Introduction

Every community has its own story, unique unto itself. The chore of every community historian is to research and tell that story as accurately and clearly as possible in order to convey a sense of the place as it has developed over time.

The Adams County story is certainly unique. The plot was outlined by a series of incidents related to time and place as well as natural and human action. For example, the pioneer lumber industry was the leading force for development in the Wisconsin River Valley in the 19th Century. Because of lines drawn on a map by treaty negotiators and by legislators with no more than a vague idea of the geography of the territory, Adams County became only a marginal participant in the lumber industry. None of the major water power sites where the lumbermen located the mills that were the foundation of cities such as Wisconsin Rapids, Stevens Point and Wausau were included in the borders of Adams County. The builders of the sawmill village of Barnum tried to be part of the Wisconsin lumber industry, but they lacked access to logs, had no suitable water power and went out of business after about ten years of operation. As a result, the Adams County portion is one of the longest stretches on the Wisconsin River without a city of at least a few thousand where the lumber industry made jobs and created wealth.

In part because of the absence of a sawmill town, Adams was the last county in Wisconsin to have a railroad within its borders. It is difficult to underestimate the impact of the railroad in 19th Century America. The railroad delivered the mail, carried settlers, shipped farm products, hauled manufactured goods, made jobs and built communities. In sum, it was the most important social and economic force in the country and Adams County suffered for its absence. Without a railroad, Adams County was harder to reach and more isolated than neighboring counties. It cost more and took longer to travel to the county, to ship farm products out and to bring manufactured goods here than to places served by the Iron Horse.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the power of the railroad is to look at what happened when regular rail service began in 1911. Since the 1850s, the largest village in the county, Friendship, could not muster a population much larger than 300 souls. Less than five years after the Chicago and North Western Railroad arrived, the largest village in the county, Adams, had a population of 1200 and Friendship itself grew beyond the 500 mark. The totals were still small, but the rate of growth was phenomenal. What might have happened in the county had the tracks been laid fifty years earlier at the start of the railroad age instead of near its end is anyone's guess. As it happened, the railroad arrived at the dawn of the automobile age, which also gives Adams the distinction of being the only county in Wisconsin to have autos running on its roads before it had railcars running on tracks.

The final and more fundamental fact of Adams County history is the poverty of its soil. The sandy loam, bare sand and blow sand comprising the bulk of the earth beneath the feet of county farmers sit high on the list of the poorest agricultural soils in Wisconsin. As a result, farming here was more difficult, more costly and less profitable than in other parts of the state. The poor soil limited settlement and, in many cases, attracted farmers of last resort — people of limited means who purchased inexpensive ground, no matter how infertile, because that was all they could afford.

Consequently, the history of Adams County is dominated by three negatives: no water power on the Wisconsin, no railroad until 1911, no soil except infertile sand. These facts shaped the Adams County of 1900 and that of the year 2000.

Despite its discouraging fundamentals the story of the county is not entirely negative. In fact, much of the history of Adams County is the story of people who, when confronted with negative facts, struggled mightily to overcome them. Crops were raised, homes built, schools established, churches founded, laws enforced, families made, communities created. This story of quiet heroism is the story told in From Past To Present.

Of necessity, the book focuses on the first century of county history. For, along with the other omissions affecting its story, Adams County has not had a comprehensive history book of its own. Gauging its small population and potential market for their wares, publishers either bypassed the county or lumped it into bulky volumes that covered six, ten or twenty other counties as well. Therefore, we felt it necessary to dwell on the basics and concentrate on the period from about 1830 to the 1960s because no one else has.

The decision is practical from the editorial and the historical points of view. The 1960s witnessed an end to what might be
called the old Adams County of sparse population, small farms, a county seat and a railroad village. In the 1950s, the population of the county was about the same as it was in the late 1850s. It was aging and declining, as young people looked elsewhere for opportunity. The railroad still dominated life in Adams, but on a diminishing basis. Tourists were present, but in small numbers, as were summer homes and retirees. Farming meant dairying and stock-raising.

Then the county started to change. The groundwork was laid in the 1930s and '40s, when the power lines of the “Adams-Marquette” Electric Cooperative brought village convenience to rural homesteads and provided power for expanded farm operations ranging from milking machines to irrigators.

Farming itself was undergoing its greatest period of change since settlement. Hybrid corn, vernal alfalfa, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, conservation practices, artificial insemination, bulk milk handling, marketing organizations, and new machinery of every sort created an entirely new way of making a living on the land. Irrigated farming, which took off in the 1960s, would change it even more.

With a new kind of farming came a new kind of rural education. The venerable one-room schools closed. The country schools were consolidated into larger districts served by buses that enabled every student to attend a graded elementary school and a high school.

Those buses traveled on improved roads, as unpaved county trunks were surfaced and town roads graded and graveled. The most dramatic local highway improvement was the completion of the Highway 82 bridge across the Wisconsin in 1955. It soon became an important link to Interstate 90-94, which reached Mauston in the mid-1960s. The Interstate itself made it easier for travelers to reach Wisconsin Dells, which boomed in the '60s and created opportunities for Adams County people. The Interstate and the Highway 82 bridge also brought people to the shores of the Castle Rock and Petenwell Flowages, which were completed early in the '50s and stimulated development from Quincy to Rome.

While new highways and bridges were important, the construction of the Adams County Memorial Hospital in 1959 was equally significant. A modern medical and health care facility and employer centrally-located in the county could not help but improve the quality of life here.

As the railroad continued to decline, community leaders pursued industrial development. They succeeded in 1968, when Lewis Container opened a plant in Adams. It soon became the largest manufacturing employer in the county, more so when it was purchased by Consolidated Paper, then by the Saint Lawrence Company.

With or without industry, increasing numbers of tourists came to the county and many of them wanted to stay longer than a week or two. Realtors soon divided parcels of rural land and subdivisions appeared on virtually every waterway and almost every woodlot. In time, weekend homes became year round homes for retired people and then people who were not retired. The town of Rome saw the greatest change. It was transformed by the construction of three impoundments on 14 Mile Creek from a pine barren town of 200 people to a suburban-style, recreation community, with ten times the population it had in 1960.

The residents were not tourists, of course, but the construction of the federal correctional facility in the town of New Chester in the early 1970s, also brought change to the county. The prison became a source of jobs for local people and a source of cultural and racial diversity in the local population.

Accompanying these changes, the 1960s saw, for the first time since the railroad boom of the 1910s, an increase in the population of the county. Except for a slight upturn during the Great Depression, when unemployed city people sought refuge in rural areas, the population of Adams County had been falling since the 1920s. The turnaround started in the 1960s, and continued into the 1970s, '80s and '90s when Adams County ranked at or near the top of the list of fastest growing counties in Wisconsin.

The county had developed into a suburban community whose people were just as likely to work, shop and recreate in surrounding communities as at home. County farmers became part of the central Wisconsin irrigated vegetable industry, which made potato diggers and center-pivot irrigators as visible as threshing machines and tile silos used to be. Adams County also became an integral part of the Wisconsin tourist industry, with lakes, woods and wildlife that attract visitors by the thousands. The place has changed more in the last forty years than in the previous one hundred forty.

But not everything changes. The wind still rustles the needles of the jackpines as it did when the Ho-Chunks hunted deer on the Big Flats. The marshes of Quincy still bear purple iris in June, as they did when the first country school teacher sent her students outdoors to recess. The tannin-tinged water of the Roche-A-Cri still flows from the glacial moraine to the Wisconsin, as it has from past to present. Adams County goes on.