The public administration of Wawanesa from 1889 until its incorporation in 1908 was under the jurisdiction of Oakland R.M. Council, with the community of Wawanesa in Ward I, and our first member being W.T. Johnston. The first election in the new Village of Wawanesa elected as our first mayor C.D. Kerr. Council’s first meeting was on January 5, 1909 at the I.O.O.F. Hall.

Public functions that were connected in the public mind to government services include the post office. Dave Ricker was the first postmaster, in 1889, followed by William Foster in 1890. For many years the post office was in Ricker’s store, then in the local newspaper building, and finally in 1904 in a custom-built office built, which is still standing. Mail bags were delivered to Wawanesa by train and then sent out via horse and buggy. A new post office, still in use, was built in 1962.

Fire control was another important municipal function, but it took several years to get the necessary equipment. The first attempt in 1910 by village council via a referendum was defeated, with the expense for equipment deemed too high. But in 1925, after a fire that destroyed Mitchell’s Store and Yuen’s Cafe in 1924, the need for action was clear. A volunteer fire brigade was formed under fire chief Hamilton Bell. And with a chemical machine, hose operators and water carriers, fire threats were greatly reduced. In 1962 a whole new generation of fire-fighting gear was acquired.

The IOOF Hall was also used for various public and governemtn events.
Public Services

Three notable services that were likely deemed essential functions in any small community were the provision of newspapers, lighting and telephone service. The first newspaper, in 1892, called the Wawanesa Enterprise was a weekly, with E.A. Bailey as editor and publisher. When the Enterprise closed in 1895 it was replaced by the Wawanesa World, which only survived to 1897, itself replaced by The Independent, from 1903 until 1939, with first editions from A. Schell and Oswald Davis, and later ones from Fred Batty beginning in 1908. Major political issues that found voice in the local newspapers involved women’s suffrage (the vote) and the prohibition of alcohol. The speeches of local activist Nellie McClung were covered, and letters to the editor were a must-read feature of newspapers at the time.

In Wawanesa’s early days lighting was provided by coal oil and every house and store had a lamp or lantern. During the 1920s many stores and some houses installed electric lighting systems, powered with a unit right in the building; one of the first to do this was the Manitoba Hotel, in 1925. These technologies were all swept aside when hydro-electric power was brought into town in 1929. It would take another 20 years, until 1949, for this service to reach rural areas.

The first telephone came to Wawanesa in 1905, with service in Vanstone’s Drug Store. The first serviceman was Hamilton Bell, and operators (nearly all women) were located first in Vanstone’s Drugs and then a new building.

Wawanesa Telephone operators Dorothy and Elsie Osborne, 1911.
Wawanesa Milestones

Transportation

A local transportation infrastructure was essential for a community to grow and prosper. The first rough trails and basic roads were sufficient for travel in the very early period of settlement, but all Manitoba communities relied completely on the arrival of a rail line to secure their place as a thriving commercial centre. For the area around Wawanesa, it was the arrival of the Canadian Northern (CNo) line and station building in 1890 that ensured its future. And when the Canadian Pacific Railway Company built a line through the area in 1891-92, opportunities for travel—for grain shipments and visitation—were even better. A bridge was necessary for the CNo to cross at Wawanesa, and two more bridges were also constructed in town—one for horse and buggy traffic called the “Black Bridge” and one for autos (?) called the “Red Bridge.” In 1924 the collapse of the railway bridge, killing one man, was a major disaster, both in terms of loss and life, but also for local travel, until a new bridge was constructed later that year. The rail line was abandoned in 1984.

Horses were the major form of transportation for many years, and each side of Main Street was lined with hitching rails. The age of the horse was marked for extinction when the first automobile arrived in town in 1908—under the steerage of Reverend Todd.
Wawanesa’s CNR Station, ca. 1910.
Wawanesa Milestones

Commercial Development

Any urban centre has as its raison d’etre a set of commercial functions – provided for the citizens of the town and, at the turn of the 20th century in Manitoba, especially for surrounding farm families. For small communities in Manitoba, the typical main street was lined with a dizzying display of functions, signs, people, and horses. When the community of Wawanesa was established in 1890, and the Canadian Northern Railway selected the site for it crossing of the Souris River, (or Assiniboine?), the first commercial operation was Story and Avison’s General Store.

As the community quickly developed in the early 1890s, the impressive range of retail functions was provided by entrepreneurial men and women. Thus businesses like H.E. Holland’s hardware operation, W.T. Storey’s lumberyard, Joseph Snyder’s barbershop and pool parlour, Mr Scott’s bakery, butcher D.H. Chalmers, E.L. McDonald’s jewellery store, R.Q. Mitchell’s grocery store and restaurant, Alex Blain’s private bank, Dave Ricker’s big general store, hotel services at the Northern Pacific and Joseph Wells’s Windsor Hotel, A.B. Thorn’s photography studio, Joseph Ferris’s hardware and undertaking operations, and C.L. Atkinson’s law office were only some of the earliest. And of course the busy farm and horse service operations were numerous, including blacksmiths like R.P. Smith, Corrin and Harvest, Fred Sims, livery stables and implement dealers like Harris and Co., R.W. Hector, Patterson and Brothers Co., and the John Deere dealer Dick Moore.

Like any thriving community, Wawanesa has seen innumerable changes to business names, and even to business types, especially as horses were replaced with automobiles and trucks in the 1920s. And while our community has lost many of its old commercial buildings, especially through major fires that consumed scores of buildings, our main street still boasts several of these hardy survivors, effective reminders of this vital part of our past.

Interior of Scottie’s Store, ca. 1905
Clockwise from top left, Union Bank, Manitoba Hotel, Storey Block, all from around 1910.
Wawanesa was not only a thriving commercial centre in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries. It was also the site of several important manufacturing and industrial operations, places that provided employment and which also helped put us on the map as a place of energy, ingenuity and self-sufficiency. One of the first of these operations was the Wawanesa Flour Mill, built in 1895 by A.W. Snider and D.N. Russell. Producing 100 barrels a day, with flour types called Hungarian Patent, Family Patent, Stone Bakery; and Pride of Oakland, the mill burned on Christmas Day in 1949. Mr. Snider also operated a grist mill for rolling oats and barley for feed. Another major operation was Britton’s Brickyard. Located at the south end of town, and begun in 1890, the yard employed about 10 men per season, and produced the hundreds of thousands of bricks that were used for nearly all masonry buildings in town and throughout the area. Like other communities, Wawanesa also boasted several grain elevators, the first of which went up along the Canadian Northern line in 1890 – Martin and Mitchell’s and the Manitoba Elevator Company’s.

Wawanesa was also home to several inventive and energetic men who seemed constantly to be engaged in inventions and business ideas: thus J. Booker, who was engineer at Wawanesa Flour Mill, developed the Booker Stove, a modified version of which was still being sold in the 1980s; and Alonzo Kempton established the Wawanesa Wagon Seat Company and the Canada Hone Company, both of which were short-lived ventures.