

TOURISM, TRAVELS & TALES

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The Rise and Fall of Many Small Iowa Towns—Madylon Perley



Today, as you look at the towns in all of Iowa's 99 counties, you might think about their rise and whether they thrived or, because of outside forces or disasters like fires or floods, struggled and did not live up to the potential their founders dreamed of.

Sometimes, it was economic forces that changed the outcome for them. It might have been the changes caused by changes in the transportation system—from horses, wagons, and buggies to the railroads with their superior speed of transportation. The coming of the railroads and the routes chosen for them often determined the future of small towns like River Sioux, for example, which gradually diminished in size to become unincorporated as a town when the railroad tracks went nearer Little Sioux.



Little Sioux, a thriving town in its earlier days, featured an opera house, a livery stable, mercantile stores, and several churches as well as a newspaper. When Dale Alton retired and closed his hardware store in 1973, he had operated it for nearly fifty years in a scenic community just five miles west of some of the most rugged hill country in Iowa. He stocked hardware, appliances, and, for a time, groceries. He also operated a TV repair shop in his garage after he had sold the store. He reported that there had been 30 businesses and about 650 residents in Little Sioux when he was young. Only Kenneth Gee's drugstore and Marin Evers's service station remained in business in town when Dale Alton retired.

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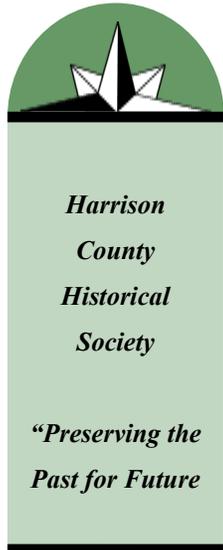
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Some small towns like Little Sioux became what was termed “bedroom towns,” with residents who lived in town, but worked in other, larger towns. They often shopped for their needs in the towns in which they worked or towns along their driving routes to those towns. Interstate roads provided smooth transportation and quicker commuting times (except in bad weather, of course), so residents of small towns like this often were only at home in town overnight and on weekends. Sometimes, attractions of larger towns like celebrations or entertainment like circuses, plays, musical events, and museums, zoos, and attractions even took them out of town on the weekends.

Just as automobiles and better roads replaced railroad travel for many, there are signs on the horizon of other forces of change. There have been discussions of having drones deliver some items to people. Some prefer to order items online—and then to have UPS or FedEx deliver them, often with pictures of the front porches or steps upon which the ordered items have been placed, so you can check to see if your package is at your home or across the street, for example. Many urban dwellers prefer to order online and pick up their grocery orders at a time they designate; they shop without ever entering the store. Even towns much smaller than Sioux City, Iowa, or Omaha Nebraska, their two closest major population centers offer grocery items delivered to your door; residents of Harrison County now can order by phone or online and have pharmaceutical items delivered to their doors by mail.



Just as the original settlers in Harrison County towns knew their present and dreamed of the future expansion of their towns, settlers/residents in Harrison County towns work toward a solid future of their towns, encouraging new businesses and supporting the established them as well as encouraging tourism in Harrison County. It's interesting to look back at Harrison County's past as well as to try to peer forward into its future.



Whether you were a farmer in Iowa's early days awakened by the dawn's early light or a rooster's crow or a farmer's wife only too aware that daybreak meant a hungry husband and perhaps children, perhaps, since they started helping on the farm very early in life. There might also be a hired man to feed as well. That meant that the farmer's wife started her day at "full throttle," so to speak. If your day started with outside chores, you were probably looking forward to a hearty breakfast that included fried potatoes and even a piece of pie, with homemade bread to accompany the fried eggs that were part of the day's first meal. A full stomach was needed the whole family who was then ready to take on the rest of the day's work. A long time after the Iowa pioneer days, my father told tales about some of the "hired hands, who often appeared at his family's farm which was relatively near a railroad. They were asking for a job after they had "ridden the rails" by positioning themselves in (if they were lucky) or under railroad cars and get a free ride—until the railroad personnel noticed them and they were sent packing. Those men were always hungry, especially at breakfast, it seemed. One of my dad's favorite stories involved the look on my grandmother's face when she passed the platter of fried goose eggs around the table and the first hired man just tilted the platter and sent the whole batch of eggs onto his plate. She apparently looked startled, grabbed the platter, and turned back to the stove to fry another dozen eggs, so the rest of those seated at the table could get something to eat with their toast.

