

## *Brief History of Black Hawk County*

Before the Europeans came, the valley of the Cedar River was almost completely covered in dense timber. Yet at a point about seven miles below the Falls of the Cedar, unwooded prairie grasses covered both banks of the river for a stretch of about a mile. The river itself at that point fell in a swift rapids. Underneath the rapids, the riverbed was solid rock.

When the region was opened to white inhabitants, after the Sac and Fox Indians lost their hold on it following the Black Hawk War of 1832, the Falls were an attraction to entrepreneurs who saw their potential for water power. One such, William Sturgis, made plans for a dam and lent his name to the early gathering of cabins.

The combination of open space and a solid river bottom at the rapids made a safe, and hence a popular crossing for the Indians and for the early white visitors, and the site inevitably became a settlement, initially named Prairie Rapids by first settlers George and Mary Hanna. Thus Sturgis Falls and Prairie Rapids, later to be renamed Cedar Falls and Waterloo, became in 1845 the first settlements in Black Hawk County, and between them at the end of the year they boasted the county's entire white population of thirteen pioneers.

Prior to the establishment of permanent homes, Black Hawk County, first created in 1843 and named for the Sac war leader who lost the war that bears his name (and who never set foot in the area named for him), had been under the administration of Delaware County. Responding to the gradual western trend of white expansion, Benton County officials took over in 1845, the year before Iowa statehood, followed by Buchanan County in 1851. By act of the Iowa legislature, Black Hawk County was allowed to organize its own government and elect officers in 1853. At the same time, the counties of Bremer, Grundy, and Butler were administratively attached to Black Hawk County. The first election of county officials was held on August 17.

The legislature also called for a commission to locate the county seat in the same year. Sturgis Falls, with its thriving mills, was the leader in commerce at the time, and got the nod. Waterloo boosters, unwilling to acquiesce, convinced the legislature to call for an election, and by a vote of 388 to 260, the more centrally-located Waterloo became county seat in 1855. It was already vying with Cedar Falls in the milling industry, a dam having been constructed in 1854, the year the city was platted.

Many eastern Iowa settlements moved swiftly from frontier outposts to civilized cities in the beginning of the last half of the nineteenth century. Surrounded by some of the richest farmland to be found anywhere on the globe, the cities of Black Hawk County became important centers for the agricultural community. Despite a brief period of high water, which allowed the steamboat *Black Hawk* to make twenty-four round trips between Cedar Rapids and Waterloo in 1859, the Cedar River was not destined to provide a transportation advantage. However, the railroads arrived in 1861, precipitating another rivalry between the neighbors on the Cedar.

When, in 1870, the Illinois Central Railroad chose Waterloo over Cedar Falls as the site of its repair shop, Waterloo was set in its path to become a major industrial center by the turn of the century.

Cedar Falls developers were chagrined by Waterloo's ascendancy in commerce, but their city started to form its distinct personality in 1876 with the establishment of the Iowa State Normal School, a teacher's college that opened with twenty-seven students in a former orphanage and quickly grew. As it took on the adornments of a college town, Cedar Falls gained the nickname of "The Lawn City", in sharp contrast with Waterloo, which by the early 1900s was known as "The Factory City".

From the earliest days, another rivalry existed in the county, that of East and West Waterloo. Probably the Indians argued about which side of the river was better before the white settlers ever arrived, as both sides had well-established paths, the route on the east side leading to present-day Marion and the one on the west to Iowa City. Early Waterluvians clashed on the location of the courthouse. (Disgruntled Cedar Fallsians threw the decisive votes to the East Side to avenge themselves on the West Side businessmen who finagled the county seat referendum out of the legislature in 1855.) Separate East and West Side school districts were established in 1866, merging only in 1942.

Probably the most famous cross-river spat came when philanthropist Andrew Carnegie began in 1898 his campaign to subsidize the building of public libraries. Of the 1,679 libraries built by the program's end in 1919, 101 were built in Iowa, two in Waterloo. A remarkably patient Carnegie foundation negotiated with implacable East and West Side factions from 1902 to 1904, when instead of the original \$30,000 grant, \$40,000 was offered to build two libraries, one on each side of the river, or one library, sited in the middle of the river. (Mayor P.J. Martin had suggested building one on the not-yet-completed Fourth Street Bridge.) Two small but tasteful buildings were finally erected, and served their respective patrons until 1981, when the library moved into the former post office, which moved from the West Side to a new location on the East Side.

