

Context 4 – Farmsteads and Agricultural Life

Time Span – 1852-1950s

The First Farmsteads

The site of the City of Chaska was an early choice for land speculators as soon as the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux was signed. Early land speculator Thomas Andrew Holmes realized that this location where the Big Woods met the river, which was already an important site for Native Americans, was likely to have good natural resources and easy access. However, the actual platting of the town was delayed due to bonding and litigation, and so the settlement of the township's individual farmsteads was contiguous with the development of the city. As a result, the City of Chaska and its surrounding rural environs have always been very vitally connected.

Most of the early farm settlers of the area were of German or Scandinavian descent. Initially, they often relocated from the eastern United States, though as the century progressed many emigrated directly from Europe. They purchased the land through government programs allowing them to homestead the properties of 160 acres or less for \$1.25 an acre. The Chaska area was one of the earliest to be settled simply because it was one of the closest-in areas to be opened as part of the treaties.

Most farms began on a subsistence basis, as the homesteaders removed the trees on the plot and began creating fields. Early crops were mainly vegetables, including potatoes, onions, cabbage, carrots, and some corn. They also harvested native products, such as sap for maple syrup, ginseng, and wild rice, as well as trading with the native American population. Hunting and fishing were still important to survival.

As the farms began to develop, the relationship to the city became especially important. After Chaska was named the County Seat for Carver County in 1856, it became an important market town for selling produce and livestock, and for conducting farm business such as land acquisition and deed registration.



Chaska farmers, machinery and wagon in the early 1900s

The wood cleared from the farm sites became one of the first cash crops for the farmers, who often sold or traded it to the brickyards in town for kiln fuel or sent it into Minneapolis and St. Paul via river barges. Price ranged from \$3.00-4.50 a cord. Soon after, wheat became a principal crop, selling from between 80¢-\$1.90 a bushel. Other crops included apples, cranberries, grapes, sugar beets, and hops, as well as trade continuing in vegetables and ginseng.

As the farms became more prosperous, they added livestock — first cattle and poultry, followed by swine and some sheep. The City of Chaska began to host a monthly livestock fair beginning in September of 1866. Farmers would come into town to show and sell their animals, then spend money at the local businesses. Many speculate that this is a reason that Chaska developed so many saloons! These fairs were a popular monthly institution in Chaska up until the late 1950s.

Much of the community character of Chaska can be traced back to that early relationship between the city and the farmsteads. Many local industries, such as sugar refineries, dairies, and canning and pickling plants, located in Chaska to be close to their sources, and some of these still produce today. Older farmsteads still remain, scattered throughout the township and sometimes right in the middle of newer subdivisions. Chaska's role as county seat and busy agricultural and industrial town owes much to these farms.

Vernacular Construction on the Farmsteads

The original homes built on the farms were of simple, basic construction — a few sod homes, log cabins, or anything else that could be quickly erected so work on the land could begin. These were slowly replaced by frame houses, though even by 1868 F.E. DuToit noted, as he campaigned throughout the county, that most structures were still log cabins.

The most prestigious building material, however, for farmhouses, barns, and outbuildings was brick, particularly the local Chaska brick. Homeowners were frugal in obtaining the brick, often trading wood for it, or even making their own on-site. Buildings were often constructed in stages, and money and crop sales allowed.

The earliest extant Chaska brick farmhouse in the area appears to be the Vogel house on Bluff Creek Drive, built with homemade bricks in 1864. It is the only known gable-side home in the county. The Olsen farmhouse on Dahlgren Road is another early example, presumably built in 1868 to replace an earlier house elsewhere on the property. Several more were built in the 1870s, with the most built in the 1880s and 1890s.

Chaska brick was the favorite construction material, for any number of reasons. Firstly, it was a practical material — durable, low in maintenance, well insulating, and fire resistant. It was possible for one man who was a good mason to build much of a brick building alone and in stages, rather than the crew and block of time needed to erect a frame home.

Farmers also preferred brick because of its prestige. It became a status symbol, a sign that your farm was doing well and could invest in infrastructure. A third reason for the popularity of brick might have been sentimentality; many of the settlers were northern European, re-creating the brick buildings remembered from their homelands.

This last point is key to identifying the vernacular style of the rural farmhouses. These immigrants were not constructing replicas of existing buildings. Instead, they were building what they remembered, adapted for the new country and for the construction materials. This gave the buildings an ethnic and regional similarity and distinctive style. The buildings were usually of the predominant Chaska brick, constructed in solid, generally two-story geometric forms, with restrained ornamentation — usually just window detailing or perhaps some ornamental wood accents, particularly on the porches.

