

EVERYTHING ROLLED DOWNHILL

A Brief History of the Okanogan County Courthouse

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Ruby City was as wild and woolly a town as ever existed on the western frontier. Cheap whiskey, prostitution and frequent gun play were common elements of life. “The biggest liars and thieves I [have met elsewhere],” confirmed one bewildered traveler in 1889, “are honorable, high-minded citizens compared to the beauts who abound here.”

Another visitor to Ruby City reported a typical example of lawlessness. A drunken customer had been denied entrance into the town’s chief bawdy house early one morning. The inebriated man thereupon took a swing at the outraged proprietress; she reacted by coolly producing a revolver and blowing a hole through her assailant’s chest. At this point the lady suddenly remembered some urgent business in Spokane Falls and quickly boarded the next stage out of town. The murderous madam returned in a week or two, but by then the entire incident had been forgotten, and she once again resumed her bustling trade.

This violent community flourished because of the many silver mines that pocked the hillsides surrounding the town. The *Ruby Miner* of June 1892 proudly crowed, “Nature has endowed Ruby with the elements of a city. Man has supplied the adjuncts to make a metropolis.” The paper likened the district to the Comstock Lode and Ruby to Virginia City. A more realistic visitor compared the town to a far more ancient city; he called it “the Babylon of the West.”

Despite being one of the roughest towns in Washington Territory, Ruby City was also the legal seat of Okanogan County. The story of how this political coup was accomplished is every bit as interesting and colorful as the inhabitants of the rough-and-ready mining town. Ironically, that story begins with a cattleman, not a miner.

Thirty-three-year-old Cullen Bryant Bash came from a politically active Indiana family, and he was used to dealing with elected officials. As a rancher and customs agent, Bash was tired of having to make the 200-mile trek to Colville every time he had business to transact. He was not the only one who felt this way—the miners, merchants, and farmers who were moving into the region also wanted a closer source of governance.

Bash and a partner devised a bill that would separate a huge tract of land comprising all of present Okanogan and Chelan Counties from Stevens. Since Bash was one of the few men in the area who could afford to pay an overseer to look after his cattle, he volunteered to push the bill through the territorial legislature. The rancher accordingly left for Olympia in December 1887, determined to have his way.

Unfortunately, there were several bills that year designed to move county borders. This was making legislators very nervous, and there was a coalition of county representatives who were

determined to beat back any measures of the sort that might come up. The lawmakers from Colville were naturally the most reluctant to see a division since they stood to lose a great deal of their tax base.

The new county had one indefatigable champion in Olympia, and that was Representative W. J. Thompson of Tacoma. It was rumored that the politician had invested heavily in the Ruby City mines and for that reason supported the division. Whatever his motives, Thompson rescued Bash's bill from certain defeat and lobbied for it vigorously. Thanks to the Tacoma man's arm-twisting, the bill was eventually passed by a paper-thin majority. On February 2, 1888, the governor signed the highly contested act that created Okanogan County.

The first order of business for the infant county was to determine a county seat and appoint temporary county officials. A trio of new commissioners had been named in the division bill, and they represented a good cross section of Okanogan's elite. William Granger was one of the new county's chief cattlemen and George Hurley was proprietor of Ruby City's biggest emporium, but by far the most remarkable commissioner was Guy Waring.

Waring was easily the best educated and most sophisticated resident of north central Washington in the late 1880s. He came from a prosperous New York family, had been educated at Harvard, and counted Theodore Roosevelt and novelist Owen Wister as personal friends. Having come west seeking wealth and adventure, Waring bought a cattle ranch near Oroville. From there he was able to observe and later record the actions of his neighbors in a wry and amusing work called *My Pioneer Past*, published in 1936.

Soon after arriving in the area, the Ivy League rancher was appointed justice of the peace and soon began moving in the most exalted circles of Okanogan society. It was probably inevitable that Waring would be one of the new county's first commissioners, although according to his humorous account of the incidents that followed, it was a somewhat dubious honor.

The only two towns of any importance in the region were Ruby City and Salmon City, and when it came to deciding on the seat of the new county, partisans from both communities were very vocal in their support. Before the commissioners were to meet, the maneuvering and politicking had been intense. Both of the contending towns had produced "liberally signed petitions" listing backers from each district, but there were other inducements, too. The citizens of Ruby offered to provide offices for the county officials at no cost to the taxpayers, while Salmon City offered five acres of land. On March 6, 1888, the commissioners met to decide this issue in an extremely rustic log cabin on the John Perkins ranch at the head of Johnson Creek.

