Omemee: A “Cross-Rails” in North Dakota

By Sara J. McIntee

Sitting in the kitchen of Charles Kippen’s farm house, Charles sat back to think when he was asked what type of celebrations occurred in Omemee. Charles grew up on his farm outside of town, experiencing the Great Depression and World War II with small town life. He listed off dances and parties, Christmas and holiday celebrations. Then his eyes lit up. “1937,” he declared. In 1937, there was a celebration called Omemee Days. His wife dug out an old photo album and he flipped through to a black and white picture of two fair haired and skinned nine year old children. Both the boy and girl were dressed in a kilt, complete with sash and hat, and are standing on a gravel road with wood buildings in the background. Kippen declared the boy was himself and the girl was Marian (Frasier) Hancock, dressed in traditional kilts for a parade during the Omemee Day’s celebration. There were pagents, parades, and street dances to celebrate the Scottish heritage of a town where the settlers were of mostly Scottish or Scottish-Canadian descent.

The buildings behind Kippen and Frasier, identified as the town hall and some houses, are now long gone. In roughly eighty years, from the post office opening in 1890 to the closure of the town in the 1970s, Omemee declined just as quickly as it boomed. This is a puzzling occurrence since Omemee was in a prime location to thrive. A rare type of railroad town, Omemee was positioned at a “cross-rails” of the Great Northern Railroad and the Soo Line. It should have grown nearly as big, or even bigger than Bottineau County’s county seat, Bottineau. Bottineau, roughly sixteen miles north west of Omemee, was situated on only one railroad, the Great Northern, but today it is a thriving community of about three thousand five hundred people.

Why would Bottineau, a town with only one railroad, outgrown and outlive Omemee, a town with two railroads? The answer to this question can be found in the growth and expansion of the railroad in the area. What should have been Omemee’s greatest provider turned out to be its death. To
understand how a railroad that built a town in north central North Dakota could also cause its decline, it is necessary to understand how railroad towns occurred on the Great Plains and settlement patterns in North Dakota.

The first non-native American settlement in North Dakota is attributed to Pembina, located in the extreme north-eastern corner of the state on the confluence of the Red River of the North and the Pembina River. At the beginning of the settlement, Pembina had been considered part of Canada until 1818. Settlers from Fort Douglas in the Selkirk colony in present day Canada were driven south in search of provisions and wintered at an old fur-trading post located at present day Pembina in the winter of 1812. The trend of moving south for the winter lasted for several years until the Métis and white settlers were forced out of the encampment by the Hudson’s Bay Company because of a belief that a division between the settlers at Fort Douglas and Pembina weakened the Selkirk colony. In 1818, the boundary between British Canada and the United States was drawn at the forty-ninth parallel. This placed all of Pembina save for one cabin on the United States side of the line.¹ Some of the original settlers remained in Pembina, but by 1836, it had been abandoned. Out of this settlement, however, grew a great fur trade network between Fort Garry and St. Paul along the Red River, which opened the Valley to a new demographic.

Trade was important to the draw of settlement to North Dakota, but so was the lure of new farm land. Some of the first non-native American settlers moved the Red River Valley seeking new fertile land that was similar to the already claimed areas of southern Minnesota. Largely influenced by the signing of the Homestead Act by President Lincoln in 1862, settlers came looking for new land, but access into the territory was challenging. In the 1870s, such men as James J. Hill, Norman Kittson, and Alexander Griggs improved upon the access of the Red River Valley via steamboat. The railroad followed in 1872, crossing the Red River, and ending in Bismarck in 1873 due to bankruptcy, giving North Dakota a

¹ Elwyn B. Robinson, History of North Dakota (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 65.
connection to the outside world. The Northern Pacific was unreliable at best, but it was a start nonetheless.

The railroad is one of the most important influences on the growth in population on the Great Plains between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Railroads provided more than population movement in the northern Great Plains. The three major railroads that influenced settlement in North Dakota also carried wheat harvested in North Dakota to mills in Minneapolis and docks in Duluth, providing access to new business.² The Northern Pacific entered the state from the south in 1872, while the Great Northern was a merger between two railways in 1889 and dominated the northern part of the state. In 1894, the Soo Line, which stretched diagonally across the state starting in the very north-western corner and leaving in the south-eastern portion, provided a competition for the Great Northern for control of the northern part of the state. These railways helped to solve some of the settlement problems North Dakota faced as a state on the northern Great Plains.

