mile north of the present Arrowhead to the Hermantown Road and the Stebner

Road was open from one-half mile north of the Maple Grove to the Hermantown Road. The Swan Lake Road was the main road between Duluth and the range towns and run generally along the line of the present Miller Trunk. It had several side roads leading north and south from it but none that went across the Town.

It was about 1896 when Mr. Soderholm built the first sawmill in Hermantown next to the railroad spur at Adolph. Here the farmers would bring their logs in the winter and they would be cut into lumber in the spring. In 1899 the Gulbransons built a combination lumber and shingle mill on their property at Adolph. Logs were brought in from neighboring townships as well as Hermantown and the mills would operate well into the summer before the piles were cleaned up.

The next big event that hit Hermantown was the land boom of 1897. This was probably triggered by talk of the seaway connecting Duluth with the East. Land sold for ridiculously high prices. One tract of 120 acres in section 22, not on any road, sold for \$250 an acre. This tract was bought by a man from New York and he frequently corresponded with my Uncle, whose farm adjoined, as to its possible sale value. The last time we heard from him was in 1936. When he was informed that the Government was buying land of comparable value for the Jackson Project for \$12.50 an acre he apparently lost interest. In 1942 it was sold for taxes. One man sold his forty acre farm and he and his wife took a one year trip to their native Norway. They came back and repurchased the farm with a nice cash balance left.

At this time some land shark from somewhere in the East by the name of Charles Bartlett hired surveyors to lay out a plat to be known as Lakeview Addition to Duluth. This plat was located on some very boggy land in the center of Section 18, about eight miles from a possible view of the lake and consisted of twenty acres divided into 100 lots, each 40 x 128 feet with sixty feet roadways. This plat was later abandoned and when Ernest Sehnke picked it up on tax title, he found on the abstract that some thirty transactions had been completed, some lots selling as high as \$250. A copy of this plat is to be found in the Township plat book at the Town Hall. It is of no value except as a memorial.

In 1902 Hermantown got its second railroad. At this time there was a large sawmill in Scanlon and a line known as the Brooks-Scanlon Line was built in a northeasterly direction from Scanlon, crossing the D.M. & N. near Adolph and then across the high school property, northerly to the Brinteson property on the LaVaque Road where a large construction camp was set up. There was no real terminus to this road as it was built for the harvesting of wood products. Logs were shipped to Scanlon and ties, posts etc. were switched over to the D. M. & N. at Adolph and from there could be shipped to any destination. I am sure that some of the Hermantown School Alumni will remember the Kee-A-Wah Trail which was a part of the old right-of-way.

I will have to back up a few years here and take note of the fact that the Board in 1893 bought one acre of land from Peter Fishan next to the school in Section 26 for a Town Hall site. This caused a lot of dissension in the Town as there were many that thought that this should have been decided at an annual meeting, when perhaps a site nearer the center of the Town could have been selected. Apparently this did not daunt the Board very much, because after things quieted down and went along for a few years, they held a special Board meeting on May 14, 1900 to (from the minutes) draw plans and specifications for a new Town Hall. Plans were drawn and the Clerk was ordered to post notices on proper places in the Town calling for bids to be opened and acted on May 31, 1900. On May 31 (again from the minutes) the Clerk was asked to open the bids. Only one bid was received and that was for \$987.60. Said bid was not accepted as they did not know if they would receive any money for same and that said Board would meet on the 5th of June to decide the same (end of minutes). The Board met on the fifth of June, but I find no reference to the subject. In 1902, at the annual meeting the voters resolved to levy \$1,000. for Town Hall purposes, but no where does it show what happened to the levy.

In 1903 the Town got its first carrier mail service. This was a star route where the carrier delivered mail as a side line. He picked up the mail at the Post Office in the afternoon and served the Swan Lake Road on the way to Pike Lake where he operated a hotel - then served the Maple Grove Road on his way back the next forenoon. In 1905 we got rural mail delivery. Route 1 served the Swan Lake and Maple Grove Roads and Route 2 served Morris Thomas and Hermantown Roads. This was strictly main road service and clusters of mail boxes were found at road intersections.

