

ORION

LOCATION.—The town of Orion occupies township 9, range 1 east (together with a fraction of township 8, same range), in Richland County, including the east tier of sections, which formerly constituted a part of Buena Vista. It is bounded north by Richland, east by Buena Vista, south by Pulaski (in Iowa County, which is separated from Orion by the Wisconsin River), and west by Eagle. Its easternmost corner is opposite Avoca, its westernmost opposite Muscoda, which because of the bridge at that point has been the principal market for the southern part of the town. Richland Center lies three miles north of the north boundary. The railroad from Lone Rock to Richland Center, up the valley of Pine River, passes through the northeast corner of the town, while the main line of the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad, Prairie du Chien division, is reached at Muscoda and at Lone Rock.

SURFACE AND DRAINAGE.—Orion is a hill town (fig. 7). Barring a small area of lowland along the Wisconsin in the southwestern part, the equivalent of three or four sections of lowland in the valleys of Ash Creek and Pine River in the northeastern part, and that portion of Pine River valley included in the eastern tier of sections, the surface is practically all upland, with only small, narrow, and steep-sided ravines or valleys here and there. There are no considerable rivers in the town, and the land, geographically, forms a promontory jutting down to the Wisconsin between the valleys of Pine River on the east and Eagle Creek on the west. Indian Creek, which enters the Wisconsin in fractional section 31, rises on the line between sections 21 and 20, its trench forming part of the line of communication across the plateau and by way of Ash Creek with upper Pine River valley. This is one road to Richland Center. In sections 33 to 36 the Wisconsin River has worn its course against the hills, making a steep escarpment along which has been cut the road to Richland City and Lone Rock. By way of Eagle Creek and Hoosier Hollow, Orion has a way out toward the west and north.

TYPES OF SOIL.—No soil survey of Richland County having been published to date, one can classify the soils of Orion only by their similarity to those of Iowa County. The southwestern, low lying portion is a sandy loam or loamy sand, the slopes from the valleys to the foothills are probably of Lintonia silt loam, and the ridges Knox silt loam. The valleys being extremely narrow, short (except Ash Creek and Pine River valleys), and few in number, the quantity of land described as alluvium (Miami silt loam) would be comparatively small. The surveyor, Alvin Burt, when in 1842 he prepared the government plat of township 9, range 1 east,

found practically no first-rate land. Most of it was described as second-rate, and some of it as third-rate. The surveyor's judgment, however, is not conclusive as to the quality of the soil, being influenced a good deal by the character of the surface—whether rough, stony, or otherwise undesirable for purposes of cultivation. Some parts of the Ash Creek valley were described as wet, or swampy. On the whole, the town must be classed as relatively poor in its farming lands.

TIMBER.—Like Eagle, the town of Orion was originally heavily wooded with several kinds of oak, ash, elm, maple, lynn, aspen, and undergrowth chiefly of hazel. Not a single section line was described as running through open land. The settlers who took lands in Orion had before them a heavy program of clearing, before their farms were made.

BEGINNINGS OF SETTLEMENT.—A glance at the plat shows that the earliest entries in the town by persons still retaining title in 1860 were those of William Dooley, section 32, and Daniel Mainwaring, section 33—both dating from 1849; John H. Segrist, section 3, 1848; J. H. Scheuerman, section 3, 1849; David Mayfield and Peter Joerris, section 3, 1849; F. Scheuerman, section 9, 1848; and Charles Neefe (Kneefe), section 15, 1848. All except the first two of the above purchases were in the several branches of Ash Creek valley. In fact, all of section 10 and adjacent parts of 9, where the two branches of Ash Creek unite, giving a greater breadth of valley land than elsewhere, were entered in 1848 and 1849, except two or three small tracts which went in 1850. From the land ownership cards we learn that a number of other pieces scattered over the town were taken in 1849, and two tracts—in sections 31 and 32—were purchased as early as 1846.

