

Our Common County: Roscommon, U.S.A.

Roscommon, Michigan was formed in 1840 and given the Indian (Algonquian) name Mikenauke County. In 1843, State Representative Charles O'Malley from Roscommon, Ireland initiated action to have the county renamed Roscommon. It was a paradise of big lakes, dense forests and rivers brimming with fish.

In 1872 the railway reached Roscommon County. The lumber barons who moved in shipped the lumber taken from the forests around St. Helen and Houghton Lake through the railroad terminal known as Roscommon Station.

A Detroit lawyer, George Robinson, saw the future potential of Roscommon Station and bought tracts of land around the Station in the 1870's. He built a home there and sold lots to settlers and pioneers. Many of his buyers came north with the idea that Roscommon was a rich agricultural area. Robinson did little to change this public misconception.

By 1875 the County was organized with the county seat granted to the Village of Roscommon, although no meeting facilities were yet built there. County meetings were therefore held at the bigger centre of Houghton Lake further south. Houghton Lake became a strong contender for the county seat as did the other county towns of Higgins, St. Helen, Prudenville and Denton. All had good selling points, but Roscommon was considered more strategic, having a post office and railway station, though a small population. It was therefore chosen county seat by the Board of Supervisors. The matter did not rest there. The other townships made better representation to the Board of Supervisors who put the issue to a vote. Roscommon won by a small margin. That too was contended until the State Legislature stepped in and declared Roscommon official county seat. After that Roscommon began to develop rapidly.

The harvesting of white pine moved closer to Roscommon Village. Grayling

fishermen brought tourism to the area. The Courthouse was built. Also four hotels and an opera house were constructed, plus twenty-one saloons where the lumberjacks brawled and spent their earnings.

In the 1880's two newspapers thrived: THE ROSCOMMON NEWS and THE ROSCOMMON COUNTY PIONEER. Roscommon was now the centre of political life, and it looked like the Village had a bright future ahead.

It was obvious to many people however that the lumber boom would not last forever. The editor of THE ROSCOMMON NEWS defended the agricultural potential of the area. A canning factory was proposed to process all the crops that would be harvested when the lumber men moved on. The editor contended that a finer potato could not be grown than those of Roscommon farmers. At the same time a group of people got funds together to drill an oil well. By 1886 it was apparent to many that the lumber industry was almost dead. Roscommon was in for leaner times.

The population of the Village had dropped by forty per cent before the turn of the century. One of the newspapers, THE ROSCOMMON COUNTY PIONEER, folded. Merchants closed up and went away. The twenty-one saloons dwindled to three.

But in 1890 a man named Albert Sly came on the scene. He restarted the defunct newspaper and the political rivalry it involved, calling his paper THE DEMOCRAT. Four years later however Sly mysteriously disappeared from Roscommon and was never heard of again.

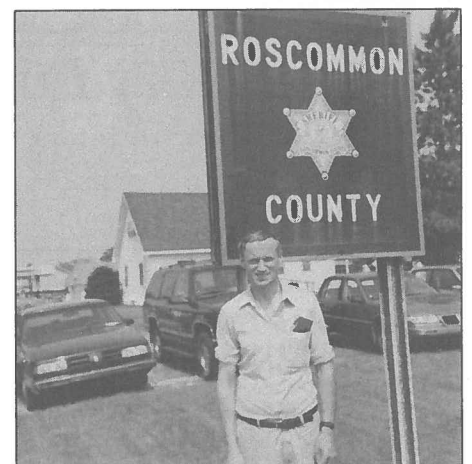
The people of Roscommon now looked toward petroleum or agriculture to save their town. Standard Oil Company began exploration. Excitement

ran high for the opening of a new industry to boost the local economy. The excitement, unfortunately, was short lived. Nothing promising was found and Standard Oil withdrew its operations from Roscommon County, once again dashing the hopes of a courageous people.

The lumber era was gone. Oil exploration had failed. Only one hope remained: agriculture. It was an idea pushed for years by Robert Ward the founder and editor of THE ROSCOMMON NEWS.

As time passed and crops failed, it was apparent that the sandy soil was unsuitable for agriculture. Ward instead blamed the failures on inept farmers and the slander of hunters and woodsmen, saying that everything was being done to retard the advancement of Roscommon. He reiterated the need for a grist mill and canning factory. His editorials were a reflection of the mood of a defeated community.