One of the biggest challenges to the settlement of the Great Plains region, including North Dakota, is the location and the remoteness of the area.³ Another problem for the Great Plains is the assumption that settlement and governmental issues on the plains could be solved in the same manner as settlement and governmental issues were handled in the Eastern United States.⁴ Settlement has to be viewed through a different model. For example, Kraenzel divides the settlements on the Great Plains into two categories: the sutland and the yonland. Sutland is defined as a more densely settled, string-like area of settlements along major avenues of transportation, originally starting with the railroads, and soon followed by major highways, bus routes, and public utilities such as telephone and power lines.⁵ The sutland is the location for main businesses; industrial, educational, health, governmental, and social

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³ Robinson, xv.
⁵ Kraenzel, 196.
functions in the region; and the site for certain agricultural specialties. The “sutler” is historically the supply agent at the army post.  

In contrast there is the “yonland”, the in-between area generally without major transportation avenues and other services found in sutland. This area “out yonder” from the sutland holds smaller towns that are less developed due to the issue of inadequate finances and people to support the services. Yonland is not the hinterland, nor the inland, as Kraenzel states all of the Great Plains are a hinterland and inland. Yonland is a small, semi-arid area, and is held in-between sutland areas. Keeping these definitions of yonland and sutland in mind, how could one characterize a ghost town that once existed along a great transportation line such as a major railroad?

Railroad towns are in truth pre-planned sutland areas to reach the potential yonland. If one were to look at railroad map of the eastern states, and compare it to one of the Great Plains, it is prevalent that the railroads in the eastern states do not expand in straight lines. They are clustered and disorderly to connect the thousands of towns that existed before the railroad. A railroad map of North Dakota shows straight lines with neat little dotes located along these lines in nearly symmetrical spacing. Most of North Dakota was settled after the arrival of a railroad. This pre-plotting of town sites before there were potential settlers not only was to reach potential yonland areas, but a wish to control the areas and make them remain yonland for the improvement of the sutland business.

Building before there was business carried potential problems, such as loss of money by building too fast or not enough population to support the area. Another potential threat to a new railroad town was the continued expansion of the railroad, and the future increase of use in the automobile. The automobile made distances between sutland’s shorter, and a person in a yonland could travel the distance to a bigger or more desired sutland than the one closer to his location. But what made some

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6 Kraenzel, 196.
7 Kraenzel, 196-197.
8 Hudson, 71.
sutland railroad towns die and others thrive? This question cannot be solved with one cookie cutter answer, and each town has its own individual story of its decline. Omemee is one such town that was in prime position to thrive but was outlived by a town only sixteen miles north, Bottineau. The history of Omemee is important in understanding its decline.

In late 1887, the farmers living between Bottineau and Willow City felt a need for a post office halfway between these two towns. A petition was drawn up with the name of Omemee for the site which was located in Sec. 4-160-75 of the Willow Vale Township, along the Great Northern Railroad as it ran north from Rugby to Bottineau. This area is known geographically as the Souris River basin, the remains of the lake bed for ancient Lake Souris, and is surrounded by formations known as “moronic hills”.\(^9\) Figures one, two, and three illustrate the location of Bottineau County in North Dakota, Willow Vale Township within Bottineau County, and Omemee within Willow Vale.

Located about sixteen miles south east of Bottineau and ten miles north west of Willow City, the town site was named for Omemee, Ontario, Canada, the hometown of Omemee’s first post master. George Raye became post master on April 8, 1890, when the post office was moved to Omemee from Amity Township. On May 15, 1893, the town was platted by William Cole.\(^10\) The word “omemee” derives from the Ojibwa word *omimi*, meaning pigeon or turtle dove.\(^11\) Omemee’s position along the Great Northern Railroad was important because it was considered the “end of the line” for many in the Willow Vale Township and surrounding communities. Bottineau and Willow City were just too far for some residents. The Great Northern at this time ended in Bottineau.

