

Dakota County History: Are You Smarter Than a 5th Grader?

By Joe Atkins, Dakota County Commissioner

Founded in 1849, Dakota County celebrates its 175th anniversary in 2024. When I mentioned this to a local elementary school teacher, she asked where she could find a list of notable historic events, with a focus on northern Dakota County. Unable to locate anything shorter than hundreds of pages in length, I created and shared the list below with her class.

Most students knew of fewer than half of the nearly 80 events on the list. If you want to see how your knowledge stacks up, keep track of the number of events you are aware of. More than 40 makes you smarter than a 5th grader. More than 50 means you have probably been around for a while, like me. And if you score more than 60, I want to talk to you about serving on the Dakota County Historical Society's Board.

10,000 YEARS AGO. The last glacier retreats from Dakota County, leaving rocks and sands covering the bedrock. Many of the rivers and lakes existing today arise from meltwater of the withdrawing glacier. Called "glacial drift," this is now the geology we see across Dakota County... with one "shocking" exception. If you can't wait to find out what it was, skip ahead to 2021 to see the startling discovery made here by a University of Minnesota geologist.

1,000 YEARS AGO. The Dakota tribe of American Indians first arrive in what is now Dakota County.

1689. French fur trader Nicholas Perrot proclaims possession of Dakota lands, including what would eventually become Dakota County, without consent of the tribes.

1801. Napoleon becomes Emperor over what would eventually become Dakota County, following France's acquisition of Spain's interest in much of North America.

1803. Dakota County becomes part of the United States through the Louisiana Purchase negotiated by President Thomas Jefferson.

1837. The Kaposia band's village moves east of the Mississippi River to what is now South St. Paul.

1837. In Mendota, Dred Scott marries Harriet Robinson in Dakota County; the marriage's location in a free territory proves crucial in civil rights cases for decades to come.

1840. Overhunting eliminates all bison in Dakota County.

1849. Dahkotoh County is founded, one of nine original counties that pre-date Minnesota becoming a state in 1858. Extending 412 miles from the Mississippi River to the Missouri River

in what is now South Dakota, Dahkotah County includes what is now Minneapolis, but not Hastings.

1851. The Kaposia Village site, together with millions more acres west of the Mississippi, are ceded by the tribal nations to the United States in the Treaty of Mendota. Signed high atop Oheyawahi (Pilot Knob), a sacred site to the Dakota people, the site overlooks Fort Snelling and the St. Paul and Minneapolis skylines.

1853. The county seat is established in Kaposia, then moves to Mendota in 1854, and finally – and permanently – to Hastings in 1857.

1857. The first baseball game ever played in Minnesota takes place in Dakota County in Nininger Township.

1857. Dakota County legislator Thomas Wilson pushes for the right of Black men to vote. Fellow lawmaker Willis Gorman of St. Peter breaks his cane over Wilson's head.

1857. The most consequential U.S. Supreme Court decision in history is issued, and it hinges on the location of a marriage of two people here in Dakota County. Dred Scott and Harriet Robinson were wed in Mendota in 1837, with the location of their marriage in a free territory emerging as a key factor in the couple's famous anti-slavery argument to the U.S. Supreme Court two decades later. The Scotts win their case for freedom in state court, but the U.S. Supreme Court overrules the state court decision. Historians point to the fierce, overwhelming public reaction to the decision as being key to Abraham's Lincoln's election in 1860, the Civil War from 1861-1865, and passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. To this day, the struggle for freedom by Harriett and Dred Scott stands as a defining moment in the history of the Civil Rights Movement. It is a struggle they waged together, starting when the two joined hands and said "I do" 187 years ago here in Dakota County.

1858. Minnesota becomes the 32nd state. Dakota County's boundaries shrink closer to present-day dimensions.

1858. Inver Grove Township is founded, named for a small Irish fishing village.

1865. Residents of Dakota County are the first to petition the State of Minnesota to allow Black men to vote.

1873. Hastings resident George Washington Daniels is one of the most notable residents of Dakota County. Daniels escaped slavery and the Confederate Army in the early 1860's by outsmarting his captors. He then joined the Union forces. Union General William LeDuc of Hastings is so impressed by Daniels that he hires him after the war. Daniels is employed by

LeDuc here in Dakota County until about 1880. Daniels and his wife become prominent, respected farmers.