In 1898 the school at Maple Grove and Stebner Roads was replaced by a new one-room school. The contract for this building was let to Adrian Westberg and his son Rudolph for the sum of \$696.

After the turn of the century the Town kept growing and rooms were added to the schools at Adolph, Five Corners and Washington at LaVaque and Hermantown Roads. In 1904 a new Jackson school was built at the LaVaque and Swan Lake Roads. It was about 1912 that the school district began building the new two-room schools with living quarters upstairs for the teachers. The Lincoln School at Adolph and the Washington and Jackson Schools were all replaced before 1917. When it came to replacing the Washington School the Board found the one-half acre tract too small for the new larger building, so they entered into a trade agreement with the Town to exchange the smaller site including the building for the one acre Town Hall site - now Hermantown had a Town Hall. Apparently everyone was happy, including the man who had sold both sites. He informed the Boards that if they would examine their deeds, they would find that these tracts were conveyed for specific purposes and when not so used they would revert back to him. He agreed, however, to quit-claim the sites for fifty dollars each and this is how it was settled.

After this Town Hall was acquired, the Town started levying taxes for Town Hall purposes, usually \$300. This was mostly spent for repairs and the fund built slowly. It was about this time that the Town petitioned the County Board to be transferred from the fifth commissioner district to the third. The third district was entirely in Duluth while the fifth took in part of West Duluth and all the way to Floodwood and the Board felt that we would have better representation in the smaller district. After much discussion it was decided that it could not be done, as Hermantown joins Carlton County in the southwest corner and this would cut the fifth district in two parts. It was finally decided to leave the west half in the fifth district as a connecting link and put the east half into the third district.

In 1907 the Hermantown Ice Company was started. At this time electric refrigeration was not yet in use and places that needed cold storage had to pack their own ice. The Village of Proctor had no ice delivery service so there were a number of business places there as well as a large number of dairies in and around Hermantown, as far as Piedmont Heights that were potential customers. The ice was cut from the lake off the LaVaque Road near Proctor. This business kept a crew of six teams and about twenty men busy for about five weeks in the winter. As electric refrigeration took over and more customers were lost the business died a natural death in 1922.

In 1908 Mork Brothers, who operated two meat markets in Duluth, built a slaughter house near the intersection of the Haines and Hermantown Roads where they processed meat for their markets and also for some individuals in the neighborhood. This business lasted about ten years and was forced to discontinue for lack of sanitation.

In 1912; St. Louis County bought all the land in section one and one-half of section two for a work farm. This was to be a place where minor offenders would serve time in some useful occupation. A saw mill and planning mill were installed and the idea was to clear up some land and put it under cultivation and with lumber harvested from the tract, it would be sold in forty acre tracts for potential farms and the men would

go on to develop another tract. This was soon forgotten and modern barns were built, pure bred cattle bought, a dairy superintendent hired and a dairy in direct competition with local dairymen was put in operation. Likewise a large poultry barn was built with a superintendent in charge and the highest grade of day-old chicks bought and when the cockerels were sold at the fryer stage they returned less than what was paid for the day-olds. The pullets were kept for egg production and again the eggs were put on the market in direct competition with the local poultry men. Needless to say, the farm was heavily subsidized by the tax-payers.

In 1932 the County sold the land to the City of Duluth for an airport and the farm was moved to the Stone property at Saginaw.

In 1925 someone got the idea that the Town was not developing fast enough so they bought eighty acres in section 34 (E 1/2 of SE 1/4) and platted Proctor Lake View Acres. This plat includes a small lake and on the south shore a tract of about three acres is dedicated to Public Park.