There was never any doubt about how Guy Waring would vote. He despised Ruby City, with its gin mills, fleabag hotels and dens of iniquity. So when the first meeting of the Okanogan County Commissioners took place in the little cabin, he was ready to plead his case. Unfortunately, Waring had not anticipated the raucous crowd that assembled outside.

Somehow, news of the meeting had circulated through the streets of Ruby City, and a motley group of citizens had come out to the Perkins Ranch in order to hold a celebration in honor of the new commissioners. "Whores, thieves, and drunkards, and other notorious citizens of the mining town were on hand," recalled the Harvard man. "They were of course agreeably drunk, and serenaded us so loudly that it was difficult for anybody inside the ranch house to hear himself speak."

The three men did their best to discuss the relative merits of Ruby and Salmon City, but when they had failed to make a decision by late afternoon, the crowd began to grow restive. Loud cries of "Good old Ruby" and "Ruby for county seat" made concentration difficult for the men inside. Then the people outside formed a large circle, and the drunken harlots and their putative customers danced around the house in a bacchanalia fueled by excitement and bootleg whiskey.

Having failed to reach a decision, the exhausted commissioners were forced to adjourn until the next day. Waring was in for an unpleasant surprise the next morning. One of his colleagues had experienced a mysterious change of heart overnight. Hurley, the mining town merchant, had always been in favor of Ruby, but Waring strongly suspected Granger of having been bribed. Despite Waring's best efforts, Ruby City—this suburb of Hell—was to be the new county seat.

After the townspeople had participated in a drunken spree of rejoicing, the commissioners could settle down to running the county. The men decided that they needed a few offices.

Accordingly, they found a rickety structure measuring 20 feet square for the auditor and another smaller one for the sheriff. They next decided to erect a rather flimsy jail made of spiked wooden scantlings for the county's many rambunctious inhabitants. The officials then leased a building on Ruby's dusty main street to house the various other county offices. The treasurer obviously knew the reputation of Ruby City only too well, for rather than leaving the money in town, he put the county funds in a baking powder can and buried it on his farm.

By the time the next election came around in November 1888, the rest of the county had become fed up with the shenanigans in Ruby City. While the mining town reeled on in its usual tipsy way, Salmon City made its move. Townspeople quietly began lining up support for a county seat coup in the outlying areas, and by November they were ready. The town decided about this time to change its name as well as its losing image. Henceforth it would be known as Conconully [Konk-a-nelly].

Though residents of Ruby voted for their hometown 92 to 5 in the county-wide election, Conconully won overwhelmingly, 357 to 157. A few months after the citizens of Okanogan had voiced their decision, wagons pulled up to the rough-hewn county buildings to haul furniture, law books and a large safe to the new county seat. Ruby City's brief fling with respectability was over.

When the Panic of 1893 struck Ruby, it finished off many businesses, and when the price of silver fell in 1899 it spelled the end for the wild boom town. Eventually people moved away and the town became deserted. Vandals stripped the houses of anything they could steal, and the ramshackle buildings fell into decay. Finally a fire roared through the gulch and destroyed the remains. Today there is nothing but a plaque and a wooded valley to mark what was once the state's wildest town.

While Ruby City went into decline, Conconully shot to prominence. Having nabbed the county's seat of government, citizens of the town were determined to give it a good home. The first courthouse was a wood frame building that the county rented for \$25 a month, and during the winter of 1889-90 the commissioners authorized construction of a new, sturdier wooden jail. After the lease on the first courthouse expired in 1890 there was considerable controversy over where the court would move next, so Okanogan's government moved from one temporary location to another. Finally, in 1892, the county built a new, permanent courthouse.

Local builder Steve Herrick was paid \$2,495 to construct a simple, two-story wooden building on a hillside overlooking Conconully. Rectangular in shape, measuring 30 by 60 feet, it featured a

false front and wide steps leading up to a generous porch covered by a balcony that opened from the second floor. The lumber for the new courthouse had been supplied by a water-powered mill on the south fork of nearby Salmon Creek.