1876. The James Gang travels secretly through Dakota County on their way to carry out their famous bank holdup in Northfield a week later. A sign at Robbers Ravine Park in Eagan recounts the route they took and an encounter with a local farmer along the way. What the notorious gang fails to realize is the way that fearless residents of Dakota County and Rice County would defend their hard-earned savings at the bank in Northfield. Instead of running away, local residents run to the bank and wipe out nearly the entire James Gang as they try to escape.

1887. South St. Paul is founded.

1889. West St. Paul is founded, after splitting off from South St. Paul. An earlier City of West St. Paul formed in 1858 but ceased operations as a city within a few years.

1895. A strong storm whips across Dakota County on September 28, 1895, causing Castle Rock to topple. The 45-foot-tall spire, which attracted thousands of tourists to Dakota County in the late 1800's, was among the most sacred spots in Dakota County and known to the Dakota people as Inyan Bosndata or "Rock-standing-on-end." The formation came to be known as Castle Rock by white settlers. On a clear day it could be seen from as far away as St. Paul.

1907. South St. Paul High School opens.

1910. The first remains of several mammoths and mastodons are found in Dakota County.

1912. "The Wreck of the Ten Spot," the worst and most mysterious train crash in county history, takes place when Engine No. 10 plunges off a swing bridge in South St. Paul into the Mississippi.

1916. Infamous criminals Frank McCool and Joe Redenbaugh get more than they bargain for when they try robbing a bank here in Dakota County. It all begins in the early morning hours of November 4, 1916, when townspeople in tiny Randolph (pop. 182) are awakened at 4:30am by two explosions. A third blast shakes the whole community in southern Dakota County and brings with it the realization that their local bank is under attack. Rather than hide out from harm, villagers armed with shotguns rush into the streets in the cold morning air and run toward the bank. A gunfight in the streets of Randolph ensues. Although McCool and Redenbaugh escape aboard a train to St. Paul, they do so without the \$2,500 in the bank's safe and are eventually apprehended in Omaha and San Francisco, respectively. The two are tried and sentenced to life terms in Stillwater Prison.

1919. Armour's opens a new meatpacking plant in South St. Paul. It is the largest building ever constructed in Minnesota.

1919. Croatian immigrants who settled in South St. Paul found the Hrvatski Dom, which means Croatian Home. It quickly becomes and remains the place for social events such as dances, dinners, weddings, and even funerals.

1920. Eighty-seven women in South St. Paul become the first women in America to vote following enactment of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

1922. The South St. Paul Public Library opens in the Fitzgerald Building on Grand Avenue. Replaced in 1927 by the building at 3rd and Southview, which closed on December 2, 2023, the next chapter occurs in February 2024 with the opening of a new county library in South St. Paul at 7th and Marie.

1926. The 4,119-foot Mendota Bridge connecting Dakota and Hennepin Counties becomes the longest continuous concrete-arch bridge in the world when it opens on November 8, 1926. Over 15,000 people attend the grand opening.

1930. West St. Paul's Harold Stassen, 23, is elected Dakota County Attorney, before going on to become Minnesota's youngest governor ever in 1938, at the age of 31. He resigns as Governor in 1943 to take part in WWII, then plays a key role in founding the United Nations in 1945.

1931. Cenex (now CHS) is founded in South St. Paul. It relocates to Inver Grove Heights almost exactly 50 years later and becomes a Fortune 500 company.

1933. The largest robbery in county history takes place outside the South St. Paul Post Office. The post office is renamed the Leo Pavlak Post Office in 2023 in recognition of the police officer killed that day.

1934. Ma Barker and her infamous gang spend upwards of a year at a hideout in an unassuming in West St. Paul. Still standing at 1031 Robert Street, neighbors thought the men in the home were in an orchestra because they arrive home late at night carrying violin cases.

