

A Brief History of the French River District

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The genesis of French River takes us back almost to the middle of the last century when the first pioneers began to homestead scattered tracts along the North Shore. One of the first of these whose name still remains in the community was Samuel C. McQuade. He acquired a quarter section just west of the river in 1861, and it was on this property that the first school building was erected in 1892. The Old North Shore road may have been, and probably was, in existence as a trail at this time and would have been the only overland line of communication to the settlements farther up the shore.

In 1884, the Duluth and Iron Range railroad was built through to Duluth, and a siding and station were installed at French River (*where Ryan Road crosses the tracks*). Included in the station was a boarding house and also the local post office. One of the early stationmasters was Matthew Jackson who was also the section foreman and postmaster for many years. A little later, Mr. Jackson bought land along the track across from the station where he built a residence and store while still maintaining the boarding house until it was abandoned and torn down in 1933.

The year of 1910 saw the arrival of the Robert Mace family, and D. B. McDonald also bought and built along the (*French*) river at about this time. Previous to this, Louis Mattson had located on the shore near the mouth of the river in 1905 and was later joined by his brother in fishing. Mr. Mattson had a large family and the children attended the McQuade School nearly two miles distant. He related how he used to break a trail for them through the snow by tying a line to a block of wood and dragging it while they walked single file.

During the period just previous to the first World War, a number of businessmen from Duluth and Superior bought land in the vicinity. There were the Frecker brothers, Frank and Louis on the McQuade road, J. R. McCarthy who built a fine place on the bank of the river, and John Olson who bought a large acreage along the east side of the Ryan road and brought in a (steam) saw mill.

The Ryan road at this time was little more than a trail and many of the early arrivals used the old logging roads to reach their destination. The expression "*packsack farmer*" was in common use.

Among the earliest arrivals of this period were the Burk, Hill and Abrahamson families, also the Stromgren brothers, Arvid and Gust, Erick Johnson, Laiti and many others. At one time the Ryan road was spoken of as Garfield Avenue as so many of the newcomers had formerly lived in that district.

In 1918 came the great forest fire, which swept over the territory. Many of the settlers were burned out completely although here and there a home escaped the flames. The fire speeded up the clearing of the land, and the Red Cross came to the aid of the ones who had suffered with building materials and equipment.

In 1920 the State Fish Hatchery was built at the mouth of the river and Mr. Gale was appointed as superintendent. Adolph Sundstrom and Ben Gustafson were among the first employees.

Some years earlier a school had been built on the Mace property. In 1922 this school and the McQuade school were combined in a new two-room building at the Ryan road (*at the junction with Old North Shore road*). This school was continued until about 1932 when bus transportation was provided to the larger Bloomingdale School and the new Clover Valley High School, which could take care of the increasing enrollment.

About 1916 a *Farmers Club* was organized and a hall was built near the intersection of Ryan and Lismore roads. This became the center of community activity for several years, being reorganized as a community club through the leadership of the Misses Mace, the Gales, Mrs. Englund and others. *The French River Pleasure Club* was organized about 1916 also, but later became the *French River Women's Club*. A dramatic arts club was formed under the direction of Frances Hoffman, and a large group of the young people conducted this successfully for some years.

By 1920 the Ryan and McQuade roads had been greatly improved and extended, and there was no lack of interest and attendance at any and all public gatherings. This continued until the completion of the new Highway #61 along the lakeshore when the advent of the taverns and the increased use of the automobile together with other factors caused interest to swing to other sources of amusement, and the various organizations gradually died out. The hall was finally torn down sometime in the thirties.

The French River Lutheran Church was organized with its first regular pastor being the Rev. Carl Silverstein who was to remain for nearly twenty years. Meetings were held at the various homes of the members and later on in the (*Bloomingdale*) schoolhouse. Then a church was built on land given by Einar Hendrickson at the junction of the Ryan and Anderson roads. A new modern building was erected near the lakeshore in 1959 and the old building was sold to Edward Engelson who transformed it into a residence where he now lives.

In 1961 a Bomarc Missile base (*where the water tower now stands*), (since abandoned) was constructed on the Berg-quist Road. Three years later the county closed the Bloomingdale School and built the North Shore Elementary School on the corner of the land formerly owned by Erick Johnson who had maintained a store at the same location many years before.

Of all the changes that took place through the years, perhaps the most spectacular was the construction of the new divided-lane highway roughly paralleling the railway, which was put in operation through the French River section in 1965. This and the introduction of electric power to the area about 1935 have been of the greatest advantage to the community in my opinion. Drilled wells have taken the place of the old undependable dug wells, and it is now rare to find a home without water and sewer.

French River has not been without its tragedies over the years but perhaps not more so than other communities. Life was quite difficult before the automobile and the tractor became

common, and much more hazardous for the fishermen before the motors came into use. Few would now care to speak of it as “the good old days” or prophesy as to what the future may have in store.

** Written in 1968 and printed in “Roots in the Past, Seeds for the Future: The Heritage and History of Clover Valley, French River and Surrounding Communities”, published by North Shore Elementary School in 2000. This article was provided, with editorial notes, by Helen Hendrickson. Vern Palms lived on the Old North Shore Road where the Hartman family now lives. Vern wore a tee shirt at his 100th birthday which announced “100 years and still dancing”. He did! He died at 103 years of age.*