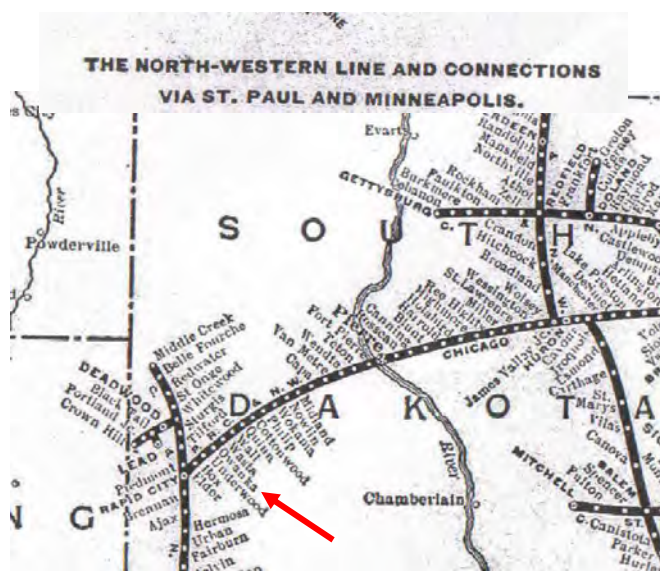


What Happened To Owanka? By Connie J. Mickelson



Gazing at an old map of South Dakota, it is surprising to see the many place names appearing on the document.¹ The names locate an area where homesteaders came together to pick up mail, go to church, attend school, seek medical attention, or gather for other important social reasons². Many of these former towns, villages, or meeting places have disappeared from the countryside of rural South Dakota.

The journey of these settlements through Native American beginnings, growth during homestead days, expansion during the railroad boom, and the factors that led to the rise and demise of some of these small towns in South Dakota will be visited in this writing. Searching for answers to the question “What happened to Owanka?” may help us to understand what happened to the many early South Dakota settlements that once dotted the countryside.³

The first known peoples of South Dakota to settle the Owanka area were the Sioux. The Sioux used this location as a camping area. An early Sioux name given to this place was “Wicota”, this term meant “a crowd. This place name slowly changed to present day Owanka.⁴ Two explanations for the meaning of Owanka are given in the local Sioux traditions. Two translations of Owanka are “where they lived”⁵ “And “good camping place”⁶ The latter is the explanation presently accepted by the nearby ranchers and local residents.

Following Box Elder Creek, the Sioux Indians found a pleasant level camping site. The hills to the north gave this location natural protection from north winds. The creek banks had some trees available for the use by these peoples.⁷ The creek gave enough water for the immediate needs of the Sioux.⁸ At this time there were ample supplies of wildlife and fruit to further aide in sustaining the nomadic life followed by the Native Americans of the area.⁹

By the late 1800’s, the availability of “free” land for homesteaders west of the Mississippi began to dwindle; therefore, Western South Dakota was opened up for settlement.¹⁰ The gold find in the Black Hills led many others who had not made it in the gold mines to travel east out to the available homesteading lands of western South Dakota to realize their dreams through ranching.

To accommodate the desires of the whites, many Indian Tribes were forced onto reservations so homesteaders could be offered land to settle. At this same time, the economy in the eastern United States was undergoing a recession, and the government wanted to expand western colonization to alleviate the lack of available work for the many immigrants coming to the United States.¹¹ Young men wanted to realize the American dream of land ownership. The government wanted to ensure the policy of Manifest Density in the United States, by creating states from ocean to ocean.¹²

The new settlers, like the Sioux before them, found the area around Owanka a good place to locate.¹³ The first settlers arrived here in the late 1880’s.¹⁴ In the early 1890’s, several miles northeast of Owanka, a supply and mail center was set up, and the name of this settlement was Dakota City. This center thrived until 1906,



when the Chicago Northwestern railroad sent railroad surveyor, H. U. Hill, to plat out the future railroad towns of Wasta and Owanka.¹⁵ Due to this railroad surveyor's decision, Dakota City became a memory. The buildings of Dakota City were moved to other locations in the area nearby. Owanka was born for the convenience of the railroad system. The railroad towns were located a specific distance apart to fuel the steam engines. The engine's fuel had to be replenished to keep up the train's power to complete its journey.¹⁶

Oddly enough by this time, 1906, the Owanka town site no longer had a good supply of water. Box Elder Creek had become a victim of the reduction of water levels, by the Hearst Homestake Mines, in the Black Hills. Most of the water in the creek no longer got this far east.¹⁷ Due to the lack of yearly runoff from the Black Hills, the water also became very alkaline, and unfit for animals or humans to drink.¹⁸ The settlers were able to dig wells north and south of Owanka, but none of these wells were easily available to the town.