The population dropped further in 1906. Then unexpectedly hope was revived when Benjamin Helen bought all of George Robinson's remaining land. His enthusiasm for Roscommon brought new hope to the remaining residents. The Roscommon State Bank was chartered.



*Patrick Owens at the Sheriff's Sign,
Roscommon, Michigan.*

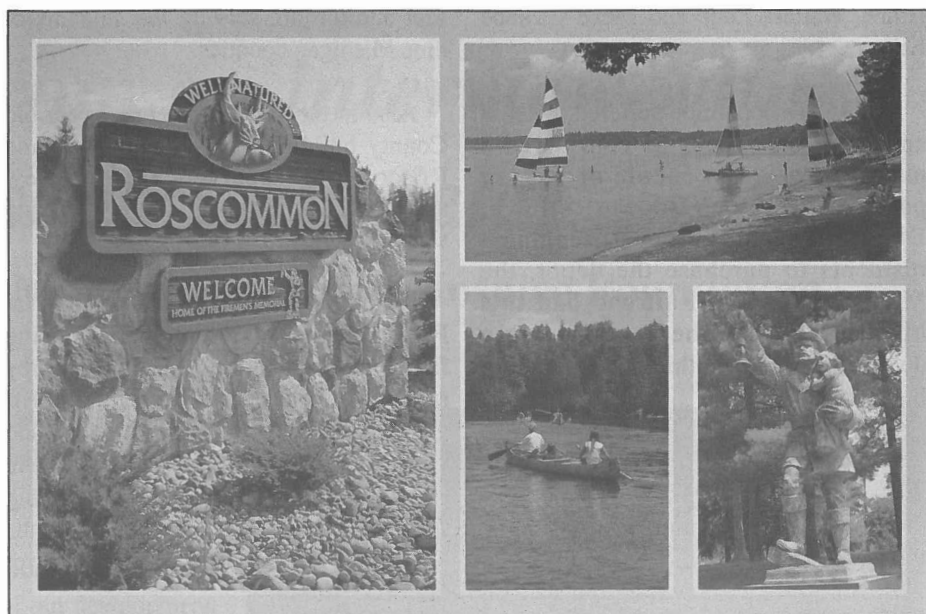
In 1907 the Mattheson brothers established THE ROSCOMMON HERALD. A Chicago real estate baron offered to pay the train fare of anyone who travelled to Roscommon and bought land from him, which he claimed was good agricultural land. Many arrived in Roscommon in 1907 ready to make a living on agriculture, only to discover to their disappointment the unproductive sandy soil.

Then from Bay City a group formed the Development Bureau. They invited all the counties of Northeastern Michigan to become involved in developing the farming potential of their region. Professors gave lectures and held meetings, working closely with the Michigan Agricultural College. The effort, far from hindering unscrupulous land sales in Roscommon, actually stimulated it further. The Bureau finally realised that crops could not be raised from Roscommon soil. Next they decided to make it a grazing county.

In 1917 the railroad brought in Holstein cattle, pigs and sheep. Again realtors used the occasion to sell more land, only to discover that the soil of Roscommon was not rich enough to supply the necessary feed even for grazing herds. Many cattle and sheep starved and the reputation of Roscommon fell to an all time low. By 1920 Roscommon was down to 357 residents and was struggling for its mere existence. Other towns along the same railway line such as Geels and Moore were deserted shambles. Cheney was close to the same. Extinction stared Roscommon in the face. At this point I can only offer a prophetic inspiration:

If one can brave the blackest night of year,
A dawn of hope will somehow reappear.

What appeared to be the death of a Village was in fact the turning point in the rebirth of Roscommon, and this is how it happened. As the 1920's progressed, transportation became much more efficient. People in the big cities began to travel more and farther afield. As the automobile became more popular tourism increased everywhere. The Michigan Central Railroad offered special rates from Bay City to Roscommon. Highways were improved to accommodate the increase in traffic. The Roscommon Herald-News promoted



*"Welcome to Well Nutured Roscommon, Home of the Firemen's Memorial".
"Well Nutured Roscommon" the Welcome sign reads at entrance to the town.*

the idea of building more tourist facilities, campgrounds, better roads, more advertising and a yearly tourist guide book.

Then in 1934 a National Trust magazine did a feature on vacations in northeast Michigan, mentioning Roscommon because of its railway link to the south and the excellent trout fishing on the local Au Sable River. From about that time on the tourist industry in Roscommon began to blossom. But the people of Roscommon went a step further: they fraternized with the tourists. They organised baseball games with them. The local merchants stocked and sold exactly what the tourists wanted. The Roscommon Golf Club was organised. The Village came through the depression very well considering conditions elsewhere.