1934. Gangster John Dillinger, who is Public Enemy #1 on the FBI's Most Wanted List, uses the Rock Island Swing Bridge in Inver Grove to elude police in a high-speed chase. The toll booth operator reports that Dillinger was so far ahead that he actually stops to pay the toll. Dillinger then kidnaps the Francis family of South St. Paul. After stealing their speedier car, Dillinger drops the family off unharmed in Mendota.

1935. Inver Grove resident and South St. Paul High School grad Stan Kostka signs the most lucrative contract in National Football League history. A star running back at the U of M, Stan signs with the NFL's New York team for a record \$5,000 on August 25, 1935, following a bidding war among NFL team owners. Stan's salary exceeds that of famed football legend Bronko Nagurski.

1936. NFL owners are so irked about having to compete to sign Stan Kostka that they institute the first-ever NFL Draft.

1936. Sibley Junior High opens, eventually expanding as a high school to its current location in Mendota Heights and changing its name to Two Rivers in 2021.

1943. Fleming Field Airport opens in South St. Paul, named for Captain Richard E. Fleming (USMCR), a local aviator who died in the Battle of Midway on June 5, 1942.

1953. Nine Jerikovsky brothers from South St. Paul make history when the ninth brother returns home safely from the Korean War. Six served in WWII; three more served in Korea. No family in American history before or since has ever had nine siblings serve in the United States Armed Forces.

1955. The first Fortune 500 list debuts, with Armour & Company of South St. Paul at #7. The next 10 smaller companies on the list are Gulf Oil, Mobil, DuPont, Amoco, Bethlehem Steel, CBS, Texaco, ATT, Shell Oil and Kraft. Armour's employs 4,000 people at the plant and is the largest meatpacking facility in the history of the world.

1955. One of the nation's first covered malls opens in Dakota County. The Signal Hills Mall in West St. Paul welcomes customers just in time for the holiday shopping season in 1955.

1957. The world record for the highest altitude ever reached by a human being is set by Air Force Captain Joe Kittinger. Ascending from Fleming Field along the South St. Paul-Inver Grove border to a height of 96,784 feet in a balloon, Kittinger breaks the previous record by more than 20,000 feet. The record-breaking effort was called "Project Manhigh" and was the first step in launching Americans into space.

1958. An Air Force B-52 bomber on a top-secret training flight from Maine to the west coast crashes in Inver Grove on September 16, 1958. The explosion creates a crater the size of a football field on the Kahl family farm along what is now Broderick Boulevard. Felt across northern Dakota County, windows break in homes as far away as Sunfish Lake, with the fireball seen in West St. Paul and Hastings. Today a memorial on the site honors the seven crewmen who perished in the crash, the largest in Dakota County's history.

1961. Simley High School opens in Inver Grove. It is named for I.T. Simley, the longest-serving school superintendent in South St. Paul history, who guided the construction from start to finish.

1965. Inver Grove Village and Inver Grove Township merge to form the Village of Inver Grove Heights.

1966. Planning Commission member Devona Weatherhead becomes the first woman elected to the West St. Paul City Council.

1966. West St. Paul resident Richard Schulze opens the Sound of Music on Robert Street, which he expands to multiple stores and eventually renames to Best Buy.

1967. The first Target store in Dakota County opens in West St. Paul.

1970. Dakota County donates 485 acres to create the Minnesota Zoo. The large site transforms the zoo experience, beginning a nationwide movement to cage-free environments.

1974. Inver Grove Heights becomes a city on January 1, 1974.

1974. Dakota County's deadliest fire occurs in West St. Paul, claiming the lives of three firefighters and the caretaker when a propane tank explodes at an apartment building on January 11, 1974.

1974. Dakota County buys 62 acres in West St. Paul. Together with six acres donated by the City, it becomes Thompson Park, the first county park.

1975. The Lafayette Freeway is completed through South St. Paul and West St. Paul from St. Paul to the northern border of Inver Grove. It takes nearly two more decades for the freeway to extend further south through Inver Grove Heights.

