

## **Early History of International Falls**

The Rainy River, flowing westward from Rainy Lake to Lake of the Woods for its entire length, forms the boundary between the state of Minnesota and the Canadian province of Ontario. International Falls, located 2 ½ miles west of Rainy Lake, the largest of the border chain, is relatively young as cities go, yet very old. As a hustling, modern community, it dates back little more than 100 years, but as a geographical location, it was known to explorers long before the Revolutionary War. It is situated on the "Voyageurs Highway," the water and wilderness route which Jacques DeNoyon, Pierre Gaultier, LaVerendre, and many other rugged adventurers traveled in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. As key points on the route of trailblazers between Lake Superior and the vast interior, the sites of International Falls and its Canadian sister city, Fort Frances, became fur trade centers over 200 years ago.

For many years the travelers between Winnipeg and Lake Superior over what was known as the Dawson Route had noted the wonderful water falls here, but to Alexander Baker, a sturdy Scotchman, belonged the honor of paving the way to the development of their power by entering the government land adjoining them on the American side. To him goes the credit for starting the settlement that became International Falls. It was in 1870 the Alexander Baker, prospector, paddled into this area, squatted on the track of land that today includes much of the Boise Solutions LLC site, business district and some of our residential area. The land at that time had not been surveyed and Baker waited more than 10 years before he gained his homestead title. After obtaining title, Baker sold it, (with the exception of the plot called Baker's Acre), to H. Winches and C.J. Rockwood, Minneapolis, who recognized the water power possibilities of Koochiching Falls. The sum of \$6,000 was agreed upon and the transaction was completed in 1892. Baker occupied a crude cabin overlooking Koochiching Falls until his death September 4, 1899.

In April 1894, L.A. Ogaard, surveyor, arrived to plot a townsite for the new owners. The town was named Koochiching and the plot filed on June 23, 1894. When Mr. Ogaard arrived, there was only Alexander Baker, his nephew Joe, and Abner Jameson who had a homestead about one mile from town. While the work of the plotting of the town was in progress, and before it was complete, a man by the name of W.J. Paulman purchased the first town lots. Mr. Paulman had been at Rainy Lake City and like many of the fortune hunters there, had come to the site of the falls.

The post office was established October 13, 1894 and U.M. Thomas, who had been engaged in the newspaper business at Rainy Lake City, was the first postmaster. It was 1895 when the mail was carried from Rainy Lake City. In the early day, service was very irregular, especially at freeze-up time in the fall and break-up into the spring. Indians were employed to take the mail and they were only able to take the first class mail. Other class mail often took a month.

The village of Koochiching was incorporated August. 10, 1901 and an election was held in the school with 41 votes cast and all were "for", as it was desired to obtain a share of the liquor license money for improvements and fire protection.

Shortly after this, John Berg and L.A. Ogaard went to Minneapolis and there purchased the first fire engine. Increased interest in this safeguard was caused by the fire, which on June 15, 1902 almost completely wiped the town off the face of the earth. However, in spite of the losses of that memorable occasion, the townsmen set about at once to rebuild and construct the new buildings better than the ones they had lost.

As the settlement of the country moved rapidly with the coming of the land seekers and the distribution of considerable money, the town was quite prosperous.

It was in 1904 that R.S. McDonald arrived from Grand Rapids to clear the 240 acres of land that constituted the original townsite. This created employment for many men in the work of clearing, stumping and grading the streets.

The following year, 1905 the contract for construction on the dam was let and work on the dam began with the arrival of the first machine on April 17, 1905. The waterfall for which the city was named is now concealed under the reservoir of water formed by the dam. It soon became apparent that waterpower would be the nucleus of a large industry, and the townsite was moved from the banks of Rainy River to Third Street in 1906-07.

The mill was constructed in 1910 and it is interesting to note that Paul L. Johnson, father of Mr. Paul Lawrence, was in charge: the Paul Lawrence Construction Company had played a big part in the construction of this great industry.

Before the coming of the railroad on September 27, 1907, steamboat played an important part in the setting of this area. The Itasca, Sea Gull, Moose and Walter S. Lloyd were some of the better known. On the Canadian side we had the Agwinda and Keenora; these however, docked only the Canadian shore and passengers were ferried over to this side of the river.

