

“Ottawa Was Born to Difficult Times”

By John Mark Lambertson

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One and a quarter centuries ago, the streets of Ottawa were first measured and staked, and a handful of families pitched their tents on the site, giving birth to a town.

It was a beautiful, strategically important location. Cradled in the broad Marais des Cygnes River valley, on a sweep of rolling prairie, the site was also centrally located in young Franklin County. The town was platted along a river and at a point where several trails converged to cross a natural ford. The river would later prove to be both a friend and foe.

It was a difficult time to build a new city, as men, money and materials were tied up fighting a devastating civil war. The town, therefore, had a somewhat slow and humble start.

We know only bits and pieces of those early months—a period in which the infant town took its first unsteady steps and the town fathers chartered its future course. But the decisions that were made then were important ones, and still affect everyone who lives in or visits Ottawa today.

In an effort to reconstruct Ottawa’s first year, the following “diary” was written. Although fictional, it is based on facts—real people, incidents and scenes.

Our “diarist” is a bright girl of 12 who observes her new world not only with the enthusiasm and curiosity of youth, but also with the reflection and maturity of someone several years older. These are merely excerpts from her “diary,” which can paint for us a clearer picture of Ottawa’s birth.

March 25, 1864—After purchasing some goods in Lawrence, we headed south of town for the last leg of the trip to our new home. There are still some burned ruins in L. from Quantril’s horrible raid last summer. At 4 o’clock we topped a high hill and could look down across the prairies to the Mary de Zene (sic) valley for the first time. Papa pointed out a few tents at the town site as we got closer. Crossing the ford we were greeted by some of Papa’s friends who helped us set up our tent.

Several trails cross here going in all directions. There are only two buildings that I can see—a trading post and another log cabin. Papa introduced me to Mr. “Ottaway” Jones who owns the store. He is an Indian but seems more like a king—very tall and regal, and wears nice clothes.

He seems very kind, too, and has a college education. Mr. and Mrs. Joe King are also educated Ottawa Indians and run Mr. Jones’ store. They live in the cabin by the spring.

March 26—Papa took Bertie and me exploring this afternoon. On the north side of the river north of the big grove of trees, we met Mr. Wilson who is the chief of the Ottawas. He is also educated and has a log school near his cabin along the creek. Mrs. Filson, a white woman, has been teaching Indian children there.

March 27—Mr. Richmond and Mr. Wolcott have finished surveying the streets. Mr. R. told Papa today we would have to move our tent. Seems we are pitched somewhere in the middle of “Hickory Street.” Fancy that! There’s nothing around us but trampled prairie grass and some of Mr. R.’s stakes.

March 28—We moved the tent about 20 feet today, over onto a “block”. Mama frets that the whole town is too close to the river.

March 31—Mr. Richmond put up his house today near the river and Walnut Street. Freddie Richmond is boasting how it's the first frame house in town. Papa said not to mind, ours would be up soon enough.

April 1—It snowed last night and Freddie Richmond's house doesn't have a roof on it yet. Hah! At last we were dry in our tent.

April 3—We are starting to get mail here this week. Mr. Jones has closed out the post office at his place on Ottawa Creek and Mr. Evens is the new postmaster here.

April 11—The old hotel at Minneola has been torn down and some of the lumber is being made into a barn behind where Ottawa's hotel will be built at Second and Main.

April 14—Mrs. Kalloch watched the baby while Bertie and I helped Papa and Mama move our things into the house. Mama says it's good to have a roof overhead again.

April 17—One of the Ottawas, Mr. Wind, showed Papa and me a huge old log on the prairie at the south end of town where Seventh Street has been surveyed. He said it had been washed clear up there in the great flood of 1844. I had to promise not to tell Mama.

April 20—Mr. Lathrop is putting up a fine two-storied building on Main Street at Second. It was first built as the capital building of Kansas up at Minneola, but M. lost out to Topeka. Mr. L. had it taken apart to rebuild here.

April 23—The building that was put up at Second and Walnut as a stable for the future hotel has already been turned into a hotel itself. Some folks joke that it is the pony Hotel. They are having trouble getting the hotel built and visitors are needing a place to stay. Mr. Bunting is going to operate it and he calls it the Ottawa House.

April 28—There is much excitement here. An alarm has come down to be on the lookout for Missouri bushwhackers.