Some theorize that the design of the houses was also strongly influenced by the form and function of the farm sites. In particular, a recent study argues that the homes were often built in phases, with a more ornamental façade facing the road and a kitchen ell, which overlooked the farmyard, dominating the other side of the home. In any case, most farmhouses, regardless of their construction material, were eminently practical, relatively unadorned homes that were integrally related to the farmyard. This design is generally referred to as “cross-wing,” because the rooflines of the wings cross. Many of the outbuildings, such as the barns, dairies, and smokehouses, were of similar style and construction.

This relationship of the house and outbuildings to the land is also integral. The farmhouses were, in general, well proportioned and designed to stand out, but not dominate the rural setting. Outbuildings supported the main structure. Often the coloring of the house, whether it was of creamy buff Chaska brick or painted clapboard, complemented the natural tones of the surrounding vegetation. Were the property to be too closely encroached upon, or overbuilt, this delicate balance would be destroyed.

A recent survey of rural Carver County has documented at least sixty-six historic farmsteads, all constructed of Chaska brick. Were other farmsteads of similar age but other construction to be added in, there would likely be eighty to one hundred historic farmsteads remaining, demonstrating the above standards of development and construction techniques.

Chaska’s Agricultural Businesses

As discussed above, the close relationship between city and countryside led to a thriving agricultural industry in Chaska. A number of these resources still exist, to some extent, today.

Milling

With wheat as the predominant area crop, mills were of great importance. By the 1860s, over 100,000 bushels of wheat annually were being sent to the Twin Cities to be milled, and local businessmen George Heinline and Simon Moch determined that the "creek in the rear of town" could support a mill. Construction began in 1864, and the mill opened in 1865. With only one mill stone, it was soon under almost continual operation.

A second mill, steam powered and with four runs, soon opened at Cedar Street. It also contained a cooper's, for which local farmers provided plenty of wood for the staves.

By 1868, wheat was going for \$1.20, while milled flour was retailing for \$5.00 a sack. Local farmers withheld their product in order to negotiate better pricing, and the two mills were forced to close for a short time. By 1872, the Chaska Flouring Mill was again in financial trouble, and closed for a few months before selling to the Reidele/Fuller partnership. They produced about 100 barrels of "Star Drop" flour a day.

In the 1870s a third mill was built, also water driven. Soon, however, it was converted and all three mills were steam-driven. After a fire destroying one mill in 1893, and the reduction of the market during the recession, Chaska mills had generally closed by 1896, though some limited milling continued through the early 1900s.

"Sugar City"

Of course, the agricultural industry most closely identified with Chaska is the sugar industry. For years, Minnesota's "Sugar City" hosted everything from "Sugar Days" to the "Sugar City Basketball Team." In many ways, sugar was to agriculture as brickyards were to the construction industry.

The Carver County Sugar Factory first took shape in 1905 when the city donated the Heinecke Tract land to a pair of Michigan businessmen for its construction. The three-story main plant, which had its own railroad spur and was built with over two million bricks, cost over \$750,000 to construct.

Sugar was processed in "campaigns" from late fall to mid-winter. The first campaign began in October 1906 and employed 185 men processing over 40,000 tons of beets.

In 1911 the Carver County Sugar Company was renamed the Minnesota Sugar Company. Almost all the beets were grown within a few miles of the plant, though soon the large harvest from the Red River Valley was also added in.

The company was at its peak in the 1920s. Farmers were guaranteed \$5 a ton for beets, with a bonus as sugar

prices rose. A stable crop that had a reliable market, sugar beets provided a good living for many of Chaska's farmsteads. The sugar fields also brought in an influx of migrant harvesters, one of Chaska's first experiences with this peripatetic group.

The name changed to the American Beet Sugar Company and then to the American Crystal Sugar Company in 1934, and is now called United Sugar Corporation. However, the stock market crash and the Depression decreased production, with workers laid off and taking pay cuts; the president of the company cut his own salary by 25%. The sugar union, formed in 1938, was Chaska's first successful union organizing effort. During sugar rationing in WWII, the plant was converted into a facility for drying potatoes for conversion into industrial alcohol.

There was a small bump after this, with production rising to over 1,600 tons daily. At that point the plant was running campaigns of between 47 and 110 days, employing between 40 and 280 people. As automation changed the industry the processing part of the plant was closed in 1971. To this date United Sugar maintains a small facility in Chaska that serves as a liquid sugar distribution center.

Some historic resources remain, including the old, deco-styled offices.

"It's the Minnesota Pickle" – Pickling and Canning

The M.A. Gedney factory began negotiations with the City of Chaska in 1900 to convert the old creamery building into a pickling plant. In 1902 it contracted with several area farmers for 100 acres each of cabbage, tomatoes, cauliflower and cucumbers. Its main products were the famous pickles, as well as sauerkraut. By 1937, the company reported processing 800 tons of cabbage into 112,500 gallons of sauerkraut. The factory moved to its current location on Stoughton Avenue in 1958.

