

This Central MN Town Was Once Named El Dorado

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photo courtesy of Daniel Photography in Edina

Clearwater is a town in northwestern Wright County with a population of 1,922. It can be accessed on Interstate 94 and Highway 24. The town is 12 miles southeast of St. Cloud, 16 miles northwest of Monticello and 16 miles north of Annandale. To help tell the story of Clearwater I was joined by local historian Elaine Paumen.

Three early settlers, Simon Stevens, Horace Webster and John Farwell founded Clearwater in 1855. The land was previously claimed in 1854 by Asa White and Alonzo Boyington and it was named El Dorado. Stevens, Webster and Farwell won the debate with money over White and Boyington. The area was named El Dorado for just 1 year before it was renamed Clearwater. The early settlers came from New England and Canada.



photo courtesy of Daniel Photography in Edina

In 1856 the group constructed a swing cable ferry across the Mississippi River which was the only connection to Sherburne County for the locals. The swing ferry was suspended in 1930 when the bridge was built over the Mississippi. The bridge was built with discarded bridge parts from the Anoka bridge. The swing ferry returned when the bridge washed out in 1943. The ferry ran from April - November when conditions allowed. The last Stickney ferry route across the Mississippi was in 1952. Lloyd Laughton was an operator and he was also the first village historian.

Clearwater built their 2nd bridge over the Mississippi in 1958 on Highway 240. The opening ceremony consisted of Maude Porter cutting the ribbon which began a tradition of women handling that honor. The 3rd bridge was completed in 2017 on Highway 24 and Paumen cut the ceremonial ribbon and was the first driven across the river in an antique car.



photo courtesy of Daniel Photography of Edina

Paumen explained many people don't know the original downtown Clearwater was along the river. She says many blacksmiths, merchants, banks, livery stables, elevators and more existed in the early days in the downtown area. Whittings Brothers built a mercantile building in 1857 on the corner of Oak Street and Main. The first doctors in Clearwater were Dr. Jared Wheelock (1855), Dr. Ira Edmunds (1885), Dr. Gilbert Tollington (1909) and Dr. E.M. Kingsburg (1920). Paumen says her mother helped Dr. Kingsburg deliver babies. She also says they didn't have another doctor come to town again until 1983 when Dr. Kurt Lemke graduated from medical school and located there. He continued his practice until 2010. Dr. Scott Rahm came to Clearwater in 2000. CentraCare took over St. Cloud Medical Group Clinics in October 2016. Northway Dental built the Professional building in 1983.

The first hotel in Clearwater was built in 1855 at the meeting of the two rivers. It was called the Oyster House. Other hotels built in Clearwater include the Francis Morrison House in 1857, a fire destroyed it in 1887. In Clearwater/Scott Hotel on Main and Maple was built in 1904 and burned down in 1924. The Hollywood Motel was built in 1955 along Highway 152 and was moved to Highway 24 when Interstate 94 moved through town. In 1987 a Budget Inn came to town and it is presently a Home Town Inn.



photo - Jay Caldwell

Clearwater has a long history of churches in the community. The First Congregational Church in Clearwater starting in 1859 and was dedicated in 1861. The Catholic Church was built in 1904 with financial help from Patrick Quinn. It suffered a fire in 1943, reopened and stayed in that location until 2003. A parish center was built on Huber Avenue and masses were held Sundays in 1993 until a adjoining new church was completed in October 2024. The Methodist Episcopal Church was organized and built in 1858. It has since been named the United Methodist Church. It is currently on the 400 block of Main Street on its original site.

Clearwater had a 2-story high school built on Bluff Avenue in 1871 and was remodeled in 1906. Elain Paumen's grandfather, Jay Miller, was their long time janitor between 1930s to 1950s. The last graduating class in Clearwater was in 1932. Paumen says from 1938-1966 the school their consisted of grades 1-8. Thereafter the school consisted of grades 1-6 until the school closed in 1968. Students then rode a bus to Clearview in Clear Lake and went to high school at Tech in St. Cloud or they went to Annandale.

The first railroad came to Clearwater in 1866 on the east side of the Mississippi in Sherburne County. St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway did not come to Clearwater until 1881. It became Great Northern in 1890. The trains transported passengers, mail and

supplies. Paumen says almost all the Great Northern boxcars were constructed in the Waite Park Car shops between 1891 and 1986. After 103 years on January 24, 1984 the last train went through Clearwater. The vacated property was sold in 1991 to the adjacent landowners.



photo - Jay Caldwell

T.O. Plastics is a big employer in Clearwater. Ted Ingersoll and Oren Beech originally rented the bottom of the Masonic Hall in November 1955. In 1975 T.O. was loaned \$700,000 industrial development bonds by the city to finance a new building. Their products included planting trays for greenhouses and plastic plates. In 2001 Otter Tail Corporation in Fargo bought the business.



photo courtesy of Daniel Photography of Edina

Clearwater organized a volunteer fire department in 1948. Paumen explains fires were always a threat to businesses. Clearwater had many cases where buildings burned down. Clearwater Fire and Rescue ended in 2022 with 373 calls for service, the highest volume they ever had.



photo - Jay Caldwell

The original Masonic Hall was destroyed and a new one was built in 1888 on the same block. The Masons and Eastern Star organization met on the upper level. The lower level was often rented out. Paumen says it is probably the oldest building in Clearwater and the Masons still meet upstairs.

Clearwater had several newspaper over the years. The Messenger (1878), Clearwater Review (1884), Clearwater Advance (1885). The last was the Clearwater Tribune in 1987. Phillips drug store was the first with a female pharmacist, Jennie Phillips. It was located on Main & Maple Streets.

The first library was built in Clearwater in the late 1950s in the Village Hall on Main Street. It consisted of donated books that were carefully scrutinized by the Recreation Group Women. The 2nd and 3rd library was located in the shopping mall on top of the hill in Clearwater.



photo - Jay Caldwell

The Clearwater Shopping Center opened in 1979 by Don Lemke. One of the first tenants was Coborn's. Coborn's built their own Superstore in 2005. Other businesses in the center included a hardware store, furniture store, drug store, apparel store, florist and restaurants. The property was in foreclosure until the Clearwater Truck Center moved into the property in 2011.

Clearwater had 2 banks in the community. The two were First State Bank and Clearwater State Bank. Both closed in 1940 when the depression hit. The Clearwater Telephone company began operations in 1903. In 1921 it was Clear Valley Telephone Company with James Cooley as owner and manager. At that time in the 1930s - 1950s there was more prosperity in nearby Clear Lake.



photo - Jay Caldwell

Clearwater Travel Plaza opened in 1976. Don & Rose Nelson had a small restaurant/Union Gas in Cable on Highway 10 and decided to move to Clearwater to be on Interstate 94. Paumen says 3 generations of Nelson were involved with its ownership and operation.