The last-named purchase represents the actual beginning of settlement. For the land was entered by Thomas Matthews, who with Captain John R. Smith, his father-in-law, crossed over into Richland County from Muscoda in the fall of 1842, and erected the first log house in the town. Later these men purchased the land settled upon, and laid out the village of Orion.¹ Matthews operated a ferry between Orion and Muscoda, but in the first months of their settlement the two men constructed the dam for Parish's mill on Eagle Creek—the later Rodolf's mill. Smith was a native of Kentucky, Matthews of Tennessee. Another Kentuckian, R. J. Darnall, arrived in 1843, and in 1846 came William Thompson of Kentucky and William Matthews of Illinois. The former settled at first in 14 and 15, moving later to section 2, where (in the southwest quarter of the northwest quarter) he built a sawmill, probably in 1849 or 1850. The Mayfield

¹*History of Crawford and Richland Counties, Wisconsin* (Springfield, Ill., 1884), 1130.

brothers, David and Green—Tennesseans—came in 1847, two Joslyns—Vermonters—came in 1847 and 1848, and in the latter year came also the first German settlers—Henry Segrist, and Frederick and J. H. Scheuerman, who bought land in sections 3, 2, and 9. The land where Lawe's ferry was afterwards built, on fractional section 34, was entered in 1849 by Henry Koop, and sold to the Lawes in 1855. James Lawe's house was an important place on the river bank for many years. The Mainwarings came in 1849 from Wales; Levi Houts of Indiana, Charles Kneefe of Germany, Alan-son Hurd of New York, and Reason Barnes came in 1849. William Dooley, a native of Kentucky, came to Richland County in 1845 to work in Coles's lumber mill at Rock bridge, Pine River valley, where pine lumber was made for delivery down the Mississippi. From there he came to Orion, entered land in 1849, and after three years settled on his tract and began farming.

Thus it is seen that the earliest settlements were in the northern part of the town, in Ash Creek valley (or the west branch of Pine River and in Pine River valley itself), where soil and timber were good, and along Wisconsin River, the great artery of communication. The few settlers were engaged for some years in woods work, or in occupations connected with transportation, making farming operations subsidiary. In fact, there was little farming done until after the completion of the railway to Muscoda, in 1856, and the larger portion of the land of the town was entered in the years 1854 to 1856.

CONDITIONS AFFECTING THE PURCHASE OF LAND.—The chief obstacle to the utilization of the lands in this town was found in the surface characteristics of the region. It was in large part so rough and complex in topography as to discourage settlement for agricultural purposes. One area, the valley of Ash Creek, provided an opportunity for a limited number of contiguous farms, and Pine River valley was accessible. Aside from these there were favorable small tracts, large enough for a farm or two in a place, but no chance for a continuous body of settlement. The early land entries, scattered widely over the town, are markers to show where the best tracts lay. No town site speculations appear to have been tried, apart from the plat of Orion (at first called Richmond), which was purchased in 1846. Also, so far as the ownership cards reveal the facts, no mill site speculations occurred. Speculators, however, bought up a number of tracts of farm land. Among them were Hazen Cheney, Robert C. Field, Cyrus Woodman and C. C. Washburn, Josiah Noonan, Albert C. Daley, Chauncey Abbott and Julius T. Clark, John B. Duryea, Hamilton H. Gray, Parley Eaton, and Charles G. Rodolf.

PROGRESS OF FARM MAKING.—In 1860, about 200 subdivisions of Orion land remained in possession of those who entered them at the United States land office, while over 300 subdivisions had already changed hands. A large proportion of the transfers represent the sales by speculators to actual farmers, of unimproved land. It is probably safe to say that most of the land was in the hands of those who bought it for the purpose of making farms. But progress in farm making was as yet limited. Many tracts were still without clearings of any extent, and 80 acres was the largest amount under cultivation on any farm. This was in Ash Creek valley, on the farm of a German settler of 1848.² One farm had 75 acres improved, one 70, one 63, and another 60. These five were all that had above 50 acres under cultivation. On the other hand, 20 or 25 acres, and even less, was a common record of improved land. Farming, in fact, was merely well begun. The number of farms was only 42, the total amount of improved land 1473 acres, and there was a total of 3772 acres unimproved. That means, the total of land within the farms was hardly more than a fourth of the area of the town. In 1870 the number of farms was 83, and of improved acres 2472, while the acreage in the farms was 9319. Ten years later there were 102 farms embracing 12,751 acres, of which 5202 or an average of 51 acres per farm was improved. As in the case of some other neighbor towns—Eagle, Muscoda, Castle Rock—the quantity of improved land grew less rather than more, for some years after 1880. In 1885, according to the state census, it was 4975 acres; in 1895, 4355. The census of 1905 seems to show a decided upward curve. At that time the farms numbered 131, the total acreage 20,474, and the amount of improved land 9413 acres. But the explanation is found in a change of boundaries, which gave to Orion the easternmost range of sections in township 9, which sections lay mostly in the Pine River valley—a well cultivated farming area.