April 29—All is quiet, but my mind is too excited to concentrate (sic) on anything but the Missourians.

May 2—A windy spring. Mr. Holt has opened a dry goods store in the north end of Mr. Lathrop's new building. There are offices and Mr. Hutchinson the Indian agent lives in the rest of the downstairs. The big upstairs room is called Lathrop's Hall.

May 6—Mrs. Kesting told Mama the Baptists are getting together to organize a church—the first in Ottawa. It's funny though because they plan to call it the Second Baptist Church! The Indian church east of Ottawa is going to move to town and I guess they are the First Baptists.

May 8—Ottawa is beginning to look like one big lumberyard on the prairie. Besides lumber brought in from Lawrence, Kansas City and the Peoria mill, about 40 wagonloads have come from buildings town down at Minneola. Mr. Whetstone is building a mill here too.

May 19—Emily and I went walking at the south end of town this evening but Jiggs scared up a family of skunks along the ravine. Papa laughed when I told him how fast we ran!

“Ottawa Grew With History”

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May 25—I spent the day with Papa looking at land near the “island” west of town. When we got back, Mama had on her black dress and had been crying. A letter came from home with word Uncle Robert had been killed in the fighting around Spotsylvania, Va. He was just 19 years old and Bertie's namesake.

May 27, 1864—Rain and more rain. Mama is uneasy about the river as it is nearly out of its banks. Mr. Holt's dry goods shipment from Kansas City is stranded on the north side, the wagon unable to cross the ford.

June 1—Ottawa must be getting to be an important place, for a state convention is being held here. The Baptists of Kansas met today. Papa and I joined them in the afternoon out on the hill south of town where they laid the cornerstone of the college. Mr. Ottaway Jones put the stone in place.

June 2—Mr. Whetstone's son, Francis, died from the effects of his accident. I went with Papa and Mama to the burial this afternoon in the new cemetery west of town. He was only 13.

June 9—Jiggs must have been down along the run south of us again for he came home smelling of skunk. Bertie had to take him to the river for a scrubbing.

June 13—Hot. The town company has set aside a grove of seven acres of the biggest trees on the north side of the river for a park. Their shade is heavenly!

June 26—Sabbath. We went to the Baptist meeting in Lathrop's Hall and heard Rev. Kalloch preach. He had a big church back East. I think I could listen to him for hours. Mama calls him spellbinding, but Papa thinks he's too friendly with the ladies.

July 4—Rain dampened the celebration today but it still was a gay day. Mr. Sears gave a fine oration, the Declaration of Independence was read, and Mama and the other ladies provided refreshments.

July 13—Emily, Nettie and I picked wild strawberries this afternoon along Main Street south of where the stores are going up.

July 22—More rumors of bushwhackers have the town stirred up.

July 23—The alarm that raiders were coming from Missouri emptied Baldwin City as people lit out for safer places. Bertie thinks they are all just a bunch of cowards.

July 24—No Missourians.

July 31—Hot. The chief of the Ottawas, Mr. Wilson is back from his trip to the city of Washington.

Aug. 12—Ottawa is now the official county seat of Franklin County. We won easily in the balloting on the first, and today Mr. Sheldon and Sheriff Robbins brought all of the county records up from Ohio City in a wagon. This is such a new county where were only a couple of boxes.

Aug. 16—Some more horses have been stolen south of here. Papa and the other men in town are pretty agitated.

Aug. 17—They caught one of the horse thieves (sic) near Ohio City and hung him, although Papa said Mr. Elder tried to stop them and give the fellow a trial. Papa thinks it will cool off some of the other thieves.

Aug. 20—Mrs. Smith has had her new baby. Mama went over and helped Dr. Lockwood. They have named him Franklin Ottawa Smith.

Aug. 21—The Smith baby has been given a lot of Main Street by the Town Company because he was the first baby born in our town. Papa was joshing Mr. Smith that his new son is Ottawa's youngest speculator.

Aug. 30—Now that Ottawa is the county seat, some folks are moving up here from Ohio City.

Sept. 3—Mama let Bertie and I watch the Sac and Fox Indians race their ponies on Main Street this afternoon. They race (bareback) nearly every Saturday, with a group cheering them on.

Sept. 7—More rumors of raiders...

Sept. 13—Mr. Jones' store, which was here long before the town was laid out, is going to be moved. It blocks one of the new alleys.

