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LINCOLN COUNTY COURTHOUSE

Fire and Fury over the county Seat

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The morning of August 3, 1895, dawned hot and dusty in Sprague, the busy seat of Lincoln County. Most of the town's 3,000 citizens made their living from the Northern Pacific Railroad, and these busy employees arose and went to work in due course. Sprague's main thoroughfare, chockablock with brick and wooden frame buildings, quickly bustled with pedestrians. The street ran at the bottom of a shallow eastern Washington valley, and comfortable homes of the town's residents dotted the low hillside rising above the business district.

Shortly after sunrise a blast-furnace wind began to blow off the hot, dry scablands outside of town. As the day progressed, the gusts picked up heat and intensity, and at one point it blew with such force that a wooden structure was overturned on the tracks outside town. As bad luck would have it, precisely at noon, a fire broke out in a blacksmith shop on the outskirts of town and quickly spread to the feed and chop mill next door. From there, the conflagration jumped from building to building with a speed and intensity that dismayed everyone. Whipped up by the fierce winds, the flames advanced with lightning speed until nearly the entire town was ablaze. In a matter of minutes the fire had consumed the railroad offices and train yard and reduced everything to smoking ashes. The wind funneled down through the little valley and swept the flames ahead of it until the entire business district was ruined.

More than wood, brick, and mortar had been destroyed that fateful August afternoon, for the flames had also taken away Sprague's preeminence in the county. The town's citizens would soon learn that the blaze had robbed them of their chief means of livelihood. As one contemporary newspaper ruefully put it, "The destiny of Sprague and the history of Lincoln County was changed by the careless use of fire in a dingy little blacksmith shop on a windy day."

Sprague had seen much controversy and even violence before, as had all of Lincoln County. In fact, it would be fair to say that no other county had encountered more antagonism in its birth than Lincoln. It was something of a miracle that it was formed at all and an even greater wonder that it survived. Like most parts of the Columbia Basin, the area around Sprague was slow to become established. The land was a little less fertile and a great deal drier than more desirable properties in other parts of the territory. Still, the area was largely empty and land values were cheap, so in the final decades of the 19th century settlers began to arrive in increasing numbers.

Early in 1880 a man by the name of Harker settled near what is now Davenport. Apparently beguiled by neither the landscape nor the solitude, he soon departed, but Harker had at least become the area's first temporary inhabitant. It was not until John Nicholls took up Harker's claim that a real community was born. Nicholls built the first structure in the embryonic town. It was a combination store, house, post office, and hotel. Later a saloon opened nearby with the prosaic name of "Bob's Place."

There was a large spring surrounded by cottonwoods near the center of the settlement. Because of this grove, the post office took the name Cottonwood Springs. It was to this sleepy community that an energetic homesteader named J. C. Davenport came in 1882. He wanted to start a town, and he was not impressed with Cottonwood Springs, so Davenport decided to build his own community. This new settlement took shape on the higher land south of Cottonwood Springs, and it eventually included five buildings, including a store, warehouse, and saloon. Unfortunately, Davenport's village burned to the ground shortly after he had completed it. Perhaps because its residents aspired to the higher levels of civilization that had been attained in the recently destroyed community, Cottonwood Springs now decided to change its name to Davenport.

While Davenport was climbing in population and prestige, a rival town to the south was growing even faster. Sprague had begun as a humble sheep-shearing center in the 1870s, but this activity was quickly superseded by the arrival of the railroad. Henry Villard's Northern Pacific Railroad had swept into eastern Washington in the 1880s and immediately became a powerful economic and political force in the region. The company founded or appropriated towns, established governments, and ran things pretty much as it chose for a long time. Sprague was only one of a number of communities taken over by the railroad or named after an NP executive, and the town owed both its existence and its prosperity to the railroad. Like a delicately balanced house of cards, the NP had carefully built up the region until the bosses had it looking the way they wanted. The Northern Pacific's purchases of land, buildings, and politicians had cost them a great deal, and they were loathe to change things.