The Sioux had previously known an ample and steady water supply. Due to the advances in civilization presented by the whites, the water was not good. The site of the town did¹⁹ give excellent protection from the north against the winds from snowstorms and other inclement weather which occurs in this area.²⁰ The Chicago Northwestern Railroad solved the water problems of Owanka by hauling water to the town site and filling a cistern for the town to get the water needed to fulfill the needs of the settlement.²¹

The Box Elder Creek bed was a natural path across the southern edge of South Dakota to connect the eastern part of South Dakota with the settlers in the Black Hills region.²² For this reason, the town of Owanka flourished.

In 1907, the railroad arrived, establishing the Chicago Northwestern Depot. The mail service was moved from Dakota City in May 1907.²³ The headlines in the Owanka Bee read "First Mail Route west of the Missouri River in South Dakota will be established May 1, 1909".²⁴ The railroad made Owanka a trading center for the entire area. As earlier stated, Owanka's need for water was filled by the railroad. The city leaders needed to take this problem to heart and try to work to find a solution.

The city leaders of Owanka did not make the importance of water a high priority and thus helped ensure the demise of the settlement.²⁵ Over confidence in the railroad's provision of water caused apathy among the residents, and a real attempt to solve this very serious problem was never presented. In 1931 WPA

officials presented to the town the option of having a dam built or a well dug a mile north of town. The townspeople would have had to pipe the water to the town's cisterns.²⁶ The city chose the dam, which did not solve the problem, because with the arrival of the dry years of the 1930's, the dam completely dried up, as did Box Elder Creek. The wells north of town did not dry up, but the opportunity was gone for the federal government aide which had been presented to the city in 1931.²⁷

Owanka was not without those who tried to improve the lot of the settlement. This group was called the Owanka Boosters. Rodeos, minstrel shows, plays, glee clubs, and ball teams were intricate part of the social life of the area. The rough life of the homesteaders was made bearable by these activities.²⁸ At this time the settlers had to provide for their own entertainment with events such as the Fourth of July celebrations and school Christmas program. The Boosters were quick to support such gatherings. A poem written by



Owanka baseball team-suits furnished by Mr. Litchfield, who owned a grocery store. This baseball team rode horseback to the towns of New Underwood, Wasta, Lakeside Community, and others also used team and buggys. Left to right- Earl Williams, Wm. (Billy) Waterson, Guy Williams, Russel Litchfield, Arlo Angel, Verne Comer, Joe Waterson, Hugh Waterson, Archie Bean. Taken in 1916.

Lottie Gorman called "Boost for Owanka" contained the following stanzas:

Owanka the City of Promise
Near where the Box Elder Flows
We hope someday will be famous
Who can tell? Nobody knows.

Then boost, boost, boost, for our village
Don't wait for the sun to shine
But give a big whoop for Owanka,
And keep boosting all the time.²⁹

Mrs. Gorman, along with others in the Owanka area, had a bright hope. She thought that one day Owanka would be prosperous, continue to grow, and remain a vital community forever more.

Another set back for the city of Owanka was the town's lack of a saloon. Alcohol could not be made, bought, or sold in Owanka. Mr. Joe Waterson, who gave the land to be platted for the depot, made it a stipulation in his agreement with the

railroad; no liquor would be sold in Owanka.³⁰ Despite this fact, moonshine was available west of Owanka and during Prohibition this was the way many people got the drinks they wanted.³¹ Those folks who wanted booze would bypass Owanka to have their thirst quenched.³²

The railroad brought many businesses to Owanka and the census of 1925 states that the population swelled to over 200 residents.³³ Some of the many businesses established in Owanka were the following: the Owanka State Bank³⁴, two hotels, a Methodist Church, a Catholic Church, the Owanka Bee Newspaper, Litchfield's Hardware and Implement Store, two cafés, a blacksmith shop, a gas



station³⁵, a depot, a grain elevator, a community hall, a lumberyard, and others.³⁶ The businesses help make Owanka a thriving, busy community. The grain elevator is a five-storied building that remains standing today. The structure is a testimony to the once thriving economy of the area farmers and ranchers. The railroad brought many immigrants to the area on special immigrant railroad cars.