Telephone communications were established in December 1905 with 60 phones in use. The office was located on the second floor of the "Echo" building, which was located on Fourth Street next to where the post office now stands. Mrs. Ruth and May Sullivan had the honor of being the first "hello" girls of the town.

Of note are a few facts: Our public school was organized in 1894 with L.A. Ogaard as the first teacher. This first school was located approximately where the Boise Solutions LLC building now stands. This was a long house, 12' x 20'. The contractor and builder, T.H. Kinshella, made a long table and a couple benches and a black board (4' x 6'). There was no other equipment; books were borrowed from the different homes. Term of school was fixed at five months and the salary of the teacher set at \$35.00. When school opened November 10, there were seven pupils ranging in age from five to twelve years.

Although religion was not the town's chief characteristic, Christianity was by no means forgotten. It was in 1895 that the first sermon was delivered in the open air on the bank of Rainy River by Reverend W.T. Miliken, who chanced to be paying our village a visit at the time. Two

years later, Reverend Grefthen, a Norwegian Lutheran, preached in his native tongue. A Swedish missionary, Reverend Anderson, also paid our village extended visits. The Scandinavians had an organization known as the North Star Young Peoples Society.

The name of the village was changed to International Falls on January 1, 1903. It was in September 1903 that the first church was erected at International Falls. This was First Baptist Church. It is interesting to note that this became a community project with all denominations contributing to the project drive.

First Episcopal services were held on August 12, 1904, after which a Woman's Guild was organized and in November 1905 services were held in the new church.

About Christmas time 1905 that a temporary Congregational Church was erected by the Presbyterian board. This building was used as a reading room by the men of the town.

With the division of Itasca County of which we were a part until December 1906, International Falls was named the county seat, and the first board of County Commissioners met here on December 29, 1906. County business was conducted in rented rooms in the City Hall, which was built that year at 212 Fourth Avenue. The Courthouse was constructed in 1910.

The original village of Koochiching was located along upper Second Avenue and along the banks of Rainy River. Part of the old Second Avenue business district is now occupied by Boise Cascade Solutions logging office and parking lot and part is the site of M.D. & W. railroad yards.

#### The railroad

The Mill was constructed in 1910. The dam harnesses the water power to help run the giant machines in the Mill, which to date there is approximately 850 people employed. At one point, the "Paper and Insulite Mill" employed over 1200 people, to date the total of employees number approximately 850 people which includes the paper mill and MD&W.

## **The Later Years**

During the early years the voyageurs would travel by canoes and trade with the Indians. Today you still can walk the banks of the river and find Indian arrowheads and pieces of pottery made by the Indians.

In the late 1800 the village was known as Koochiching Falls, which is an Ojibwa word meaning "mist over the water". There was once a 35 foot waterfall, which was where Rainy River met Rainy Lake and the waterfalls carried a mist-like rain in the air. In 1901 the village of Koochiching was incorporated and the name was changed from Koochiching to International Falls in 1904.

In the early 1900 EW Backus arrived and had vision of the possibilities of the waterpower the Falls had and this resulted in the immense power dam and huge paper and saw mill. Backus started the Minnesota and Ontario paper company known also as Mando (M stand for Minnesota O for Ontario with and in the middle). In 1965, Boise Cascade purchased Mando. November 2004 Boise Cascade sold the paper mill which is now known as Boise Solutions LLC.

There was schools named after E.W. Backus and Alexander Baker (Baker was one of the first settlers on Koochiching) and the schools still stand today. Alexander Baker and Backus Schools were buildings that were about to be torn down and a few citizens have gotten together and have saved the buildings. The buildings are now a community center and holds office spaces for several businesses. The community and other people that have been using the building have come forward to save these beautiful buildings. The building are now called "Citizens for AB/Backus".

The closing of our Insulite Mill in 1985 forced people to move and find work elsewhere. This made the community drop in size. In 1989 we consolidated with the Cty of South International Falls and became one city, International Falls. Consolidation brought the City of International Falls up to the population of 6,703 that it is today.

The City of International Falls was 87 years old and the City of South International Falls was 76 years old at the time of consolidation, January 23, 1989. According to the 1980 census, the two cities had a combined population of about 8500 people.

