

Carroll marks 125th anniversary as county seat

(Published in The Daily Times Herald in April 1993)

By BUTCH HEMAN

Times Herald Staff Writer

One hundred twenty-five years ago Wednesday, a small caravan of horse-drawn wagons inched 10 miles across the western Iowa prairie under cover of darkness on a daring escape.

Outlaws running from the long arm of the law? No, but they had “stolen” property and didn't want to be found, especially by the residents of the town they were fleeing.

The story of how Carroll became the county seat is one of the stranger and lesser-known chapters in Carroll County's long history.

Secretary Marie Hackett of the Carroll County Historical Society gave the following account of how the county seat was moved.

Carroll County's government was formed along the banks of the Middle Raccoon River just south of Carrollton in August 1855. Of the estimated 200 people living in the county at the time, only 28 men were eligible to vote.

Once the new county officials were elected, a county seat had to be named. Two judges appointed by the then Sixth Judicial District designated Carrollton as the county seat.

Work on a new courthouse started in 1858. The contract was let to Nelson D. Moore, who died a year later with the courthouse unfinished. The first story had been constructed, but no plastering or painting had been done.

Moore's estate was paid \$818 for the work done. The second story and remaining interior work was completed by L&J Hampton in 1865. The total cost for the Carrollton courthouse was \$3,000.

But with a new railroad built through Carroll City, the newest town in and geographical center of the county, “Westerners” doubted manufactured goods could be brought in easily from the east.

In August 1867, a petition was presented to the Board of Supervisors calling for a relocation of the county seat to Carroll City. Sixty-seven people signed the document.

An election was called to decide the fate of the county seat. Carrollton residents were shocked to hear that 88 residents voted for moving the county seat to Carroll City while only 30 opposed the move.

Glidden, located seven miles east of Carroll and also on the railroad line, could easily have been selected as a new county seat. Many residents wanted the county seat moved there, as Glidden was a

prominent town at the time while Carroll City was a few shacks surrounded by a wide expanse of prairie.

Seven Carrollton citizens fought back, presenting a petition to the Board of Supervisors that stated the election was illegal, that voters did not have sufficient legal notice and that Carroll City was not recorded as a legal town or city and therefore could not be county seat.

“These, gentlemen, are only a part of the wrongs perpetrated on us by the untimely removal of this county seat,” the petition read. “We, your petitioners, would beg of you to consider well before acting. Do not bow to railroad interest. We know they are mighty, but Carroll Countiens are more mighty than they.”

The supervisors refused to act on the petition, and the county records and courthouse furniture were moved to the new county seat on the following day, April 28, 1868.

Some local historians say the records were transported at night to avoid a confrontation by Carrollton residents who didn't want the county seat to leave.

“I don't think there's any question they were moved at night, because the feelings in Carrollton and Glidden were so high” Hackett commented. “The people Glidden thought they deserved it because their town was bigger than Carroll, where the only building in town was a tool shed.”

Carrollton was a bustling community at the time, complete with a stagecoach stop, a post office, two general stores, a drug store, a blacksmith, a hotel, a doctor's office, two churches and even broom and cheese factories, according to the 1906 Carroll County Atlas.

“But they had no railroad in Carrollton and that's what doomed them,” Hackett said.

The first courthouse in Carroll City was a two-story, four-room Chicago and Great North Western Railroad Land Company supply depot located off Main Street on the south side of the railroad tracks and owned by William Gilley. Gilley was paid \$50 a month for rent. The courthouse was at that location for 16 months.

After one defeat, a bond issue to construct a permanent courthouse was approved in April 1869. It was a wooden structure located in the area of the present courthouse. But the building was destroyed by fire in 1886 under what some people called suspicious circumstances. A newspaper account of the incident said an “incendiary” was found on the premises.

Another courthouse was constructed where the current courthouse parking lot sits in December 1887. By the early 1960, the building was showing signs of age. After two bond issues failed, a \$750,000 bond issue to build the current courthouse was approved, with construction starting June 1, 1964, and ending in the fall of 1965.