These settlers brought their animals, furniture, household belongings, and farm implements to settle in the area. Often times an older boy or man would sleep with the belongings, while the rest of the family would be in the passenger car.³⁷

The children of the area were schooled in one-room shacks. Sometimes the schools would be held in a home until the settlers could get the necessary supplies gathered to build the school. The schools would sometimes be built with runners on them so the school could be moved to the most central location for those attending the school. With the growth of the town, the school children outgrew the buildings first constructed or used by the school system.

So before too long the growth of Owanka's school system demanded that new and larger buildings be constructed. By 1915, new edifices were built in town to accommodate the growth, and the new schools consisted of all grades from first to twelfth.³⁸ The high school was in existence until 1942, and the elementary in session until 1964.³⁹ The high school building was condemned and torn down in the 1970's.⁴⁰

Oddly enough, the school also contributed to the failure of Owanka. The school grew rapidly and brought in students from Lakeside, Elm Springs, White Owl, Baseline, and all around the area. The city had dormitories for the students who had to stay in town to go to the schools. The school had many athletic teams and competed with other area schools. In the fall of 1928 many parents bypassed

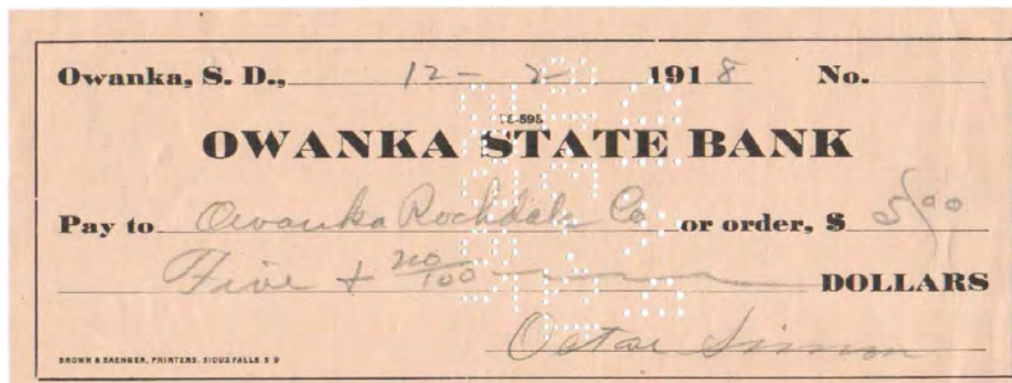
Owanka to take their children to the new school and dormitories built in New Underwood that summer.

Why would parents go further to take their children to school? In the summer of 1928 the Owanka school superintendent, Mr. Thurnston, married a ninth grade student.⁴¹ How far reaching this occurrence would be was not fully known at the time. The social mores of the day could hardly uphold this action and people chose to move their children ten miles further than put up with this action of a school official.



The town was already slowly dying and this was another death knoll.

Another factor that contributed to Owanka's problems was the bank robbery of 1920. The bank was robbed at night. The thieves blew up the safe and absconded with all of the bank's money. All of the five thieves were seen riding away on horses, and though a posse was soon in hot pursuit of the robbers, they vanished without a trace. No clues were ever found to solve this mystery, but the faith in the little bank was shaken and some folks took their banking business to ⁴²Wasta or Wall. Many of the area thought the robbery was an inside job.⁴³ In 1924, before the bank crash of 1929, the bank of Owanka ran out of funds. The bank officers never really gave adequate reasons for this bank failure and this left many without their savings. The lack of a bank gave the area residents one more reason to go elsewhere to do their business.



In 1931 the state told the city of Owanka that no one else could be buried in the Owanka graveyard⁴⁴. The city did not go ahead with the necessary paperwork to have the graveyard approved by the state so the people started taking

their deceased to Lakeside to bury. Some of the residents, who had already used the graveyard, started moving their loved ones to other local burial sites.⁴⁵ Owanka town leaders could not seem to understand the leadership necessary to slow the death of their town, and in this instance the paper work to correct the problem would not have been a huge undertaking, but it was never done.