Sept. 24—Wet. The current is too swift for the stage from Lawrence to ford the river. Ottawa passengers are having to cross in log canoes.

Sept. 27—Emily, Nettie and I picked armloads of beautiful sunflowers for our mothers. They grow very tall out towards the hill where the college will be some day. There is still no progress on the building.

Oct. 2—More war rumors. The latest is that a Rebel army is headed to Kansas with 15,000 men.

Oct. 8—The rumors are apparently true this time and everyone is worried. They have been turning the Ottawa House into a fortress by stockpiling guns and cutting out portholes to fire out of.

Oct. 10—Excitement is building. People trying to escape from the fighting are in town and there are not enough rooms for them. General Curtis has proclaimed martial law in Kansas. Papa has gone and Mama and I buried our valuables in the garden after dark.

Oct. 11—All is in turmoil here. General Price and the Rebs have entered Paola, only 20 miles away. Mama, Bertie, baby Claude and I are here in the Ottawa House tonight with the other women and children. Papa and the other men have gone to protect the town. I'm frightened, but doing my best to help keep the little ones from crying.

Oct. 12—Price is marching north so we are home again, but I still jump at sudden noises! There's been another day of fighting up near Westport. Still no word from Papa.

Oct. 26—A rider came into town this morning relaying word that the Rebs have been driven from Kansas and several generals captured. Hurrah! Better than that, Papa is all right and on his way home.

“Gradually the Town Becomes a Home”

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Nov. 1, 1864—Some families are still coming into town to escape the war in Missouri and farther south. A few colored families are here too that had been slaves.

Nov. 10—Papa was whistling when he came home at noon today. Word has come from Lawrence that President Lincoln has been re-elected.

Nov. 27—We went to hear Rev. Kalloch preach in the hall again today. He is much better than Mr. Hutchinson.

Nov. 30—My 13th birthday and my present was too big to wrap—a set of stylish hoops to wear under my Sunday dress!

Dec. 11—A cold Sabbath day, but we joined the Baptists down at the river and watched as two of the Ottawa Indians were baptized. Mrs. Ottaway Jones is a “reverend” now.

Dec. 25—Our first Christmas in our new home. For dinner we had prairie chicken with oyster dressing, the oysters shipped in special from Kansas City.

Jan. 4, 1865—Bertie and I went to the first day of school today, upstairs in Mr. Lathrop's building, but goodness what confusion! 120 pupils registered! Poor Miss Ward is the only teacher and tried to keep order. There are only four tables and several benches, so many of the children had to stand or sit on the floor.

Jan. 19—After school, some of us went to the frog pond at Fourth and Hickory and slid on the ice.

Jan. 30—Lottie Myers started today as an assistant teacher to help Miss Ward. Until today she was one of the students.

Feb. 2—The town is buzzing with word that a man was murdered somewhere west of Ohio City.

Feb. 4—After school, Emily and I followed the boys over to Sheriff Robbin's to see if we could get a glimpse of his prisoner, the Quapaw Indian they say killed Mr. Hastings on the Ohio City-Humbolt trail. But Mama found out and made me come home.

Feb. 28—The bond issue for the new schoolhouse passed today, but it will be next year before it is completed. It's hard to study with so many children crowded into Lathrop Hall.

March 2—Two more families arrive on the stage today. Mr. Hutchinson says Ottawa is growing slowly but surely and will really boom once the war is over.

March 5—A town well has been dug and drilled as a better water supply, but its water tastes terrible! Papa says it is brackish because they hit some coal.

March 11—Most of the trees on back of the river are being taken down and sawed up in the mill. Except for the park, it is looking a bit stumpy and bare.

March 16—I can hear more and more hammers at work. The warmer weather has gotten the carpenters out. Ottawa has nearly 50 houses now, many of them painted white. From the hills north of town they sparkle like jewels on the prairie.

March 24—More reports that Gen. Grant is closing in on Richmond. Hurrah!

March 25—Papa talked at supper how we arrived at Ottawa a year ago today. His business hasn't grown very fast and the hotel and college still haven't been built, but that will all change once the war is over. Rev. Kalloch is planning to start a newspaper here this year to promote the town, and also is talking of getting a bridge over the river and bringing a railroad through here. He is also getting the college rechartered next month. Papa says Ottawa is bound to become an important place.

The End.