1976. The Lawshe Museum, our county history museum, opens in South St. Paul.

1976. Volunteers launch South St. Paul Kaposia Days, now one of the oldest and most popular city celebrations in Dakota County.

1977. Senator Conrado Vega of South St. Paul takes office as the first Hispanic legislator in Minnesota history. He serves until 1987, retiring as Chair of the powerful Senate Energy and Housing Committee.

1979. Dakota County becomes home to El Toro, the first mechanical bull in the nation - outside of Texas, of course - when Peabody's Saloon opens at Robert and 80th in Inver Grove Heights. Located where Target is now, the building had been there since 1935 and had been home to Schlieff's Little City, Brooks Nightclub and Thumper's South. With one of the largest dance floors in the country at 20,000 square feet, the massive Peabody's has a capacity of 1,749 people and is built like an old-fashioned barn, with open ceilings and large wood joists.

1981. Serial killer Joseph Ture strikes in West St. Paul. The death of Diane Edwards, a 19-year-old server who was walking home from her job at Perkins, rocks the community.

1982. South St. Paul's Phil Housley is the only high school player – and only American - picked in the first round of the National Hockey League Draft. A seven-time All Star and Hall of Fame inductee, Phil is the top-scoring American-born player in NHL history when he retires in 2004.

1984. Peabody's Saloon in Inver Grove Heights burns down under mysterious circumstances on the eve of Valentine's Day. The only thing left standing following the fire is El Toro, the mechanical bull.

1988. South St. Paul voters make election history again, kicking off an unprecedented 28-year run in Minnesota of three women mayors in a row. Katherine Trummer held the top job for four years, followed by Kathleen Gaylord and Beth Baumann for a decade each.

1990. Rosemary Piekarski Krech becomes the first woman elected mayor of Inver Grove Heights.

1994. Construction begins on the Mississippi River Greenway from South St. Paul to Hastings. The final segment of the 27-mile greenway is set for completion in 2024.

1996. The Veterans Memorial Community Center opens in Inver Grove Heights. Largely funded with donations and user fees, not property taxes, it is expanded in 2001 to include an aquatic and fitness area.

2000. Inver Glen Library opens in Inver Grove Heights. It is the only library in Minnesota created as a result of a partnership between a city, school district, county and college.

2001. Dakota County kicks off construction of the River to River Greenway from South St. Paul through West St. Paul and Mendota Heights to Mendota. The Robert Street underpass completes the trail in 2021.

2002. Approved by West St. Paul voters in 1999, Dakota County opens the Northern Service Center on Mendota Road just west of Robert Street.

2003. Dakota County launches a natural area protection program that has now protected nearly 12,000 acres of woodlands and wetlands across the county.

2017. Dakota County becomes debt-free, making us one of the only counties in the country with zero debt.

2018. The Minnesota Vikings move their headquarters to Dakota County.

2019. A railroad seeks to ship 500 million gallons of the county's drinking water to Arizona. County and state officials quash the plan, citing expectations for water quantity issues of our own here.

2021. South St. Paul High School grad Sunisa Lee wins gold in gymnastics at the Olympics.

2021. A University of Minnesota geologist makes a startling discovery in a nine-square-mile area of northern Dakota County, finding shocked quartz, which is known to be produced only by the extreme compression of a meteorite impact or nuclear explosion. This is the first identified meteorite site in Minnesota and one of fewer than 200 in the world.

2023. A bison herd is reintroduced in Dakota County.

2023. Out of over 3,000 counties nationwide, Dakota County becomes the only county in the country to have ever earned the top county award in the nation for public safety (2018), for public health (2020), and for infrastructure/sustainability (2023).

2024. Dakota County celebrates its 175th anniversary.

While certainly not an all-inclusive list of every event, I hope this sample of notable moments provides a hint of our rich history here in northern Dakota County.

Joe Atkins represents District 2 on the Dakota County Board, which includes South St. Paul, West St. Paul and Inver Grove Heights. Elected Chair of the Board in 2024, he welcomes feedback. To share comments, concerns or questions, email him at Joe.Atkins@co.dakota.mn.us or call (651) 438-4430.