In 1935 the railroad quit hauling water to the cistern at Owanka. The local people had to haul their water from local wells around the area and some bought their water from a water hauler in Wasta.⁴⁶ Many folks were leaving the area and this event caused the hastening of the process.



In the late 1930's, the South Dakota east-west highway, Black and Yellow Number 1416, was being improved, unfortunately for Owanka, this road was put through five miles north of the town of Owanka and this helped seal the fate of the community.⁴⁷ Owanka struggled with many to survive the 1930's in dry South Dakota.

As 1940 approached, rain once again fell on the prairies, crops were being realized, and all in the area hoped for better times. Unfortunately a sad altercation between two local residents, the Hawk brothers, took place one afternoon in December of 1940.

On December 6th of 1940, three eighth grade boys: Jim Trevillyan, Willis Mann, and Norman Bloom were standing in the doorway of the grain elevator. As the boys were talking, they watched Claude Hawks drive his 1930 black Buick to a stop in front of the office of the Owanka lumberyard where his brother Edd Hawks worked⁴⁸ the boys heard some yelling coming from inside the office, and heard what sounded like a big bang.

Claude Hawks came running out of the store and staggered thirty or forty feet to his car. All the while his brother, Edd, was right behind Claude, emptying a pistol at him⁴⁹ Claude made it to his car, but due to his gunshot wound to the abdomen, was not able to drive away. The boys watched as some of the townspeople drove Claude away to the Rapid City Hospital. The boys were told by the adults that Claude had a pistol wound in his abdomen. The boys, who had witnessed most of the fight, were never allowed close enough to see Claude's wounds.⁵⁰ Claude died on December 16, 1940.



According to the Rapid City Journal, Edd shot in defense of himself and his wife. Rachel Hawks was attempting to come between Edd and Claude. At that moment Edd got the pistol out of the desk and shot Claude. While he was in the hospital, Claude developed pneumonia and never recovered enough to go home.⁵¹ Claude Hawks died on December 16. Edd Hawks was charged with assault with a dangerous weapon.

The three boys were sent by their parents to go to high schools in towns other than Owanka. In the spring, Jim Trevillyan, Willis Mann, and Norman Bloom were all called out of school and each boy made sworn statements about what they had witnessed on that fateful day.⁵² Three storekeepers, Bill Williamson, Art Willohoite and Ben Williamson, who were brother-in-laws to Edd Hawks, testified on Edd's behalf.⁵³ Because of the results of these testimonies, despite what the three boys had seen, Mr. Hawks never served one day for the murder of his brother.⁵⁴

This murder and mishandling of justice concerning the fight, divided the small community. People took sides, and the murder trial's outcome split the community in a way that could not easily be resolved.⁵⁵

Again some parents made the decision to take their children out of this town for high school. This doomed Owanka and its high school because of the loss of revenue and business from the families of the students attending the high school. Since the mid 1930's, the school had been a main source of business, for those who still remained in Owanka. The last graduating class of the Owanka High School was 1943.⁵⁶ The grade school remained opened until the spring of 1964.

In the mid 1940's the Owanka Depot agent was moved from this town. The last cattle were sold in Owanka were in 1949.⁵⁷ In 1952 the Owanka Hall was moved to Wall. The Baptist Church was moved in 1958 to Wicksville and is still in use today.⁵⁸ The Catholic Church was taken to Lakeside in 1950's.⁵⁹ Owanka has only one family living in its buildings today.

As one passes through the remains of the Owanka community it is interesting to note the varied reasons why the towns of this part of South Dakota came to be and just how quickly they could vanish from the area. There is no one reason for the demise of Owanka, but a series of circumstances causes a town to stay viable or vanish from the scene. The town of Owanka was important in its day, but its time has passed; just as the time has passed for the tepees of the Native Americans to dot the Owanka campsite and the South Dakota prairies.