In 1937 the Department of Conservation Region II was located in Roscommon. The office had five administrators supervising 140 officers in the northern thirty-four counties of the Lower Peninsula.

In that same year Roy deWitt set up the Pioneer Log Cabin Co. It was the first quasi-manufacturing company in the history of the Village. At first they built only summer homes in the surrounding area, but expanded from there. In 1950 the Catholic Church in Roscommon contracted the company to erect St. Michael's Church, a beautiful structure and a major project. The company gave employment to many local residents, erecting many fine buildings in the county.

Later, the Annual Trout Festival was organized and thrived for many years until a copy version in neighbouring Kalkaska County on the same weekend drew away participants. Canoe trips on the Au Sable River were by now a regular tourist attraction drawing people in from the population areas of the south.

A woman from Detroit named Margurite Gahagan came to Roscommon in 1953 and established THE NORTH WOODS CALL, a popular paper of outdoor news, having subscribers in thirty-eight States and in foreign countries. The wide circulation of her paper printed in Roscommon, weekly extolled the beauty and attractions of Northern Michigan and helped bring more vacationers into the region, so that by the 1960's tourism and its spin off industries were the main fuel of Roscommon's economy.

It should be noted that by this time a manufacturing industry had come to Roscommon with the setting up of the Eckerly Tool and Manufacturing Company in 1945 which provided jobs for fifteen people. Around that time also the Roscommon Manufacturing Company was founded which made farm machinery and employed ten people. Then later, a branch of Hancock Industries opened in the Village. A canoe livery was set up on the south branch of the Au Sable River in 1947. It was located a half mile east of Roscommon. The beautiful canoe trip down the River attracted many tourists and the establishment of one canoe livery after another, namely, the Hiawatha, Paddle

Brave, Watters Edge and Mead's Canoe Livery.

In 1959 Roscommon suffered, what in any other era would be considered a major setback, the ending of railway passenger service to the Village. Disregarding bids from Roscommon residents to purchase the depot, the Michigan Central Railroad had this historic link to the town's origin demolished with nothing left standing but the memories.

Winter tourism also began to increase with the arrival on weekends of thousands of skiers and snowmobilers, though Roscommon did not tolerate the disruptive effect snowmobiling had on wildlife and the natural state of the beautiful wooded area. Thus by-laws were passed restricting its use.

The vitality of Roscommon got a substantial boost in 1966 with the establishment of the Kirtland Community College, the effort of many years of hard work by the Boards of Education of four adjacent counties: Oscoda, Crawford, Ogemaw and Roscommon. The 160 acre campus, ten miles north of the Village, has five modern buildings with an 840

seat auditorium, serving the students of nine Michigan counties.

Also in the 1960's the eighty year old County buildings were demolished and Roscommon received a brand new administration building, County jail and sheriff's office.

In 1980 the Firemen's Memorial Festival came to Roscommon, drawing firefighters from all over Michigan, nearby states and Canada. The four day event has a parade, firefighting demonstrations and various competitions held at the Roscommon County Fairgrounds. A big firemen's memorial statue stands near the Village with the beautiful firemen's prayer inscribed beneath:

When I am called to duty Lord
Wherever flames may rage,
Give me the strength to save some life
Whatever be its age...

A large segment of the early settlers of Roscommon were Irish Catholics with names like McKane, McGee, O'Brien and Lyons. The first steps to organising a Catholic Church began in the 1880's at the nearby lumber camps.

Protestants worshipped at the First Congregational church or the Central

Methodist Church which were both established in the Village in 1880. Later on, a group of Swedes arrived and built the Messiah Luthern Church. The first Catholic Church was built in 1885. A resident priest was not appointed until 1945. Four years later Father Grill got permission to build a new church. It was completed in one year by a local contractor, the Pioneer Log Cabin Company. It is cruciform in shape and constructed of California redwood logs with a basement hall beneath the church.

Brave Roscommon in its first generation was hammered repeatedly almost to extinction, but grew back stronger, retaining its right to the county seat. Today the Village has 155 businesses, one for each year of its existence, providing employment for one thousand residents of various backgrounds who live together in harmony and peace.

We of Roscommon, Ireland, recalling our own long and rocky history will identify and rapport wholeheartedly with our beloved brothers and sisters of that remote Roscommon in the splendid country of lakes and forests of Upper Michigan.

Patrick Owens