While such quarrels may have wasted energy best expended elsewhere, the competition was healthy in other respects. When one side attracted a new business or platted a new housing addition, the other side frequently followed suit with alacrity. The result is that Waterloo enjoyed startling growth around the turn of the twentieth century. The city's population grew from 6,674 in 1890 to 36,230 in 1920. Between 1881 and 1914, the number of factories increased from 28 to 144.

Chief among these was John Deere and Company, which in 1918 bought out the Waterloo Gasoline Engine Company, in order to add the popular Waterloo Boy tractor to its other successful farm implement lines. The tractor works grew expansively along the Cedar's bank northwest of downtown (the river doesn't really run north and south, but rather bisects the county from its northwest corner to its southeast) and eventually branched out to an engine works and a new tractor works at other sites in the county.

The industrial growth in the early part of the century brought waves of immigrants hungry for work. Many of these were Croatians and other eastern Europeans and African-Americans from the deep South. This gave Black Hawk County a diversity of population unusual for mostly homogenous Iowa. A large contingent of Danes was drawn to Cedar Falls, where a Danish-language newspaper survived until 1932.

Another major employer was the Rath Packing Plant, one of the largest meat packers in the nation in its time. Rath and Deere workers epitomized the efforts of labor leaders to organize unions in the area in the 1930s and 40s. Both labor forces were unionized in separate efforts in 1942. Waterloo has been known as a strong “union town” ever since.

The prominence of agriculture in the region, which spawned such farm-related industries as John Deere and Rath, also led to an annual event that put Waterloo on the map for farmers from around the country. The Dairy Cattle Congress settled permanently in Waterloo in 1912, and, as the National Dairy Cattle Congress, became one of the nation’s premier livestock shows.

Black Hawk County has been the home or birthplace of many notable citizens. Among them are historian Carl Becker, former First Lady Lou Henry Hoover, the five Sullivan brothers, who perished together when their ship was sunk in the Second World War; and Olympic gold medal winner and longtime Iowa wrestling coach Dan Gable. Congressmen H.R. Gross, David Nagle and Bruce Braley were or are residents, as was Representative Charles E. Pickett, who was instrumental in the establishment of the Lincoln Memorial.

Black Hawk County lost population for the first time in its history between the 1980 and 1990 censuses, from 137,961 to 123,798. This was a time when the farm economy was wracked by low market prices and painful farm foreclosures. These and other factors led to major changes in the county’s major employers. John Deere drastically cut its workforce, and Rath closed in 1985, to be succeeded a few years later by meatpacking giant IBP. With its relatively low wages, IBP was compelled to recruit workers from far afield, causing a new wave of immigration into the area, largely from Latin America and war-torn Bosnia. Much like nearly a century earlier, immigrants came searching for the American dream in Waterloo, Iowa. Recent commercial and industrial growth has the region again in an upswing, and the 2010 population is 131,090.

Meanwhile, in Cedar Falls, the normal school with twenty-seven students had grown into the University of Northern Iowa, with an enrollment of over 13,000. While still a respected teacher’s college, it is also well known for other programs, including a highly regarded school of business. UNI has a wide variety of graduate programs, and offers doctorates in education and industrial technology.

Other communities have grown up in Black Hawk County and offer their own contributions. The other incorporated cities in the county are Dunkerton, Elk Run Heights, Evansdale, Gilbertville, Hudson, La Porte City, Raymond, and portions of Janesville and Jesup.

For further information on Black Hawk County history, visit **Cedar Valley Area Museums** ([www.cedarnet.org/ahs/museum.html](http://www.cedarnet.org/ahs/museum.html)), which includes a **Historical Tour with Area Maps and Museum Links** ([www.cedarnet.org/tour](http://www.cedarnet.org/tour)). Or you can call or visit the Grout Museum of History & Science (503 South St., Waterloo, (319)234-6357), the Cedar Falls Historical Society (303 Franklin St., Cedar Falls, (319)277-8817), public libraries at Cedar Falls (524 Main St., (319)273-8643), Dunkerton (113 W. Main St., (319)822-4610), Evansdale (123 N. Evans Rd., (319)232-5367), Hudson (329 5<sup>th</sup> St., (319)988-4217), Janesville (227 Main St., (319)987-2925), Jesup (721 6<sup>th</sup> St., (319)827-1533), and Waterloo (415 Commercial St., (319)291-4521).