Cheney, not Spokane, was the railroad's choice for preeminent city of eastern Washington; but when the area that became Lincoln County began agitating to split from Spokane County, it became clear that Cheney would no longer be near the geographic center of its home county. This opened the way for Spokane Falls (as the town was then called) to try for the county seat—a situation that might disrupt the structures and alliances the railroad had so painstakingly constructed. Sprague was full of grit and rebellion, however, and the town was determined to break away.

Seeing the advantages to itself, Spokane Falls allied itself with Sprague, so when the vote came up in the territorial legislature, the frisky railroad town could count on support from at least one quarter. Despite the NP's wishes, a bill was proposed to form the new county in 1883. Originally, the region was to be named Sprague County after John W. Sprague, the general superintendent and agent of the Northern Pacific. Since the man was still very much alive, however, some thought it more appropriate to call the new county Lincoln.

Everything seemed to be going well, but the bill's proponents underestimated the railroad's ability to throw wrench in the works. The Sprague delegation was dismayed to see that when the bill came before the legislature, Davenport had been inserted as temporary county seat. The Cheney forces assumed that Sprague would never vote for the bill in that form—after all, Davenport was little more than a dismal collection of wooden shacks 40 miles from the nearest rail line.

Sprague forces were outraged at this move. "It is true, fellow citizens," announced one infuriated member of the Sprague delegation, "we have been betrayed and deceived. We have asked for bread and have been given a stone." But as cooler heads reconsidered the situation, they decided that a stone was better than nothing. They would accept the bill—obnoxious though it was—and "trust to the whirligig of time to set all things right." Thus, on November 1,

1883, the County of Lincoln came into existence. It had been born of strife and turmoil, and with such midwives trouble was sure to follow.

Overjoyed at having unexpectedly nabbed the temporary county seat, Davenport set about cementing the arrangement. The first courthouse was a modest wooden frame building put up by the grateful citizens and rented to the county for ten dollars a month. Here the officers of Lincoln County met for a year, and during that time Davenport came to view the county seat as its own particular possession. Sprague, however, had a different idea.

The first real election for county seat was slated for November 1884, and from the start feelings in the two rival towns ran high. The area around Davenport had been growing steadily in population, but Sprague boasted a citizenry of between 600 and 700 souls. When the campaign finally got under way, it was described as "hot and furious." Thanks to a temporary loophole, women were entitled to vote at the time, and few people, male or female, failed to cast their ballots. When the results were canvassed, Sprague received 1,256 while Davenport polled a disappointing 819. The bitterness and disappointment in Davenport were almost palpable when the results were finally known, and many prominent citizens in the defeated town immediately raised the cry of fraud.

In fact, there was more than a little justification for this accusation. On election day Sprague cast 1,023 votes; this was far more than actually lived in the town. As it turned out, Sprague forces had taken no chances regarding winning the election for county seat this time. It had been snaked away from them once and they were determined not to lose it again. Names from the town's cemetery were added to the voting rolls as well as those of every child in town and probably the dogs, too. Reporters from the *Lincoln County Times* who later snooped through the voting rolls discovered that Sprague had used its position on the railroad line to good effect. Many of its votes came from nonresident train passengers who "had no more interest in Lincoln County than the natives of Alaska, and who... looked upon the transaction as a joke."

Despite the threat of lawsuits, the commissioners declared Sprague the winner and new county seat. They made sure that the whirligig of time had finally spun around to the railroad town's side. Meanwhile, Davenport fumed in rage at the way Sprague had engineered its victory, and the town's citizens were in no mood to hand over the county records graciously. Almost at once Davenport hotheads seized the papers, determined not to let them out of town.

"An armed mob has taken possession of our county records and refuses to deliver them to the proper county officers," read the angry telegram sent by the commissioners to territorial officials. But before any legal settlement could be effected, the situation escalated in seriousness. Suddenly the roads leading into Davenport from all directions were lined with men carrying muskets, revolvers, and Winchesters, all determined to keep the courthouse where it had always been. The city fathers urgently sought an injunction that would invalidate the election, but meanwhile the potential for bloodshed appeared to be great.