As an early settler, you might have brought your own yeast starter on the trip to your new Iowa farmstead, carefully tending the yeast to keep it ready to do its part in making the endless loaves of bread that would feed your family. If you were very lucky, you might have a milk cow or two, so you or your children could churn the milk to make that rich butter to top the bread you baked with that yeast. One of my friends remembered that he would run home from school or the field if he knew that churning the milk was on the day's list of jobs to do. It seemed to take forever for the churn's dasher (powered by human arms) to turn the crank that turned the milk into butter—or until you could skim the cream off the top, but he didn't mind, because he loved to slather the cream onto slices of homemade bread. He recommended the heels (ends of the loaves) as the best base for this snack. A thrifty and wise farm wife would have headed for the thickets near the rivers or creeks where berries might be found growing in the spring; those berries could be dried for later use or, if finances allowed purchasing sugar, those berries would appear in pies, jams, and jellies. Otherwise, you had to be alert for signs of bees to follow them to their "bee trees" where the honey was stored. The flour for pie crust, bread, and cookies was purchased in bulk (with the patterned flower sacks often becoming material for new clothes or kitchen towels) or ground from the family's own corn for an economical way to get the cornmeal that became "mush" for breakfast or part of baked or fried "johnnycakes" for any meal of the day. Food was the focus in every season of the year. One tale of pioneer life mentioned that a housewife who planned ahead put her garden area and a tree she hoped would provide shade in the future close enough to the house to make it practical to water them with any house waste water that wasn't cloudy with homemade lye soap. People brought seeds carefully saved from previous lives in the East to their new Iowa homes; they traded seeds with neighbors and might even have bought some at the nearest mercantile store. If you have a cherished plant given you by a friend as a cutting or a rooted plant start, you understand the pleasure that seeing that plant thrive and spread to give your diet a little more variety or just to add a note of color to your homestead's house. Summer meant gathering garden produce and drying it until the invention of the canning jars; those meant lots of hard work in the already hot weather, but both color and variety to the winter's meals. Harvested carrots were sometimes stored in boxes of sand to keep them fresh, while onions might hang in bags from hooks on the walls. Fall apples were stored in barrels in root cellars or in cooler parts of the homes. One apple eater reported that they were always told to eat the soft apples first, so they wouldn't spoil and claimed that he often went a whole winter without eating a crisp apple. There were few trips to the mercantile store for grocery staples. Money was saved for the basics and time and close attention to meal preparation were the norm. No one had ever dreamed of today's personal shoppers who would transfer the items from your online grocery list into sacks they would deposit in your car at a time you'd decided on. What would those early Iowa cooks have given for bread that came in plastic bags, neatly fastened with a wire twist—or frozen or fresh vegetables in or out of season? What will the next generation think when it looks back on what are now the current norms of food gathering and food preparation? Your guess could just be an accurate prediction of what the norm in that future will be.

Watch This—Madylon Perley

History tells us that the first wristwatch was first introduced in the 1570's, but described as an "arm watch." The Guinness Book of World Records credits Phatek Phillip for the first wristwatch; he designed it in 1868 for the Countess Koscoicz of Hungary. There are records of other bracelet-style watches pre-dating his model, including one ordered in 1810, but not delivered until 1812. It was designed for the Queen of Naples. Wristwatches were primarily worn by women since they were prone to damage by the elements. Wristwatches were considered more jewelry than functional items. At least a century went by before the general public adopted it and men wore them at all. Men used pocket watches, since they were not as delicate and less prone to the shocks that a timepiece on your wrist would be likely to endure.

Ironically, what really drove the design and adaptation of the wristwatch was war. Accurate timekeeping on the battlefield was essential but a pocket watch, however accurate, was somewhat unwieldy.

As warfare styles shifted from two armies facing off on a large field (Napoleonic style) to that of the modern artillery-heavy and/or guerilla warfare, so did the watch and its style. The first design for military watches featured a watch mounted on a wrist strap. It had a thick metal grill protecting the watch's face. That watch style came into use in 1880. The style wasn't popular with men in general and not considered as reliable, since it was subject to more jostling and possible accuracy problems.

However, during World War I, the wristwatch evolved into a nearly universal necessity, because of the trench warfare. When you were leading men out of the relative safety of the trench for the no man's land between the trenches with very possible death facing you, you had your gun in one hand and a whistle in the other.

You needed a watch that wasn't handheld was small and portable. Many watchmaking companies began to manufacture watches specifically for the military market. Wristwatches also began to take on a symbolic role as well since watches taken from the bodies of fallen soldiers buried at the front were returned to the family as evidence of the soldier's death, allowing the family to mourn.

After the war, the wristwatch remained on men's arms, due to the fact that it was actually used by aviators and explorers.

Today's watch can track your heart rate and perform other functions never dreamed of by earlier watchmakers.

Just as the pocket watch sometimes became a family heirloom, passed down to other generations, the wristwatch also sometimes became a family heirloom and reminder of a past generation.



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The Harrison County Historical Society works to ensure local lore and heritage are preserved for future generations. This endeavor is of the utmost important to protect historical items, buildings, first-account recollections of the past, and many other significant endeavors.

Preserving history is like reading a real map; to understand where you are going, you need to know where you've been. The Historical Society hopes you will consider joining them on their journey. The membership year begins July first each year; new members are, of course, gladly welcomed at any time during the year.

Life members and those choosing the gold, silver, or bronze levels never need to pay membership dues. With your membership comes a quarterly newsletter and other benefits; please see below for the list of benefits at each donor level.

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Annual Member (yearly fee) \$10

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