Although the county now had a courthouse better than anything they had possessed before, it was still not exactly a gilded palace. O. H. Woody described the structure in an article he published in the *Okanogan Independent* in 1943. He recalled that spectators had to sit on uncomfortable backless benches if they wanted to witness the court's proceedings. The floor of the rustic building was strewn with sawdust in order to absorb the tobacco juice that was spat liberally by visiting citizens. "No need for cuspidors in that court room," he remarked truthfully. In order to expand with new growth, the county kept adding inelegant side rooms to the original structure until at last the building was a hodgepodge of additions and auxiliary sheds. Still, it served the county well for many years.

Conconully had the courthouse, but that crown did not rest easily or securely on her head. The town's location deep within a remote mountain valley was fine while the mining boom was in full swing, but when the metals played out Conconully suddenly seemed remote and inconvenient. In addition, farmers and orchardists were coming into the county and settling along the river valleys where the land was more fertile. When depression hit the mining camps in 1893 and the resultant depopulation had taken its toll, there could be little doubt that Conconully's days as county seat were numbered. This unsettled period caused one historian to remark, "Had the Okanogan County courthouse been built on wheels, there could not have been more repeated and inflamed efforts to drag it from one community to another."

The first challenge to Conconully's primacy occurred in 1892 when Chelan circulated a petition asking to be considered for the county seat. This was thrown out on a very questionable technicality, but the first shot had been fired in a war that would last for another two decades. When Chelan's aspirations were denied a second time, in 1898, the lakeside town chafed under Okanogan's sway, and in the early years of the 20th century the entire region broke away to form Chelan County.

No sooner had Chelan been disposed of than another claimant arose. This time it was the freight and distribution center of Riverside, situated on the banks of the Okanogan River. The town argued that it was ridiculous for the seat of government to be housed in such a backwater as Conconully. By 1908 Riverside was ready to mount a full-fledged campaign, complete with petition, \$10,000 in assurances, and plans for a new courthouse.

The *Okanogan Record* of Conconully made a vehement and predictable attack on Riverside. They lambasted the financial arrangements, the motives, and even the proposed courthouse building, claiming "Specifications a Botch" in large headlines. The campaigning and the name-calling became increasingly shrill as the two towns battered each other in the press.

During the campaign, Riverside had so much confidence in its victory that the town fathers actually built the proposed three-story courthouse. Unfortunately, when the votes had all been tallied, Riverside failed to rack up the 60 percent necessary to move the seat. The vacant courthouse building continued to stand in Riverside as a tangible mockery of its aspirations until it eventually burned down in the 1920s.

Another near miss came in 1911 when the areas around Twisp and Oroville both petitioned the legislature to become separate counties. Nothing much came of these proposals, but they indicated the level of dissatisfaction with Conconully's hold on the seat of power in Okanogan

County. The only thing keeping the court in the remote mountain town was the jealous rivalry of other communities in the region, and of all the towns in the county, none could compare in enmity with Omak versus Okanogan.

The town of Okanogan was actually an amalgam of two earlier villages, Alma and its younger sister, Pogue. These communities had been built in the fertile agricultural land along the Okanogan River, and although both towns were rich in potential, there was no pretense of elegance in their appearance. When future politician and banker Harry Kerr first saw Alma in May 1906, he was clearly not impressed. "I was disappointed in the looks of the town and the surrounding country," he wrote in 1931. "The thing I noticed first was the entire absence of paint or finished lumber. Most of the buildings I could see were of the box type and made of rough lumber. The streets were but trails in the sagebrush and rocks."

When the towns decided to join together and rename themselves, Dr. J. I. Pogue, the eponymous founder, became so disgusted that in 1907 he went a few miles up the valley and started another town that he hoped would rival ungrateful Okanogan. He named the new community Omak. By 1913 Pogue's new town was ready to take on any comers in a fight for the county seat. Not surprisingly, Omak's chief adversary turned out to be Okanogan.

It did not take long for the savvy citizens of Okanogan to enter the county seat fray. This came in the form of a heavily-armed convoy of automobiles that noisily escorted \$12,000 in gold to the county treasurer in Conconully. These were the funds with which the townspeople promised to build a modern courthouse should they get the nod from the voters. A check would have been just as good, but the publicity Okanogan received was worth more than the shining specie.

After this opening salvo, the powers in Omak suggested that rather than slitting each other's throats and emptying both their purses, it would be better to hold an unofficial by-election to determine who had greater support. The loser would then withdraw all offers and support the winner in the campaign against Conconully.