Davenport dug in and readied itself for the long-anticipated attack from Sprague. For three long weeks men guarded the courthouse, some defenders even dug trenches on the hillside below the courthouse and threw up breastworks. Everyone figured that if they could hold out until the injunction was obtained, Davenport would be able to keep the county seat. But as the days dragged on and news from the lawyers turned bad, one by one the members of the little militia returned to their homes.

This was what Sprague was waiting for, and a company of about 180 men armed to the teeth left the railroad town headed for Davenport. They were determined to return with the county records at any cost. "It was," as one of the party later admitted, "no summer picnic that we were on." At the head of the column of solemn and determined men was Sheriff John Cody, cousin of Buffalo Bill Cody. He directed the men to dig trenches at various places along the route in case they had to stop and defend themselves from attack on their way back.

Martin J. Maloney, leader of the Davenport forces, saw the Sprague contingent approaching town, but with so few men at his disposal there was little he could do. Still, there were a few armed men on either side of the little creek that ran through town, and as the Sprague militia rode up to it, an angry Davenport shouter shouted out that the first man foolish enough to cross the stream would "have his anatomy full of button holes." Fortunately, this proved an empty threat, and the men continued across in deadly earnest.

At last Cody and his crew came to the flimsy wooden courthouse containing the county records, and there they found two men on guard. These sentries were quickly overcome and the group proceeded, no doubt well aware that they were in the sights of many a rifle at that very moment. Sheriff Cody knocked on the door, and a large man with a rifle in his hand opened the door a crack to see who was there. In the next instant, the door went down with a crash and the defender was looking into the muzzle of Cody's six-shooter. The Sprague troops quickly gathered up the records, loaded them into a small wagon, and left as soon as possible. As they filed out of town, the men must have reflected on the potential for bloodshed that had been so narrowly avoided. The trip back to Sprague was thankfully uneventful.

Once the records were safely stored in their new home, Sprague became the county seat in fact, and as such it needed a courthouse. The commissioners accordingly rented a brick building on the corner of Second and B Streets at a cost of \$35 a month. Leaving nothing to chance, they also hired a guard to protect the records in case Davenport citizens decided to pull a counter-raid. No such action took place, however; the Lincoln County seat was home at last.

Sprague's citizens were soon making plans to house the newly reacquired seat of government. In May 1886 a contract was awarded to Chris P. Nygard to construct a new courthouse. This would be a three-story, red brick structure designed to sit on a low hill overlooking the business district. Work proceeded quickly, and just six months later—in November 1886—the commissioners accepted the building and moved in with their offices and records. The total cost of the brick Romanesque structure was around \$10,000. It was an expensive outlay but well worth the price since it finally gave a permanent home to the government of Lincoln County.

For nearly a decade Sprague continued to be the economic and political heart of the county. From time to time diehard Davenport supporters put up desultory campaigns to get the county seat back, but no one paid much attention. The railroad was in Sprague with its offices, shops, and railroad roundhouses. Although a spur line eventually ran to Davenport, Sprague's supremacy was assured. There had been a few hints that the NP was looking elsewhere for its headquarters, but nothing serious. Once again, in 1895, Davenport had begun another attempt to regain the county seat, but again nobody paid much attention. Sprague's future as the home of county governance seemed secure. Then in August of that year everything changed.

A person looking out the third-floor window of the Lincoln County Courthouse could have viewed the disastrous fire as it raged from one end of town to the other with horrifying thoroughness. Since it was far enough removed from the scouring flames, the courthouse was

one of the few buildings that survived. Although the courthouse was undamaged, its fate, too, was sealed on that hot and windy day.

After the railroad yards had been destroyed, the Northern Pacific reconsidered its position. There was no real reason to rebuild in Sprague when Spokane had a business community that was mushrooming in importance. The executives decided to move out of the little town. This, as a local historian noted, "was a blow harder than the fire."

