

# Ottokee Offered Hustle And Bustle

Ideas are born from the experiences of others. Throughout his life, Dresden Howard employed this philosophy to advance the development of the Fulton County sector of the Black Swamp.

In the mid-1850's, the Colonel and his wife, Mary, visited the Adrian, Michigan fair. Dresden was so impressed by the fair that upon his return to Winameg, he called a meeting of his friends and neighbors for the purpose of organizing an agricultural society.

Thus in 1857, under the direction of D.W.H., the Fulton County Agricultural Society was founded. The society had to establish a site for the fair—a tract of land was leased from Dr. Welcome C. Robinson and work was begun on developing the fairgrounds. The site was one-half mile east of Ottokee, the subject of this week's Black Swamp tale, as we continue the odyssey of Dresden Howard.

## Heated Debates

On February 28, 1850, the Ohio General Assembly passed an act which permitted the organization of Fulton County. The first commissioners appointed for the County of Fulton were Mathias H. Nichols, John Riley and Laurin Dewey. One of their first jobs was to select a seat of government for the new county. Delta, (Spring Hill), and Fluharts Corners were prime county seat candidates. However, after numerous heated arguments, none of these sites were deemed suitable.

The commissioners wanted a site that was centrally located. At last a wilderness area in Dover Township was selected, whereupon the commissioners asked Dresden Howard to name the new county seat. He chose to name it after his long-time friend, the Ottawa Indian chief, Ottokee. The new name for the county seat was not readily accepted, but after two votes by the residents of the county, Ottokee was finally agreed upon.

The first court held in the new county seat was in the home of Robert Howard in 1850. In 1851, a two-story frame court house, 40 or 50 feet by 80 feet, was erected by Amos H. Jordon of Royaltown Township. A year later, on January 2, 1852, Oscar H. Cobb assumed the duties of postmaster at Ottokee. The first jail and sheriff's residence was built in Ottokee in 1853.

On the 16th of July, 1864, the Fulton County Court House was destroyed by a ravaging fire. In 1865, the county commissioners entered into a contract with Hiram Pritchard for the erection of a new

brick court house at Ottokee. When business was flourishing, the stage coach stopped daily at Ida Fish's grocery and post office. In addition to Fish's grocery, there existed a large general store which carried dry goods, hardware items and some groceries.

## Business Died Out

Over the years, other businesses were attempted in conjunction with the general store, among them a meat market, ice cream parlor, shoe store and a beer garden. However, none of these proved successful and the general store came to a blazing end in 1936.

Besides these stores, Ottokee had several taverns and hotels. One of these, Taylor's Hotel, was located just west of the general store in the year 1850. The settlement also had a cane press, saw mill, carpenter shop, blacksmith shop, well driller, two or three print



shops, a brick factory, cheese processor, a cheese press factory and Bracey's Basket Company. Also, two miles west of Ottokee, the Temperance Hotel was owned and operated by John Miller—naturally, as the name implies, liquor was neither served or allowed.

Last, but most of all not least, Ottokee was the headquarters for Stow's Circus Troupe. The Stow Circus was well known for its summer performances throughout Ohio and adjoining states. In the winter, Stow and many of the performers stayed in Ottokee.

In 1852, Dresden Howard left the Winameg-Ottokee settlements and moved to Iowa, where he bought a tract of government land. Being the settler he was, D.W.H. laid out the town of Winfield—now Harpers Ferry. He returned to Ohio in 1853 and became involved in local and state politics, as well as farming. During the Civil War, Dresden was a member of the state military committee. He also served as an elector for President-elect Abraham Lincoln and was a delegate to the Baltimore convention in 1864 that nominated Lincoln for a second term.

Dresden, knowing a good thing when he saw one, attended President Lincoln's inauguration in 1865.

In the year 1867, under the leadership of Elden Carpenter, Olive Verity and Colonel Howard, the site of the Fulton County Fair was moved to a "muggy swamp" on the road from Ottokee to Wauseon (now State Route 108). The swamp was drained and four yoke of oxen were used to level a fine race course on the new site. This new track brought notoriety to Fulton County in 1905, when Barney Oldfield duplicated his "mile-a-minute" drive for the patrons.

The year 1869 found the Ohio Legislature passing an act which enabled the seat of justice to be moved from its original location. With this option in the Fulton County commissioners' hands, they ordered a courthouse built in Wauseon because of its excellent access to railroads.

The loss of the county seat to Wauseon and the fact that the railroad ran south of Ottokee were two major blows that put Ottokee on a downward slide. Today, this once flourishing town is but a shell of its former self. Most of the stores and businesses of yesteryear are gone—in 1980, Ottokee is a quiet residential community in the old Black Swamp.

Even though the saga of Ottokee is nearly completed, the Dresden Howard odyssey has one final chapter. In the fall of 1871, D.W.H. was elected to a two-year term in the Ohio Senate. In addition to his political career, Senator Howard was president of the Toledo & Grand Rapids Railroad and treasurer of the Toledo & Southwestern Railroad Company.

Dresden Winfield Houston Howard, farmer, Indian agent, politician, capitalist, state senator and Black Swamp pioneer, died on November 9, 1897, six days after his 80th birthday. D.W.H., along with his wife Mary, are buried in a brick-lined crypt at the side of a hill beneath his beloved Winameg, not far from the refreshing spring water he knew as a boy.

The inscription on his tombstone reads, "Friends need not/ Strangers can not/ Be told/ How great a treasure/ Lies buried here." This is surely a suitable epitaph for a pioneer whose odyssey through the old Black Swamp has become a legend.