CLASSIFICATION OF FARMS ACCORDING TO AREA.—According to the eighth census (1860) there were in Orion no farms of less than 20 acres, and only 5 of 20 to 49 acres. The third class, 50 to 99 acres, was represented by 12 farms, and the fourth, 100 to 174 acres, by 19. There were 6 over 175 acres in area, but none over 500. In 1870 there was 1 farm under 20 acres, and 18 of 20 to 49 acres. The largest number was in class three, 50 to 99 acres—27 farms; 23 were in the class between 100 and 174, and 14 between 175 and 500 acres. No farm overran the 500-acre limit. Ten years later there were 2 under 20 acres, and 1 over 500 acres. There were 16 between 20 and 49 acres, 33 between 50 and 99 acres, 31 between 100 and 174, and 19 between 175 and 500. Thus the tendency was toward the good-sized and large farms.

Considered from the standpoint of their cultivated land, however, even the largest gross areas were not very large farms. In 1870 a large majority (56 farms) had less than

40 acres of cultivated land each, while no farm had more than 100 acres cultivated and only 27 had between 40 and 100 acres. In 1880 there were 52 farms with less than 40 acres of tillable, while 38 had between 40 and 100 acres, and 12 over 100 acres. When we exclude the waste land, the farms fall into the classes of small and fair-sized farms.

GENERAL PRODUCTIONS.—The wheat production recorded in 1870, amounting to only 73 bushels per farm, is evidence that agriculture was in an undeveloped condition at that time, taking the town as a whole, although the smallness of the crops compared with the acreage of improved land suggests that the crop of 1869 was not a good crop. Still, the average production of corn was better (208 bushels), and the town also produced a little wool—22 pounds per farm on the average,—and some butter—151 pounds. The total exhibit of productions, however, seems meager. In 1879 the wheat crop averaged 109 bushels per farm, corn 350, and oats 149. There were 12 head of swine per farm, which doubtless, with the corn crop, represent the major money income. Butter amounted to only 213 pounds per farm, and there was almost no cheese or milk sold. Two and a half cows and 3.8 other cattle, 9.1 sheep, and 2.6 horses made up the farm livestock equipment. Nothing in all this proclaims agricultural prosperity. Rather, it is evidence that farm families gained, on the average, a very moderate support from their farming operations.

The next five years brought little change in these conditions. Dairying on the coöperative principle was tardier there than in some of the neighboring towns of Richland and Grant counties. Only 1000 pounds of cheese was recorded for 1884. The butter record was 35,175 pounds as against 21,812 in 1879, showing some advance in home dairying. Wheat had dropped to 8055 bushels from 11,125 bushels, while corn had decreased from 35,766 to 35,233—that is, it had not increased. Oats had increased by 7000 bushels, and there had been a big jump in hay production. This indicates more attention to livestock, and is a preparation for development along the dairying lines already in successful operation elsewhere. The next state census, 1895, assigns to the town 33,774 pounds of cheese and 46,200 pounds of butter, which shows that coöperative dairying had begun. Not only corn and oats, but wheat also, had advanced, and the aggregate of all descriptions of livestock had increased perceptibly.

As indicated above, the boundaries of the town were changed prior to 1905. It is very interesting to note how great a difference in the crop aggregates seems due to the inclusion of an additional six sections of land located in the favorable farming area of Pine River valley. The corn crop was raised to 60,000 bushels, the oats crop to 34,600; there were 8476 bushels of barley and 4064 of rye. Hay advanced to 3951 tons, and in harmony therewith the livestock figures were enormously increased. There is no better commentary on the relative meagerness of Orion's earlier agricultural

productions than this result of a 20 per cent increase in her area.

SPECIAL PRODUCTIONS.—The only special productions which the census makes noticeable were a little honey, some maple sugar and molasses, a few acres of hops, and a small amount of tobacco. The town made forest products to a considerable extent. There is reason to think that most of the fuel for Hamilton's lead smelting furnace at Muscoda, in the late thirties and early forties, was brought across the river from this town.³ River steamers had wood yards supplied by Orion men. Later, the demand for saw logs, stave timber, and hoop poles was partly met by the settlers of Orion, many of whom were practiced woodsmen.

In 1879 nearly all farms in the town made forest products to some extent, and several made such products to the value of \$300 or \$400. In one case, where a farmer's total income was \$479, his forest products were listed at \$425. Much of the wood taken out in clearing land was sold for cordwood.