With this uneasy arrangement, the two towns tore into one another with unrestrained gusto. Omak organized a team of two automobiles that would go around the county drumming up support for their cause. Okanogan countered with a 16-car armada that covered the same ground as the Omak cars. Okanogan even had a campaign song that was sung to a jaunty ragtime melody. It was titled, "Everything Rolls Down Hill to Okanogan," and it promised grandly,

*We give pure cash and Court House lands.
We'll reduce the county taxes, and increase peoples' values,
And fill the boxes plenty with Okanogan fruit.
We'll buy the hogs and cattle and ship them to Seattle
With train loads of ore the miners we will suit.*

The results of the song are difficult to gauge, but the town's rivals came up with nothing better. In fact, no matter what Omak attempted, it seemed that Okanogan responded with something bigger and grander. It soon became apparent that Okanogan would win. After all, the older town was nearly twice the size of Omak: it had more money and more brain power backing it.

When the elimination election was held in September 1914, it was really no contest at all. Okanogan swept 30 of the 34 precincts, and in the official election two months later it was much the same. The county would finally move its capital. Even so, there were plenty of hard feelings

around the county. Omak people harbored a great deal of resentment for many years to come, and when the results were conveyed to the Conconully people, officials there sent this terse message to the victors: "Come and get your damned county seat!"

And get it they did. By Christmas Day 1914 all the records and furniture had been moved to a temporary courthouse in a storefront office on Okanogan's main street, and regular county government began functioning a few days later. The county seat would remain in the commercial building for another ten months while a grander, permanent structure was being prepared. With this action, the venerable courthouse in Conconully had at last become redundant. It was finally torn down in May 1937, and the thrifty citizens used the lumber to construct a new town hall.

Working with great speed, the new county seat moved to consolidate its victory by having a beautiful courthouse structure built on one of the choicest lots in town. They chose as architect George H. Keith, a man who had recently come to town from Spokane, perhaps lured by the prospect of new county building projects. He began work almost at once, and by April 1915 the cornerstone could be laid amid much celebration and Masonic pomp. The speaker, J. W. Faulkner, spoke about the swiftness of progress in the county and the advances in technology that bind a region together. "All of us who have struggled, toiled, and waited for the development of the country now feel that the coming of transportation and the establishment of our courthouse at a permanent location mark the beginning of a brighter era for Okanogan County."

It took the rest of 1915 for the massive building to be completed. The three-story courthouse was built in the California Mission Revival style that had been so popular in the first two decades of the 20th century. The entire structure is of gray, unpainted stucco; highlights are colored vibrant red. A tall central tower rises up five stories and is crowned with a Spanish-style belfry. Two prominent gables echo the flowing lines of the tower, as do the ornamental ends on the structure that stick up over the roofline. A row of large, arched windows runs around the top floor, and an ornamental entryway leads into the gracious edifice.

As lovely as it all is, the Spanish structure is still somewhat unexpected in Washington's Okanogan River valley. It was said that the architect had designed the edifice in close consultation with the eminent local judge, William C. Brown. Since the judge was fascinated with Mexico and the Southwest, he requested that the courthouse reflect the flowing style and warm feelings of that sunny quarter.

Warmth and Latin American architecture were most definitely out of place at the building's dedication. This was set for January 11, 1916, but because of sub-zero temperatures and blowing snow, very few participants were able to attend. Not even the Great Northern trains could get through. But the people of Okanogan had been looking forward to the celebration, so they decided, as the *Independent* later reported, "to drown their disappointment with the banquet that had been prepared for the visitors." They must have had an exceedingly jolly time since they also consumed the last of the town's wine supply. (The county voted to go dry in the coming year.)

Somehow Charles Lovejoy, the mayor of Conconully, had managed to attend the festivities. He made a mock-heroic oration on the topic, "Grape Juice is a 1916 Beverage," and observed, "If grape juice had been used exclusively as a beverage in the recent county seat campaign,

Conconully would still be the county capital.” Perhaps he realized that prosperity and good feelings had indeed rolled downhill to Okanogan after all.

So while the winter storm raged outside, the hearty conclave celebrated the construction of an incongruous courthouse built for a Mediterranean climate. At least the county had a beautiful structure and a permanent home, and everyone was intent on toasting its completion that snowy evening. The ghosts at Ruby City would probably have approved of the hijinks.

David Chapman became fascinated with Washington’s county courthouses about a decade ago. He has written histories of each of the towns and the structures which crown them. In addition to Washington’s past, he has written several books and a great many articles on the history of bodybuilding and weight training. Chapman teaches in the Kent School District in suburban Seattle.