Omemee enjoyed a great boom during its early years. A home was converted to the Shamrock Hotel and grain elevators were built rapidly to hold the increase in grain deliveries. Most of the settlers of the area were Scottish descent by way of Canada, and they were mainly Presbyterians, Methodist,

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11 Wick, 145.
and Catholic. At one point, Omemee was home to three churches; however, the Catholic community never built a church in town. Instead, a building was moved in to be used as a place of worship. A school one mile north of the town was moved into town in 1896, and a new one replaced this building in 1898. Enrollment had reached 64 by 1900 under the direction of teacher J.C. Miller who was paid forty-five dollars a month to perform both teaching and janitorial duties. A brick school was built in 1903 and in 1918 the Cole Hotel was purchased and converted into the high school. The locations of the brick grade school and high school are seen in figures four, five, and six. Incorporated in 1902, the town attracted more businesses. The first doctor in town, Dr. McKay, was followed by Dr. Miller and Dr. Stewart. A brass band- claimed as one of the best in the state- and a talented baseball team provided fun and entertainment for the early citizens as Omemee as well.

1903 brought in a momentous occasion for Omemee. The Soo Railroad was nearing the town, and this was received with great optimism by the citizens. A town situated between two major railways should bring a boom in business and population, and keep the small town on the map. The town moved to secure its position between the two powerful railroads to Secs. 4 & 9-160-75 in 1903 and prepared itself for a bright future. More elevators were constructed along the new railroad and old ones were moved into better positions. At first, each railroad had its own depot, but after a few years of competition, the Soo line and the Great Northern decided a compromise to share one depot with two agents at the cross-rails. Figures seven and eight show the Great Northern and the remnants of the Soo, and figures nine, ten, and eleven are of the old cross-rails remaining from the deconstruction of the Soo line in the late twentieth century and the location of the depot.

Omemee was expected to grow, and for a short while it did. Three years after the Soo Line reached Omemee, the population was reported to be six hundred and fifty residents, but in the 1910

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12 Egge, 80.
13 Egge, 80.
14 Wick, 145.
Census, it was recorded at three hundred and thirty-two. The population yo-yoed for many Census records following, and it was reported at one point in the early 1930s that the population had reached nearly six hundred again. However, by the 1970 Census, only five residents were recorded. This increased to ten in 1980, but the town was dis-incorporated after a report of only three residents in 1990. By the 2000 Census, Omemee was not recorded. Rather, the residents of the area filed under the Willow Vale Township as a population of thirty-four.

One of the lifetime residents of Omemee, Charles Robert Kippen is grandson to Robert D. Kippen and Christa (Fraiser) Kippen, who arrived to the Omemee area from Glengarry County, Ontario in 1887. Kippen’s father, Augus, had been five during the move. Augus inherited the farm roughly three quarters of a mile east of Omemee and raised a family, and in turn Charles took over and raised his own family with his wife Helen (Davidson) Kippen. At eighty two, Charles still farms his land, and he and his wife care for the Omemee Cemetery across the road from their farm yard, mowing and attending to grave sites. Charles even constructed a new gate to the cemetery in 2009, as seen in figure twelve. When asked why Charles and his wife still care for a cemetery of a ghost town, Kippen just shrugged and answered it had been near their land since he was born. It was something he had always done. He could not recall why the cemetery was located where it was.15

Kippen remembered his father spoke a bit about Omemee’s early days, but laughed with a joke that as a young man he did not always listen. He did tell of a story from his father’s young adulthood that once a train derailed off the Great Northern Bridge near the town. The bridge was out and a lantern man tried to flag the conductor to stop. For whatever reason, the conductor did not stop and the engine fell into the bridge. Kippen recalls no one died, as it was not a passenger train. The current

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15 Charles Kippen, interview by author, Omemee, ND, August 14th, 2010.
Great Northern Bridge is pictured in figure thirteen. Kippen’s personal memories, however, are from Omemee’s later boom years.\(^{16}\)

In the midst of the growth, Omemee was home to several businesses. At one time, there were four general stores, three implement dealers, two banks, three livery barns, three hotels, one restaurant, two boarding houses, two blacksmiths, two doctors, one veterinary surgeon, three lumber yards, four billiard and pool halls, one bakery, one meat market, one law firm, and eight elevators.\(^{17}\)