In 1918 the Town was hit by the big forest fire which swept some thirty seven townships including Cloquet and Moose Lake. Fourteen of our citizens were found dead in Hermantown but a considerable number who died as a direct result of the fire but survived long enough to be taken to Duluth hospitals were not recorded in our Town records. There were few buildings left in the Town but the school district came out very well with all three of the comparatively new two-room schools and the old one-room Garfield School escaping the fire. The McKinley School at Five Corners burned, but the church across the road did not and school was conducted in that for one year until the new one at Arrowhead and Midway was built. The Town Hall and the Woodmen Hall (which was the center of all activity in the Town at the time) escaped the fire.

The Town rebuilt quite rapidly with some help from the Red Cross. Fire relief buildings were given to those who lost their homes. This consisted of material for a 12 x 16' building for a family of four or less and 12 x 20' for larger families. Large community barns were built to house the livestock saved from the fire.

The Town of Herman received two portable sawmills to harvest their fire-killed timber. These were put under the control of the Jackson and Garfield Community Clubs.

As the Town grew its people became more conscious of the need for public facilities and the Town Hall levies were increased to \$3,000 annually.

Our next important project was to imitate our city cousins and have electric light and power. When the Minnesota Power and Light Company was approached on this they just about laughed us out of town. They finally put a line up the Miller Trunk and the patrons had to finance the line and pay somewhere in excess of six dollars monthly minimum. When the R.E.A. started to build a line from Kettle River through Esko into Midway Town, Minnesota Power and Light Company suddenly offered to build lines anywhere in Hermantown that they could get three customers to the mile and to furnish service for \$3.50 per month minimum. This would give the patron 35 kw. Thereafter the rate was stepped down. The Power Company was in such a hurry to beat the Co-op line into Hermantown that they paid men \$4.00 per hole for digging holes 18" in diameter and four feet deep. Needless to say with times as they were in the mid-thirties, plenty of men were available.

About fire prevention and control. In about 1920 the State Forest Ranger would come into the various Towns and appoint Fire Wardens, usually four men in each Town, these men were equipped with a pack-pump, shovel, axe and one twelve quart bucket. These Wardens were authorized to hire help at forty cents an hour in an emergency, to be paid by the State. While this was of no help in building fires, it did in several instances prevent running fires from crossing roads and thus confined them to small areas.

In 1942 the Legislature passed a law that all land platted in rural areas must contain at least one acre. Shortly thereafter a developer platted a forty acre tract in section 36 into lots 33 feet wide and 1320 feet long, thus complying with the one acre minimum. I know of no one that built on one of these lots. In most cases homes were built on two lots. Even with this 66 foot frontage and no fire protection, this area was a fire hazard.

In 1945 an attempt was made to pass our own building and zoning ordinance. A pre-election poll showed that there was much opposition to such an ordinance - "No one is going to tell me what I'm allowed to build on my farm" - so a compromise was reached and when the ordinance was voted on, it excluded all properties of ten acres or more. The ordinance was adopted. Now no homes could be built on lots with less than 100 foot frontage on an established road and a building permit costing one dollar was required. In 1947 the Ordinance was amended to include property.

In 1948 Gordon Velander, Fritz Dietzmann and others came to a Town Board meeting with suggestions for a Volunteer Fire Department. They were ridiculed and told, "You might as well spit on a fire." In 1950 another group came to the Board (which had changed several members in the meantime), with the same suggestions and were received in a more receptive mood. At the next annual meeting a ten mill levy was voted in the fire fund and men dedicated to the cause formed a Volunteer Fire Department. They operated for some time before monies from the tax levy to buy equipment became available. In the meantime, when they responded to a call, they would call on the Canosia Department to help out with their truck. The Town paid Canosia twenty-five dollars for each such call.

In 1951, the order for the first truck was placed, with delivery in the later part of the year. The taxpayers in the Town voted a limit levy of ten mills each year which, with the taxable valuation at that time produced about two thousand dollars a year. As the valuation increased the levy brought more money into the fund and more equipment was purchased and Hermantown soon had a very efficient Fire Department.