Chaska's first canning factory opened in 1904, at the old Burkhart brickyard. There was a factory, but no warehouse space, meaning that at peak times every available storage space, from garages to the back rooms of saloons, was pressed into service. The plant began by canning Minnehaha Falls corn, soon adding Minne-Paul and Chaska Bell peas. At its peak the plant processed up to 74,000 cases of corn annually, hiring up to 125 people.

Though the plant ran only seasonally, and closed for longer periods during the Depression, it remained a major economic force through 1957.

Creameries

Though a few smaller creameries had opened in Chaska, the largest did not open until Frank White established the Minnesota Valley Creamery in 1894. Hopes were high, with slogans such as “A Gold Mine in Milk” and pledges for milk from over seven hundred cows. Soon it was running two separators and over 12,000 pounds of milk daily.

Sadly, at this time the city began to discontinue community pasturing. Both the German Pasturage Association and the Chaska Dairy Association had maintained a total of eighty acres of pasture land. Soon, enterprising individual milkmen and the creamery began to handle milk production and sales, and cattle ownership became restricted to the farmsteads. This change expanded the local dairy industry, and at the turn of the century, Chaska creameries, particularly the Sugar City Cooperative Creamery, were a booming business.

Breweries

A number of breweries existed in Chaska, and many local farmers grew hops. Though these were smaller, individually run organizations rather than the large facilities like the mills and canneries, they too had an extensive role in the town’s economy and development.

The first known brewery opened in Chaska in 1862, and by 1866 there were three facilities. The brewers used German recipes to mix the barley, hops, malt and yeast — the beer was then aged in underground cellars until delivered to customers in Chaska and in nearby towns from Watertown to Augusta.

At least two breweries had beer cellars carved into the bluff, neither of which is still accessible.

Summary

Chaska’s agricultural history is an important context for several reasons. From the beginning, the town had a strong agricultural presence. The area farmsteads were influential in both the physical development and the economic stability of the town.

The farms also represent early patterns of settlement. The historic farmsteads are distinctive icons in the Chaska countryside, and the individual resources remaining are equally important.

The influence and “buying power” of the farms is another key indication of their importance. Farmers had a direct economic effect on the city, by paying their taxes and by buying products in town, particularly on the monthly market day. Perhaps more importantly, the farms required corresponding development, such as the mills, canneries, and numerous smaller industries.

Sites Currently Designated

Both the Miesler Farmstead (noted for its distinctive “fachwerk” construction) and the Ortlieb Farmstead were considered National-Register eligible, but were demolished (in 2004 & 2005) before they could be nominated to the Register.

Property Types

- Farms
- Farmhouses
- Barns
 - Stables
 - Dairies
 - Pump Houses
 - Chicken Coops
 - Smokehouses
 - Root Cellars
- Doghouses
- Sheds and Other Outbuildings
- Related Infrastructure
 - Wells
 - Post Roads
 - Livestock Fair Sites within the City of Chaska
- Agricultural Businesses
 - Canning Plants
 - Pickling Facilities – Gedney and other
 - Sugar Factories – Crystal and other
 - Mills and Related Buildings
 - Brewing Facilities
 - Breweries
 - Beer Cellars
 - Dairies and Creameries
 - Stockyards
 - Meat Packing Facilities
 - Farm Implements/Feed/Seed Stores

Recommendations and Future Actions

1. The City of Chaska should identify and inventory all remaining historic farmsteads in Chaska, and secondarily within greater Carver County. Special attention should be paid to those constructed of Chaska brick.
2. The City of Chaska should consider local designation of all remaining historic farmsteads, particularly those which retain significant integrity.

3. The Minnesota Department of Transportation is currently in the process of submitting to the National Register a Multiple Property Nomination for Chaska brick farmhouses in Carver County. The City of Chaska should support these efforts.
4. The city and county government should work together to try to preserve the feeling of agricultural life on the rural farmsteads. While many of these may not continue to be viable farms, visual elements representative of an agricultural setting, such as open, field-like space, the preservation of mature plantings (the “Big Woods”), and the retention of outbuildings should be retained. A rural farmhouse will not feel like a farm site if narrowly encroached upon by new construction.
5. The City of Chaska should consider local and/or national designation of its remaining agricultural industry resources. Examples of such include:
 - the mill and related buildings
 - remaining sugar factory resources
 - remaining Gedney (and other pickling) resources
6. Chaska should continue and expand efforts to interpret its agricultural past, such as the “Chaska: Sugar City” exhibit prepared by the Chaska Historical Society for the Carver County Historical Society, and exhibits at the History Center.
7. Chaska should work with Gedney to preserve portions of its current factory (built 1958) as representative of the relatively recent past.
8. The City of Chaska should support efforts to nominate the Mill and related buildings, such as the Mill House Gallery building, to the National Register.