Charles recalled his aunt owned one of the boarding houses and his father worked in later years in a service station located in town. This service station still stands, as pictured in image fourteen. Across the road from the service station was once a bank and post office. Now, the area has been plowed and is a field, as seen in figure fifteen.\(^{18}\)

Kippen also recalled his years going to school in Omemee. He graduated from Omemee High School in 1946 with a total class number of eight, and was an active player on Omemee’s basketball team. In 1951, the schools in Omemee closed and the children either attended Bottineau or Willow City. The grade school was the only one that held a hot lunch, so if high school members wished to have a hot lunch, they would have to run across town to the grade school during lunch hour. Dances were also a part of Kippen’s childhood, not only in Omemee’s town hall, but traveling some Saturday nights to nearby towns as well.\(^{19}\) Other entertainment included the Omemee Opera House and a horse race track. “We had fun then, too,” remarked Kippen.\(^{20}\)

There was a brick yard located north of town, and a flour mill which was built with a two thousand dollar grant from the Businessmen’s Association.\(^{21}\) Omemee was also proud to be home to a newspaper, The Omemee Herald, but is possibly most famously remembered for the pop factory located

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\(^{16}\) Kippen, interview.  
\(^{18}\) Kippen, interview.  
\(^{19}\) Kippen, interview.  
\(^{20}\) Kippen, interview.  
\(^{21}\) Maynard.
in town that was owned and operated by Chris Rasmussen. Kippen recalled walking to town with friends and splitting the dollar it took to buy a case of the safflower seed pop. In 1969 the factory closed, and Kippen and his wife purchased the well the factory used and rerouted the water to their farm. They still use this well today.\(^{22}\) Three churches stood as well as four “blind pigs”, or bars. Legal items were sold up front in a blind pig, and, if one had the right connections, everything else was sold in the back.\(^{23}\) Born in 1928, Charles Kippen was too young to remember the end to prohibition, but his father told stories of the bootlegging in the town. It never was a prominent problem, Kippen recalled, but it was there.\(^{24}\)

While the arrival of the Soo to Omemee was received with excitement, what the people did not know what this was the start of the sad end to the town. There is a combination of factors that affected the decline. First, while several people had wanted a place between Bottineau and Willow City that was closer and easier to reach, Bottineau and Willow City had been established long before Omemee was incorporated, and a number of the farmers and residents of the area had become accustomed to doing business in either of these towns. Second, the Soo Line and the Great Northern did not end in Omemee and Bottineau, respectively. The Soo continued east, and towns such as Gardena (1908) and Kramer (1908), attracted business and debunked Omemee’s importance as a middle town between the two giants, Bottineau and Willow City. Also, as the Great Northern moved north west of Bottineau, it reached into areas that no other railroad had been. Carbury (1901), Souris (1901) and Westhope (1903) provided business to Bottineau that Omemee did not have access to and Bottineau was able to grow, dominating the grain business of that portion of the county.\(^{25}\)

Helen Kippen spoke about this fact bitterly. The unfortunate removal of importance for Omemee hit the town fast. Businesses began to leave. First to go was the newspaper, followed by the

\(^{22}\) Kippen, interview.  
\(^{23}\) Maynard.  
\(^{24}\) Kippen, interview.  
\(^{25}\) Egge, 80.
butcher shop, Lein’s Jewelry, and an implement dealership. Some were closed for good, others moved to the more hopeful and booming town of Bottineau. The doctor, bankers, blacksmiths, and hotels all closed, and the depot and churches left. The post office was closed on April 21, 1967, with mail moved to Willow City, and finally the pop factory was the only business left. That too closed in 1969.26

Today, the few remaining farmers around the ghost town of Omemee are members of the Willow Vale Township community, but there is a stir of controversy. In the past ten years, plots of the old town site have been sold to buyers from all over. Charles told of a New Zealand land owner who, while visiting his newly purchased plot, came to Kippen for a general chat of the area. The pieces of land are sold with the tag of excellent retirement building locations. While buyers, of whom many bought the lots without viewing them first, are complaining of being mislead about the “excellence” of the location (some of the purchases have even been made on eBay), it is the locals that feel they are being cheated out of their hometown and traditional farm land. Most of the land being bought will never be developed, and many of the owners feel it is an investment.27

