

Makers of Dakota County

Pioneers Who Redeemed the Wilderness

ROBERT O'NEILL.

If seniority rights were exercised in Dakota county, the family of William O'Neill, on the Jefferson highway, would have more to say about this thing and that than most of us.

William O'Neill is a son of Robert O'Neill who was among the first real settlers of Minnesota. Soon after the treaty of 1851 was effected by Governor Ramsey at Fort Snelling, the settlers began to pour into Dakota county, the first settlement being made at Mendota.

Indian farmers, missionaries, fur traders, and government troops had inhabited the county for many years, the first, Father Louis Hennepin, having visited the banks of the Minnesota river at what is now Mendota, as early as 1680. He was a captive of the Indians. Actual pioneering, however, did not start until after the signing of the treaty with the Sioux Indians.

Among the first of those who settled in the county with the intent of making this their permanent home were the Baillys and Feltons, of Hastings; Sylvester Cook and William Thompson, West St. Paul; William Finch and Harris Thompson, Inver Grove; J. W. Brown and Robert O'Neill, Egan town; Joseph Auge and the LeClair brothers, Philbert and Francis, Mendota, and a number of others.

Still Occupy Pioneer Home.

Just how well O'Neill succeeded in making this region the permanent home for his family is shown by the fact that part of his original claim made early in 1852, is still being occupied by the O'Neills. O'Neill occupied a prominent position among his townsmen, and in the county as well. He was elected to the first state legislature of 1857-8, and served as one of the first representatives elected from the county. He was chairman of the board of county commissioners from 1853 to 1858, when the office was discontinued for a time. Early records and letters which O'Neill left behind divulge many interesting facts about the early political history of Egan town.

Egan was formerly part of Mendota, established by the county commissioners in 1858. A meeting was held and a new town was formed and called Montgomery. This, however, proved unsatisfactory and the action was repealed at the same meeting.

The town of Egan was detached with its present limits by a special act of the state legislature during

the winter of 1861 and was named after Patrick Eagan.

The first town meeting was held in 1860 at the home of Michael Comer. Robert O'Neill was chosen moderator and Michael Comer clerk. The following officers were elected: Patrick Eagan, James Collier, Robert O'Neill, supervisors; Michael Comer, clerk; Thomas Fannan, assessor; William Diffley, treasurer; Michael Kirby, William Harper, justice of the peace; Patrick Mooney, Louis Sausoucy, constable; Patrick Eagan, Anthony Devitt, and Michael Caim, road overseers; O'Neill served as chairman of the board during four terms between 1862 and 1879.

First Teacher in Egan.

Mrs. O'Neill, formerly Miss Catherine Forbes was the first school ma'am in Egan town. In the fall of 1860, O'Neill enlarged his home to permit education for the young generation. There being no teacher available, Mrs. O'Neill cut herself a willow stick and started a few classes on the road to higher education. After a month, however, Miss Elizabeth McDermott was secured as teacher, and she remained for a number of years.

During the following years O'Neill remodeled an old building for a school house, which was used for a time, until a log house was built on the farm now owned by Otto Motz. This house was burned in 1866, and a frame house was built in its place.

The locality was not convenient and the house was moved to the August Goetzke farm. This was burned in 1881 and another was built at a cost of \$600 with patent seats and a seating capacity of 40 scholars.

This was called the finest school building in the town, and the townsmen pointed to it with pride. The sixth school building of District 11 was built several years ago.

Held Office 65 Years.

For a period of over 65 years, the school treasurer of the district was a Mr. O'Neill. Upon the death of Robert O'Neill who held the office at the time of organization, his son, William, held the same until a year ago.

Mr. and Mrs. Robert O'Neill were the parents of 12 children of whom only William is living today. Catherine, who was the third child in the family, was the wife of James King, frequently referred to as the founder of South St. Paul. He was one of the founders of the live stock industry in the live stock

city. Three sons, Frank, Charles, and James, still reside in South St. Paul, and are engaged in live stock establishments of their own.

William O'Neill lives on 80 acres of the original homestead. His wife was formerly Frances Jane Silk, daughter of John Silk who came here in 1857. Mrs. O'Neill is the only one of the 10 children in the family who remained in Dakota county. "We used to live on about the same spot where the K. S. T. P. radio station now stands at Westcott," Mrs. O'Neill explained to the writer a few weeks ago.

"There was a lot of broadcasting around that place long before radio was ever even thought of. I was a baby at that time," she explained further.

Mr. and Mrs. O'Neill are the parents of three children, all of whom are living at home, William Jr. is operating a filling station on the Jefferson Highway a block from his home, while Robert is running the farm. Mary has one of the two votes necessary to run affairs in the housekeeping.

Egan town is good enough for the O'Neills, and it would take a strong earthquake to shake them out of Dakota county, they say.