

PORTAGE PATHWAYS: No tale of two cities for Ravenna and Kent, Ohio in 1911

By Roger J. Di Paolo | Record-Courier Editor

The numbers told the story, and the news they conveyed was anything but the tale of two cities that some had expected.

The results of the 1910 Census showed Ravenna with 5,310 residents, nearly one-third more than it had a decade earlier and, most importantly, well over the threshold for becoming the first city in Portage County.

It was a different story for Kent, which harbored hopes of achieving city status before its neighboring rival. Not only did it fail to pass the 5,000-resident benchmark for city status, it actually lost population. The census showed 4,488 residents in Kent, which was 53 fewer than in 1900.

Both communities learned of the census results in January 1911 and, not surprisingly, the reporting of the count was tailored to the hometown audiences.

“Well, the Results are in and Nothing to Brag Over,” the Kent Courier proclaimed in a front-page story announcing the disappointing tally.

The Ravenna Republican, in its announcement of the census results, refrained from crowing but noted that the 32.6 percent gain in population “puts Ravenna in the front rank of the hustling Ohio municipalities.” (A small item, all but buried on the front page, announced Kent’s tally beneath the headline “Kent goes back.”)

The county seat and its neighbor to the west were spirited competitors. Kent had surpassed Ravenna in population in 1900, with the turn-of-the-century census showing it with 4,541 residents compared with Ravenna’s 4,000.

The rivalry wasn’t far from the surface when the Kent-Ravenna streetcar line was inaugurated in 1901. After Ravenna Mayor S.F. Hanselman jokingly described Kent as a suburb of the county seat, Kent Mayor David Ladd Rockwell responded, “You’ll become used to city ways.” His words were a pointed reminder that Kent had enjoyed trolley service for six years.

Both communities had competed for the state normal school, which Kent won in 1910. City status would have burnished that achievement for Ravenna’s rival.

The Courier, in its reporting of the census tally, described Ravenna’s attainment of city status as “a splendid gain for the county seat ... just cause for congratulations from all sides.” But there was no hiding the fact that the news was disheartening for Kent.

W.W. Reed, secretary of the Kent Board of Trade, told the Courier that he had expected the census would show the community with about 4,800 residents — some 200 or so shy of city status but an overall gain from the 1900 count.

Reed said he was “disappointed very much” by the final tally but was satisfied that the count was accurate. He pointed to a temporary loss in Kent’s population as a major factor in census results.

The December 1909 fire that destroyed the Seneca Chain Co., Kent’s second-largest employer, not only cost 250 men and boys their jobs, it also displaced many of their families, Reed noted.

He estimated that about 500 residents left Kent in the wake of the blaze. The census count was taken after they had departed.

Ever the civic booster, Reed pointed to a number of gains Kent had made in the past decade that left it “much improved over the Kent of 1900.”

“We have better store buildings, better school buildings, better streets and many more and finer residences,” he said, adding that business in Kent was growing “even if the population is at a standstill.”

He dismissed the census results as a temporary setback. “Kent’s growth from now on will be steady. The future looks bright,” adding that he had “visions of ‘a 10,000 Kent’ in 1920.”

While Kent came to terms with remaining a village for at least the next decade, Ravenna began the process of transitioning to city status. In April 1911, Village Council agreed to divide the community into four wards and plans were made to name a service director and safety director.

Ravenna’s first City Council took office on Jan. 1, 1912, along with Mayor **Charles J. Hubbell**, who had the distinction of being the last mayor of the village of Ravenna as well as the first mayor of the city.

Kent didn’t become a city until a decade later, after the 1920 Census showed it with 7,070 residents — far short of W.W. Reed’s prediction but more than enough to attain the status it had coveted. And, by 1930, it had surpassed Ravenna as the largest community in Portage County.