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Endnotes

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- 1 Stennent, William, History of the Chicago-Northwestern Railroads, (Chicago Press, 1908), Book Inset.
 - 2 Boehlert David, interview with author, May 2006. Mr. Beehler visited and knew Owanka when the town was a thriving railroad depot.
 - 3 Sennet, Inset.
 - 4 Sneve, Virginia Driving Hawk, "South Dakota Geographic Names", Brevet Press, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 1973.
 - 5 Sneve, 85.
 - 6 Sneve, 85.
 - 7 Benson, Henry, "The Late Great Town of Owanka", Senior Citizens News, (November 1992):29.
 - 8 Trask, Tom, telephone interview with author, May 2006.
 - 9 Trask, Tom, interview with author, May 2006.
 - 10 White Face, Charmaline, "Many Wrongs do not make it right", Rapid City Journal, (May 27, 2006), A3. Miss White Face discusses at length the false thoughts of owners who sell stolen land of the Sioux tribes.
 - 11 Robbins, Joseph, Through the Years-before 1966. Lakeside Old Settler Association, 1966:243.
 - 12 Dr. Wolff, class discussion at Crazy Horse, April 2006.
 - 13 Benson, Henry, 29.
 - 14 Waterson, Bill, "People and Places in Owanka History", Through the Years-before 1966; 1966, 217.
 - 15 Humphrey, Carl, Interview with author, April 2006.
 - 16 Sieh, Cliff, Interview with author, April 2006. Mr. Sieh lives in Wasta and knows the territory quite well. He states the big problem Owanka had was its lack of water. He also said that Owanka had no booze sold in town, but anyone who wanted it could find it nearby.

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- 17 Trask, Tom, telephone with author, May 2006. Mr. Trask and his family live along Elk Creek and Elk Creek had always been dry part of the year, until they were made aware of the Homestake Mine selling this water to Lead and Deadwood. This disclosure came at hearings held in Pierre in 1990. The water was then released to the landowners and water flowed year around until recently. This lack of water has been caused by the recent drought. But this is not due to selling the water by Homestake Mines. Mr. Trask felt the creek would have dried up in the early 1890's due to the illegal selling of water by Homestake Mine to Lead and Deadwood. So, the townspeople did not enjoy the good water supply the Sioux tribes had known.
- 18 Trask, Tom, interview with author.
- 19 Moss, Mrs. Leonard," Town of Owanka", Through the Years-before 1966. Lakeside Old Settlers Association, 1966:219.
- 20 Moss, 220.
- 21 Humphrey, Carl, Interview with author, April 2006.
- 22 Moss, 220.
- 23 Moss, 220.
- 24 "Owanka Bee", Gertrude Willhoite, May 1, 1909. It is interesting to note that the editor of the paper from 1908 to 1926 was a single woman. She seems to have hired young women to help her in this paper. Women did not get the right to vote until 1920, but out here on the prairies women could claim a homestead, prove it up, and own the land. In the case of Miss Willhoite, a woman could run a successful newspaper.
- 25 Brassfield, Evelyn, Interview by author, May 2006.
- 26 Brassfield, Walter, Interview by author, May 2006. Mr. Brassfield was a long time resident of the Lakeside area and he related how the water problem could have been solved if the city leaders had tried to.
- 27 Brassfield, Walter, Ibid.
- 28 Keller, Blanche Oldfied, "C. E. Oldfied"Through the Years- before 1966. 1966:210.
- 29 Gorman, Lottie, "Original Poems" Through the Years-before1966. Lakeside Old Settlers Association, 1966:232. The poem was twelve four line stanzas

long. The poem was full of promise and named many of the businesses associated with Owanka.

30 Benson, Harold, 29.

31 Sieh, Cliff, interview with author, May 2006.

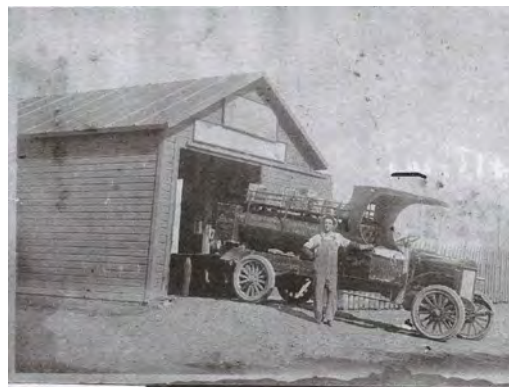
32 Sieh, Cliff, interview with author, May 2006.

33 South Dakota Census, 1925.

34 This is the bank and gas station as they stand today.



35 Hawkeye Truck: First Standard Oil Bulk truck in Owanka, SD. 1917 – Edd Hawks



36 Moss, 222.

37 Masek, Vada, "The Ben Williamson Story" Through the Years-before 1966. Lakeside Old Settlers Association, 1966:198-199.