VALUE OF PRODUCTIONS.—In 1879, according to the tenth census, this town's total agricultural productions amounted to \$48,282, or an average per farm of \$473. Seven towns in our list of twenty-three stood lower, the rest higher. From the previous census we learn that in 1869 there were 31 incomes under \$200, 24 between \$200 and \$399, 13 between \$400 and \$599, 12 between \$600 and \$999, and 3 over \$1000. Ten years later there were 22 in the third and fourth classes, and 9 in the fifth. This shows that exactly one-half of the farms were producing less than \$400. The hopeful element in the situation was the 9 generous incomes of \$1000 or more. One of these amounted to \$2085, another to \$1825, and a third to \$1683. All were made from the regular cereal crops, from hogs, cattle, and butter.

In 1904 the average farm income in Orion amounted to \$705 and in 1919 to \$2571. The number of cows had increased from 263 in 1880 to 1369 in 1905 (this increase due largely to the increased area of good farming land through the change of boundaries). Dairy productions were valued at an average of \$330 per farm at this period, and other livestock productions at \$308. By 1919 there were 1999 cows in the town; the average dairy production amounted to \$1650 and other livestock production to \$895. The dairy industry had developed considerably. Crop incomes amounted to \$67 in 1904 and \$26 in 1919.

MANUFACTURES.—Orion has always been a farming town, save that, on account of its heavily wooded character, woods work was necessarily an activity antecedent to farming. The sawmill already mentioned, which was built by William Thompson in section 2, must have been a boon to settlers as a means of getting their timber sawed into lumber, though tradition describes it as a very small and inefficient mill. A grain grinding mill established later at the same water power

³ Charles Stephenson's letters, in collection of Woodman Papers in Wisconsin Historical Library.

² Charles Kneefe.

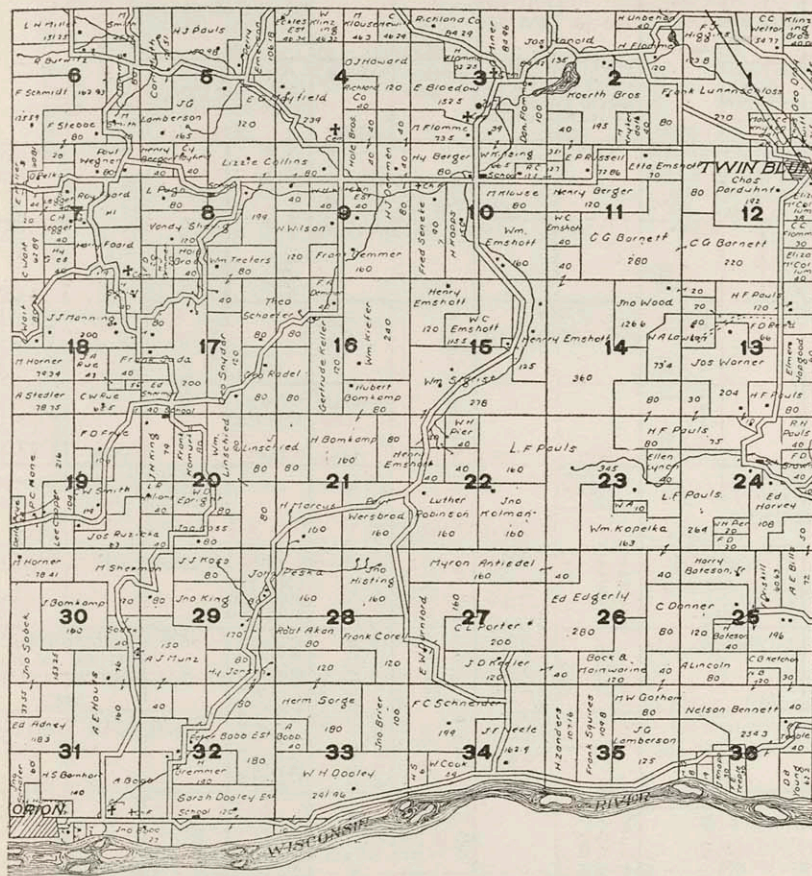


FIG. 25. TOWN OF ORION, 1915

After a drawing lent by the W. W. Hixson Company

was likewise a small affair. Later, a wool-carding mill was built there, and that filled a widely felt need. Farmers nearly all kept a few sheep. They took their wool to Ash Creek to have it carded for use in making bedding, or in preparation for household spinning, knitting, and to a small extent weaving. It is known that farmers twenty miles distant in Blue River valley patronized the carding mill on Ash Creek.

