

Community of the Month

Baker was the site of invention and ingenuity

Known for the start of the first electric cooperative in the state, the Benson County town once had a population of 150

Editor's Note: This is the last of 12 monthly community features that have appeared in The Tribune in 2003.

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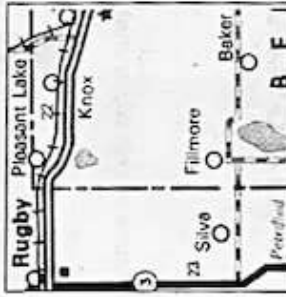
Born of the Soo Line Railroad, the small town of Baker was once a bustling town in west central Benson County. Famous for its Baker Days and the founding of Baker Electric Cooperative, the town now is home to only eight residents. However, in its heyday the town proved to be a place of action and invention.

The Soo Line was making tracks all over the country. In 1910, plans were underway to build a branch line to connect Drake and Fordville. As surveyors made their way into Benson County in the spring of 1911, a right-of-way and town-site were purchased in Broe Township.

The contractors who were hired to do the work for the railroad set up camps around what was to become the town-site of Baker in west central Benson County. The land was purchased from William Church and James Stammer, and the town of Baker was born. It was named so for C.E. Baker, an early settler from Iowa, who was deputy register of deeds of Benson County in 1898.

Baker Days

On July 11, 1912 the town-site representatives arrived. They sold lots to many people and companies. Thus, July 11 became Baker Day. The annual celebration began on that day in 1913. It was a yearly event until the 1920s. In the



Taken from a 1999 N.D. map

The building came under several operators, such as Frank and Clarence Spaulding, Cy Edwards and Steve and Eva Axtman. The building was later moved to Balta by Max Warren.

A second store, Baker Mercantile, owned and operated by Fred Bollerud, was built on the west side of main street. He later sold the store to the Cooperative Store Association. Managers over the years included Bernard Ellingson and his wife, Jessie, and John Stadum, who later purchased the store. Other owners were Paul Stenhjorn (under whose management it became the Baker Trading Post which it is still called today), Gordon Jacobson, Palmer Broe and now Elvin and Ardis Randle.

Business today in Baker

The Randles own the store and help make up the population of eight that still calls Baker home. They have operated the store for 45 years and also reside in the living quarters in the back of the store. The small, unique store is one of the only ones still in operation in such a small community.

Ardis Randle likes the flexibility.

Ardis.

The Randles are one of two business owners in Baker. There is also a beauty shop owned by Kim Kirkeide. Other than these two establishments, the town is pretty quiet.

The population consists of the Randles and two farm families.

Early business boom

However, that wasn't the case many years ago. The first hardware store was built in 1912 by Theodore Ness. It was later owned and operated by members of the John Allen family. The building was moved to Knox, where it was used as a grocery store until it burned in 1971.

Baker could once boast of a millinery store owned and operated by a Mrs. Blackmore. There were once two lumber yards, Bowman-Cullen Lumber Company and Hardware on First Ave. West with Nels E. Nelson as manager, and Bovey-Shute and Jackson on First Ave. East with Ed Blettner as manager.

Like most towns in the area, Baker had three elevators. John Aker built an independent elevator when the town began and operated it until 1930 when it was sold to the Farmers Union Cooperative Elevator Association. In 1968 it merged with the elevator of the same name in Harlow. Another elevator was the O&M—Osborne & McMillan. It was later torn down and used to build an annex to the Peavy, the old Spaulding elevator to the east. It was purchased by the Farmers Union elevator in about 1950.

Besides the first elevator, John Aker also owned the first implement business that sold

the Lund Hotel. Unfortunately, it operated for only a couple of years before it burned. The same year, a restaurant and hotel opened on First Avenue next to one of the lumberyards. Two banks were established in Baker. Farmers State Bank was one which was later moved to Leeds in 1926. The other, First State Bank, merged with Farmers State Bank after a few years.

The Baker Herald, a weekly newspaper, was published by George Olson and Arne Lunde for about two years. The building later became the post office. There was a butcher shop, a barber shop and cream station at one time as well.

There was a feed grinding plant run by Emil Engen. His daughter, Orpha, born in 1913, was the first child born in Baker.

A livery barn and dray line were started by Herb Davidson and Ed Bennet as soon as the town was established. A large part of their business was hauling water to the residents of Baker, since the water in the town's only well was not good. A 14-barrel water tank was mounted on a bob sled and hauled water from Jim Stammer's well.

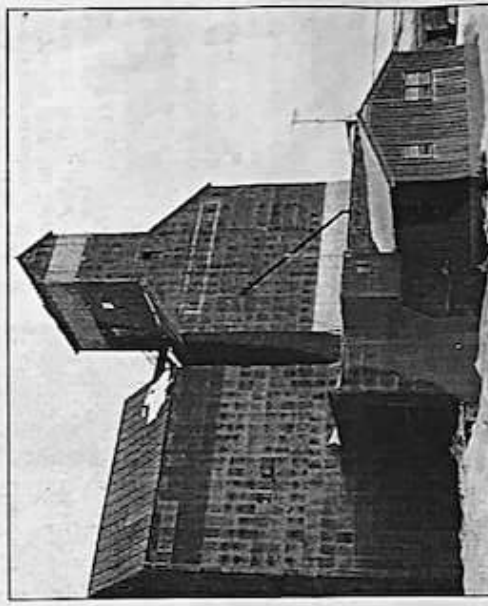
In 1919, a Standard Oil bulk station, a branch of the Esmond Standard Station, was established in Baker. It was operated until 1962. In the 1940s a service station was built, then closed in 1959.

Social life

In its early days, Baker had many businesses as well as social endeavors. The townsfolk organized a 20-member band as well as an orchestra from 1915-17. Local musicians joined in wherever needed



The sign outside of Baker stands to mark the town.



One of the elevators still sits at the north end of town. At one time the town had three.