A small part of South Falls was generally referred to as Hollers Addition. The City's elementary school was officially named Holler School and its post office was knows as Holler Post Office. It was renamed the South International Falls Post office in 1948. The school districts consolidated in 1949 and a new elementary school was built, bearing the name Holler Elementary School. The Holler School was sold to Shannon's Inc in 2005 and still has the same look as the school, but houses Shannon's Inc, a plumbing and heating business).

The construction of Highway 53 brought a progressive period to International Falls in the 1930 and 2940s. During the days of Works Progress Administration, wooden and concrete sidewalks, gravel streets, grocery stores, taverns and motels were built. Municipal water and sewer systems were eventually installed.

Falls Public Library/Community Building and the City Municipal Building were constructed in 1939. The original South Falls City Hall was completed in 1950. After several decades, the buildings remains formidable land marks and are the most recognizable symbols of local city government.

International Falls has been referred to as the ICEBOX of the Nation since the 1940's and in recent years, had decided to capitalize on its reputation as an icy capital or recruit companies to conduct cold-weather testing in the Falls area. In the last several years, official authorization to use the Icebox title to promote the area has been granted.

The first mention of consolidation of the two cities was proposed in the 1970s and negotiated at length during the 1980s. Much of the ground work was laid by residents who negotiated the proposal during the first round of talks, although the question was eventually defeated in a public referendum conducted on May 21, 1985.

A new round of talks began in 1987 and continued over the course of 1-1/2 years. Sound agreements between representatives of the two cities – after much debate a second referendum was conducted on November 8, 1988. The referendum received solid public approval and a new city came into the world in January 1989 as the city's new council conducted an organizational meeting.

After the closing of the Insulite Mill, in 1989 Boise Cascade added on to the Paper Mill and built one of the largest paper machines in the world. Boise Cascade LLC employees approximately 850 people today.

International Buildrite is another industry and employs approximately 60 employees.

Specialized Care Services, which is health care billing company, employs approximately 255 employees.

We are known as the "Coldest Spot in the Nation" with our -20 to 50 degrees in the winter months and 75 to 90 degrees in the summer. We have high humidity in the summer months and with that we have a lot of mosquitoes.

The cold does not stop us from having fun. There is snowmobiling, winter camping, hunting in the fall, fishing on the ice during the winter months (drill a hole in the ice with an ice auger) and fishing in a boat on Rainy River and Rainy Lake in the summer months. In the winter we have communities of Ice Fishing Houses on Rainy Lake and Rainy River. (small houses or tents that have holes in the floor to make a hole in the ice to fish).

Each year we have a winter festival know as "Ice Box Days". This is when people from all over the country come and run a race called "Freeze yer Gizzard Blizzard Run". The race is a 5k or 10k race. With this 4 day event we have snowmobile races on the ice, cross- country ski races, ice-skating events and snow sculpturing in Smokey Bear Park.

We are also known for our 26 foot statue of Smokey Bear and his cubs. As you can see by the enclosed post cards, we put mittens and scarves on Smokey the Bear and his cubs during the winter months. Smokey Bear Park houses 2 basketball courts, bandshell (which in the summer time bands perform concerts in the park) and a public picnic area.

As for famous people from International Falls, we have legend Bronko Nagurski who is famous for his football and wrestling careers during 1930 to 1943. He played for the Chicago Bears as a full back and defense tackle (see article). It's said he could play every position in the game of football. There is a book written about him, "Monster of the Midway", by Jim Dent.

In 1979 his U of M Jersey was retired and Sports Illustrated later named Bronko as Minnesota's Greatest Athlete of the Century. In 1992 International Falls dedicated the "Bronko Nagurski Museum" in his honor and it is located in Smokey Bear Park along with the "Koochiching County Museum". If you ever get a chance to come to International Falls, stop by the Museums and them. We are sure you would enjoy it.

Frank Youso was born and raised in International Falls and played profession football. He was the first Minnesota Viking hired and also played for the New York Giants and Oakland Raiders. He still lives in International Falls.

Neil Sheehy was another athletic person form International Falls. He played for the Calgary Flames hockey team on defense. He is a nephew of Bronko Nagurski

The late TV Evangelist, Tammi Faye Baker was another person born and raised in International Falls in the 1950's. She also has family that still lives in International Falls.

We are also known for our wild blueberries and wild rice. There is nothing like blueberry pancakes, muffins and wild rice hot dish and pancakes.