VILLAGES, POST OFFICES, SCHOOLS, AND CHURCHES.—Orion, in section 31, and Twin Bluffs, on the railroad in section 12, are the only villages this town has had. Orion was known by the name of Richmond, until the post office was established in 1851, when the name Orion was substituted. As already stated, the village was begun by John R. Smith and Thomas Matthews, who built the first log house in Orion

in 1842, and laid out the village after making their land entry in 1846. These first settlers established in 1842 the ferry between Muscoda and Richmond, for the sake of accommodating the hunters who desired to cross the river at that point.⁴ The first ferry was hardly useful for general purposes, but it was soon improved, and the ferrying business was conducted by Matthews—who bought out his partner—till the opening of the Muscoda bridge about 1870. Prior to the establishment of the Orion post office, mail for the Orion settlement was received through Muscoda. For a short time Richmond was the county seat of Richland County. But the establishment of Richland Center, in the Pine River valley, proved the end of its hopes of being the permanent capital of the county. The Orion post office was discontinued about thirty years ago. Twin Bluffs, in the northeastern corner of the town, being a station on the railway, has become an important village, with stores, post office, and high school.

Schools have usually numbered four, all of the one-room, one-teacher type. By 1874⁵ there was a school in section 32—the Dooley school—one in the northwest quarter of section 20, another in section 8, and one in section 10. The school at Twin Bluffs is more recent. At that time the town had three churches—a Lutheran or Evangelical church in section 5, a “Christian” church in section 9, and a Methodist church in section 7. The first two were in the valley of Ash Creek (or upper Pine River), the third on the ridge between Ash Creek and Hoosier Hollow in the western part of the town. Preaching was also conducted at the village of Orion during most of that general period, and later there were church services more or less regularly at some of the schoolhouses. The Lutheran church in the northeastern portion of the town represented the German settlement, consisting of a few families who took land there in 1848 and 1849.

POPULATION CHANGES.—In 1860 Orion had a population of 597, all but 70 of whom were native Americans. There were 85 American families and 21 foreign born families. Aside from the natives of Wisconsin among the heads of families—and these were very few—19 were natives of Ohio, 15 of Pennsylvania, 7 of Indiana, and 11 of New York.

⁴History of Crawford and Richland Counties, 1134.

⁵See Atlas of Richland County, Wisconsin (Madison, 1874), 39.

Virginia, Kentucky, and Illinois each furnished 7; Maryland, Tennessee, and Missouri 3; and Massachusetts, North Carolina, and New Jersey, each 1. Of the foreign born heads of families, Prussia claimed 10, Canada 3, England 3, Ireland 1, and there was 1 each from France, Nassau, Saxony, and Bavaria.

The table shows that the American element continued to predominate, the largest number of foreign born heads of families appearing in 1885, when it stood 51 against 87 American born.

Both the population table, representing conditions at the several census periods, and the several land ownership plats of the town indicate that changes in the original list of families have been relatively few. As in Eagle, the old families have tended to persist, the lands descending to their children. And the persistence of the American type is a marked fact of the social history. Quite as marked is the non-Yankee character of the American element. Like the settlers of the town of Eagle, those in Orion came from the recently forested sections of the country; Ohio, Indiana, and Pennsylvania (probably the western part) supplied the highest numbers, with Virginia, Kentucky, and Illinois adding an important element. It is not remarkable, therefore, that for many years, till the forest was fully subdued and farming became both a more congenial and a more profitable occupation than in the pioneer days, there was always a suggestion of the backwoods in Orion. At present one can find there a number of excellent modern farms and farm homes. The dairy business has improved greatly in recent years, and Orion people seem bent on profiting from the labor which their pioneers bestowed upon the land and the forest.

ORION—POPULATION STATISTICS

YEAR	TOTAL	AMERICAN *P			FOREIGN						FAMILIES			
		Wisconsin	Other States	Total	Bohemia	Canada	England	Germany	Other Lands	Total	American	Foreign	Total	
1850	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....	.....
1860	597	190	337	527	.....	12	6	41	11	70	85	21	106
1870	697	309	279	588	.....	15	10	73	11	109	94	42	136
1885	624*	.....	.....	520	.....	11	13	66	14	104	87	51	138
1895	688	617	4	2	6	55	4	71	106	42	148
1905	928	701	134	835	15	7	6	57	8	93	163	37	200	
1920	764	640	66	706	11	.....	4	23	20	58	153	29	182

* Village excluded.