The Industrial Act passed by Congress in 1933 appropriated \$25,000,000 for the construction of subsistence homesteads. This act was the beginning of many Homestead Projects throughout the United States.

The Duluth Chamber of Commerce, upon receipt of a letter from the Subsistence Homesteads Division, became interested in locating such a project in this area. During the next two years much work was done by the Agricultural Committee of the Chamber. Some of the ups and downs can be explained by the fact that originally the project called for fifty-two homesteads, each having five or ten acres of land. The homesteader was to build his own house, barn, etc. under the supervision of the Construction Division. The units were to be provided with one pig, one cow, and thirty-five chickens. The cost of a pig was estimated at \$3.50, a cow was priced at \$35.00 and thirty-five chickens at \$3.00. According to the drawn schedules, the homesteader would do the necessary brushing for grazing, plant enough vegetables for his own use, with the surplus to be sold and the profit applied to his note. He would, of course, need to buy no milk, butter or eggs as his own stock would furnish this.

In 1934 Mr. Earl Farnum was appointed project manager. About this time the Government lost interest in the project and it was more or less abandoned until late 1936, when the Government began to acquire land and decided to build eighty-four complete homes and sell them to qualified applicants on a contract basis. In March 1937 the first family moved in and the homes were occupied as fast as they became available.

The addition of a large number of children to our community overtaxed the capacity of our schools and in

July 1937, plans were made for a larger central school to replace the five small ones. In September 1938, the new ten room school with fourteen teachers was dedicated and with Mr. Kenneth Kellett as Superintendent, we now had one central school for all Hermantown children.

In 1938 the Government gave the administration building, which was used during the construction period, to the project for a store. This was opened on a cooperative basis with money from shares previously subscribed in hopes of starting such a business. In 1944 the store did a business of \$75,000 net sales.

In 1945 shares were again solicited and money raised to build a modern locker plant. This plant had facilities for slaughtering and processing all kinds of meat and freezing and storing fruits and vegetables. There were 650 individual lockers and the plant did a thriving business for a number of years, then like the store, they died the natural death of all cooperatives in this community.

The Hermantown Credit Union was formed April 1, 1943, and has been operating successfully ever since.

In 1955 the voters decided to build a combination Fire Hall and Town Hall. There is nothing historical about this. What I consider historical is that this building was paid for in cash with a substantial balance left in the Town Hall fund. In 1952 a law was passed, making all Townships with a population of 1200 or more living on platted property eligible for an apportionment of the state cigarette tax. This amounted to about two dollars per capita annually. This was, by vote of the people, put into a future fire hall fund and when fire hall no. 2 was built it was paid for out of this money and did not cost the taxpayers a cent. After that, this money was voted into the park fund and as this apportionment now amounts to about \$13,000 annually; it is financing all recreational activities.

There are many more things that could be said about Hermantown's past and I suggest that if anyone can contribute anything further, especially about schools, this report would be revised or altered.

End of original article from the "Chalkboard" published by the Hermantown School system.

Addendum: In 1953 the Air force built an airbase in Duluth/Hermantown township – this along with the construction of 105 family housing units on base in 1957, brought 120 new students into the school system. By 1959 the existing school had been added on to five times and a new elementary school built.

In 1974 the adjoining town of Duluth announced its intention to annex two-thirds of Hermantown Township. Duluth wanted to keep its population over 100,000 and needed Hermantown to achieve its goal of being a "First Class City." Public hearings, yard signs, and action by citizens resulted in 1975 on December 31st. Hermantown Township would become the City of Hermantown.

Note, the original article appears to be from the mid to late 50's Volume 7, Issue 53 of the Hermantown School system newsletter, and was in a collection of stuff I got from my mother when she passed away. My uncle was a teacher/coach at Hermantown High School and shared it with my parents (his brother) because of their growing up on the Stebner Road in Hermantown Township.