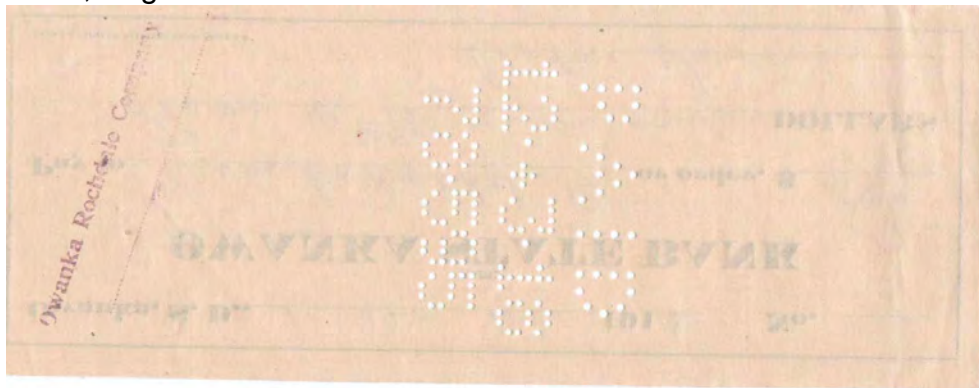
38 "The Owanka Schools" Through the Years-before 1966, Lakeside Old Settlers Association, 1966:228-231. This article contains many pictures of the Owanka Schools. There is no one author noted in this article.

39 "The Owanka Schools", 228-231.

40 "The Owanka Schools", 228-231.

41 Brassfield, Walter, interview with author, May 2006. Mr. Brassfield was in high school at this time. His parents decided to change their children's school site and Mr. Brassfield's parents told him this was because of the actions of Mr. Thurnston. Several other families in the Lakeside area also took their children to New Underwood to complete their schooling. This was done despite the fact it was further to get to the New Underwood School.

42 Simon, Edgar.



43 Simon, Edgar, interview with the author, May 2006. Mr. Edgar also gave the author a check of his father's to reproduce and put in this paper.

44 Pictures from Owanka graveyard. It was abandoned in 1936.



45 Humphrey, Carl, interview with author, May 2006.

46 Sieh, Clifford, interview with author, May 2006.

47 Simon, Edgar, interview with author, April 2006

48 Trevillyan, Jim, interview with author, May 2006. Mr. Trevillyan related this entire story to the author. Willis Mann, Norman Bloom, and he were standing in the doorway of the granary across the street from the hardware store where Mr. Edd Hawks worked. Mr. Claude Hawk came screeching up to a

stop and blustered across the street. The boys heard yelling, as Claude did not even close the door as he entered into the store. The boys heard a report of a gunshot and watched Claude stagger out and run towards his car. Edd came out, aimed his pistol at Claude, and emptied the gun at him. Later that school year, Mr. Trevillyan and the others were taken out of school and gave their testimonies to the district's office, but they were never asked to come to an official trial. Mr. Trevillyan related this episode made folks take sides and divided the town. Some children were taken out of the school system, and this did nothing to help the economy, which was at this time dependent on the school.

49 Rapid City Journal, December 7, 1940. This gives an account of the shooting.



50 Trevillyan, Jim, interview by author, May 2006.

51 "Hawks dies and brother is rearrested" Rapid City Journal, December 17, 1940.

52 Trevillyan, Jim, interview by author, May 2006.

53 Karp, Edward S. "Pieces of My Life, Just for You" My fifty-five years in South Dakota: 49-56, Mesquite, Texas, 1988. In Mr. Karp's writing he states that the shooting was viewed as justifiable self defense. The lawyers got the money realized from the Hawk place. Edd did not serve any time in prison.

54 Simon, Edgar, interview with author, June 2006.

55 Benson, Harold, 32.

56 "Schools in the Owanka Area," Through the Years-before 1966, Lakeside Old Settlers Association, 1966,228.

57 Sieh, Clifford, interview with author, April 2006.

58 Moss, Mrs. Leonard, "Fifty years with the First Baptist Church of Owanka", Through the Years-before 1966,Lakeside Old Settlers Association, 1966, 264-266. This building is five miles north of Owanka. The building has been

added on to and is presently being used by the local residents as a church. It is on the old Black and Yellow Road numbered 1416.



59

This picture is Saint Margaret's Catholic Church and is at Lakeside. The graveyard is two miles south of this building. This church is still in use.