Charles spoke about this incident of people buying plots of his childhood town. Not only are locals outright selling the plots, but many are being foreclosed upon, and locals cannot afford to keep their own land. In a Notice of Foreclosure of Tax Lien report from July 2010, there was an astonishing thirty-six lots in foreclosure, many that are from the original location of the town. In a 2005 report about the sale of plots, Charles was quoted to have said he had a chance to buy the entire town for five thousand dollars, and regrets that he never did. He did not mention this in the August 2010 interview, only that he now owned a small portion of Omemee.28

Omemee is just one of hundreds of ghost towns in North Dakota and on the Great Plains that had a bright future with the start of the railroad, but could not be sustained. Each town had varying

26 Egge, 80.; Kippen, interview.; Maynard.; Wick, 145.
28 AP, “Ghost Town”.; Bottineau County Auditor, Notice of Foreclosure of Tax Lien, Mae Streich, July 15th 2010.; Kippen, interview.
reasons for its decline; Omemee’s being the expansion of the railroad. Whatever the cause, it is a sad occasion when a town that was once a thriving, unique community has to close. Today, all that is left in Omemee is remnants of the original roads (figure 16), the service station, a fraction of the twelve miles worth of sidewalks (figure 17), the school superintendents home (figure 18), a pump house (figure 19), and a mysterious brick foundation (figure 20). The streets are covered in grass, the sidewalks are nearly cracked beyond recognition, and the superintendent’s home has been partially torn down and forgotten about. Oddly, this is a fulfilled prophetic scene. Stopping to look across the road to where his aunt’s hotel had once been, Charles stated, “My dad said a guy had a dream he told [my dad] about...he dreamt that the grass would be growing on the streets of Omemee.” Charles followed my father and me into our pick-up, and we drove out of town on the grass covered streets.
Figure 3- Willow Vale Township, 1929. Omemee is blocked out in green, The Great Northern is highlighted in yellow, and the Soo Line is highlighted in red. Milbank Atlas Company, Milbank, SD. 1998.

Figure 4- Grade school location near fence pole and tree. The Soo Line is directly north.
Figure 5- School Superintendents's House on left. High school location on right by trees.

Figure 6- Location of high school. Used as garbage pit.

Figure 7- The Great Northern Railroad, facing north, which still operates. The location of the Soo line can be seen in the center to the left as a rock path. Omemee is to the north-west.
Figure 8: The torn remains of the Soo Line, facing west. A bridge still stands by the first area of tress. Omemee is to the north.

Figure 9: The location where the Soo and Great Northern once crossed. Facing east, Omemee is to the north.

Figure 10: The cross rails, discarded after the deconstruction of the Soo line, and left on the side to rust.
Figure 11- Standing on the Soo Line, facing north east to view the Great Northern. The depot stood in this area, in-between the railways. Omemee is to the north.

Figure 12- Omemee Cemetery. Located about one mile east of Omemee on 89th St. NE.

Figure 13- Current Great Northern bridge. Standing on 89th St. NE looking south. Omemee is to the north west.
Figure 14- Service station located in town. Facing north.

Figure 15- Across the road from service station. Facing south.

Figure 16- Looking north into town. Prairie trail was once a main road. Building in the background is the service station.
Figure 17 - Portion of a sidewalk facing north, running along the road in Figure 16.

Figure 18 - Superintendent’s Home, located on east side of Great Northern tracks.

Figure 19 - Pump house, south of the old high school location. Great Northern tracks are behind it.
Figure 20: Foundation located over the hill to the east from the pump house. Peak of the pump house can be seen just over the hill.

Birds eye view of Omemee. The railroad is the Great Northern. Looking north west. Date of photograph unknown. From Historical Highlights of Bottineau County, pg. 80.

Map, via Google Maps, with key features pointed out.
1. Posted land
2. Wheat field
3. Service station.
4. Old High School Location.
5. Superintendent’s Home.
6. Present day silo’s.
7. Sidewalk.
8. Old Grade School Location
9. Great Northern Bridge
10. Railroad Cross Rail’s
11. Soo Line Bridge