Results of this new disaster were apparent almost immediately. Before the fire Sprague had boasted a population of around 3,000; after the fire only 400 remained. "Sprague," wrote Davenport's *Lincoln County Times* with perhaps a little swagger, "is practically a deserted city today, with no hope of recovering her lost population or regaining her commercial standing." Now it was time for Davenport to make its move. Suddenly the election to move the county seat had taken on new life. With Sprague in ruins, Davenport easily won. The victorious city was under no illusions about its win. The *Times* put it clearly: if it had not been for the destruction of its rival, there would have been no victory. "Experience shows us that the voters do not take kindly to county seat changes, no matter how necessary the change or how good the inducement."

On December 15, 1896, Davenport went to Sprague to fetch the records back. There were no threats, violence, or armed guards this time—Sprague was finished as a community and everyone sensed it. Still, it took three railroad cars to hold all the official effects, and they were three days in getting to their new home. As was to be expected, county officials were temporarily housed in various offices around town. By Christmas the newspaper reported that the county officers were "all very comfortably ensconced in their new quarters this week."

Shortly after the new year arrived a number of prosperous Davenport citizens paid \$6,000 cash into the county treasury and deeded a block of land on which to construct a fine new courthouse. Soon the commissioners advertised for bids on a new building, and on March 1 the construction contract was awarded to Fred Baske. "He is a townsman," explained the *Times*, "a competent workman [who] will employ home labor, and it is believed that he will do honest and faithful work." Baske promised to erect a stately courthouse for a little over \$12,000. Since there was no mention of an architect, it is safe to assume that Baske handled the design work himself.

Construction of the new courthouse began almost at once, and soon the graceful building rose on a hill overlooking Davenport. Baske had decided to use cream-colored bricks instead of the usual red. This gave the structure a pleasing pastel look as it was set off from the brilliant green of the lawn and surrounding trees. There were echoes of the Richardsonian Romanesque style in the arched windows and the stonework highlights, but this heaviness was largely offset by the delicate cupola that arose from the center of the roof.

While Baske was working on his courthouse, things were not going well in Sprague. A halfhearted attempt to rebuild the town was made, but it never really took off. Property values plummeted, and the once-busy railroad town withered away to a mere shadow of its former self. Finally, in July 1897, the former courthouse was sold at public auction to one R. K. McPherson who wanted to turn it into a Methodist college. Sadly, the property that had been built at a cost of \$10,000 went for a paltry \$300. When the college failed, the building was sold to the Catholic Church, which used the old structure for St. Joseph's Academy until it closed in 1965. The once noble seat of Lincoln County was then sold for salvage and demolished in 1966.

The new courthouse in Davenport had a happier fate. It was accepted right on schedule on August 1, 1897, complete with its own water well and a wrought-iron fence atop a sturdy rock wall. An elegant porch and central heating system to replace the old wood and coal stoves were added in 1907 when the building underwent remodeling and updating. Soon after, the courthouse was nearly doubled in size with an extensive addition on the north side, but the most obvious feature from this time was the elegant, classical porch that covered Baske's arched basalt entryway.

There have been a few minor changes down through the years. In 1918, for instance, the iron fence that had enclosed the grounds was taken down and donated to the war effort. During another war, plane sighters sat up in the cupola straining to see Japanese bombers winging over eastern Washington. For the most part, however, the alterations have been minor, and the beautiful courthouse remains largely as it was back in 1897 when it was first presented to the people of Lincoln County.

Today, Davenport in a busy little rural town of about 1,600 people. It is hard to imagine anyone in the peaceful county seat marching off to defend the courthouse or inflicting mayhem on fellow county residents. Nevertheless, in December 1995 fire—the old nemesis of Lincoln County—made another appearance when a blaze "of suspicious origin" succeeded in burning much of the courthouse's second floor and damaging its roof. Fortunately, a move to rebuild and restore the lovely old structure was begun almost at once, and today the building is just as beautiful and more structurally sound than ever. The citizens of Lincoln County have much to be proud of when they contemplate their courthouse. The battles fought by their grandparents are in the past, but the visible sign of their victory resides in the beautiful cream-colored structure that still stands on the hill above town.

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