

PETE WEIGANT
by Bob Anderson January, 2000

I started out writing Pete Weigant, Mayor of the Big City of Craig and then said "Not exactly right." His name wasn't pronounced Weigant as most people called him but We-gänt', and Craig didn't have a mayor or any other officials, especially law officials, but he kind of acted like the mayor of Craig; and it wasn't a big city but just a rip-roaring lumberjack town most of the years that Pete was there.

Pete was born in Springfield, Illinois, May 30, 1870. Most of the people that came up to this North country came either to seek free land or work in the woods, and Pete didn't seem to have either one of those reasons in mind when he was here in the summer of 1902 according to Jimmy Knight's tales. He helped other settlers do one thing or another and when Jimmy met him he was helping Sam ^{Lang} Lang, north of Bigfork, to make hay in a meadow with a scythe. He said Pete didn't have a permanent residence at that time, moving around from one abandoned homestead shack to another and was kind of a rover. He seemed to have a little education and courted the school-marm pretty heavy. Back in those early days of the century when they had a dance in the school house or party at home, the ladies all put on their very best stuff and the men also; and Pete had a tuxedo, and he'd carry that with him and walk a mile to where the dance was being held in the school house, get behind a brush pile and change his clothes and come out with that tux on.

He was quite a ladies' man. Unfortunately, the school-marm that he was pursuing had another boyfriend and she married that lumberjack in 1905 and they took a homestead and stayed in the country. Pete apparently vowed at that time that, with the loss of that gal, he would never wash again. And I think he kept his vow to his last day on earth - at least until he got to the Bigfork Hospital a day before his death.

Pete had a homestead on 4 tracts in Section 3 and 4 of Bustitown (62-25) as shown on the map. He filed on July 8, 1904 and proved up December 5, 1906.

Some time later Al and Emma Anderson left good-paying jobs in Minneapolis and came up to get some of this free land. They filed on a homestead and Al came up in March, 1916, and went out to his place, cleared a little spot of land, built a platform of small logs, hewed some flat for the floor and pitched a tent on it. It would be their home until they got a house built. Then he made arrangements with Sam McAfee to store what stuff they couldn't take out to the tent and for Sam to arrange for someone to haul them out to the homestead. So when they came up

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sometime later Sam had made arrangements with Pete to haul the stuff out and Pete came along with a team of oxen and an ox-cart. It was pretty wet and the fire break was not much of a trail and they went through a lot of water and slow going, and they never made it to the homestead by night-fall, but they did make it to Pete's place. Pete graciously invited them to eat with him and spend the night with him. Emma got as far as the door and looked into that shack and would not go any farther. They built a campfire out in the yard and cooked their supper, then rolled out their blankets and Al and Emma slept under the wagon. Pete hauled them over to their place the next morning but he kidded Emma the rest of his life about how particular she was because she wouldn't come into his place.

Soon after that Craig started booming. Jim Reid built a sawmill, Camp 29 was booming and Pete moved off his homestead and went to the big city of Craig to make his fortune. A neighbor of Pete's on the homestead was Johnny Waldron, who married Edith De Shaw and was drafted into the army in World War I. Johnny wrote home to his wife, Edith, from Texas, "I feel sorry that Pete Weigant has not come to see you, but maybe he's waiting for me to go to France- ha, ha, ha." Johnny did go to France, but he never came back. He was killed in action. Pete went to Craig and built a small store and got the postmaster's job - he had some education and could write well. He bragged that he had the dirtiest post-office in the United States. Word got to the postal officials, and they checked to see if that was true or not, and they agreed it was, but by that time Pete was no longer the post-master. They moved the postmaster's job to Kutina's store which was on the north side of the river at Craig. Pete got a job as depot agent for the Mpls-Rainy River RR. It's unclear if that was a paying job or not - they had never had a paying "depot agent" job in Effie. One of the joints across the street from the depot had an event take place. A couple of guys were playing pool and a drunk lumberjack fell across the table, dead of an apparent heart attack. They pulled him off the table and pushed him underneath it and finished their pool game. After awhile the guy started to smell pretty bad so the guys thought, "we'll take him across the road to the depot - Pete wouldn't mind that" - so they dragged him over to the depot and laid him on a bench. After a while he got a little too strong for Pete, so Pete took him out on the platform where he froze up stiff. Some guys came along and stood him up against the depot until the train came.

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Pete wasn't a boozier. How did he live in Craig. He had a car and was the only person in town that had a telephone. Rumors persisted that Pete arranged for the call-girls to come into Craig when there was a bunch of jacks in town and the saloons wanted some extra women. These rumors were verified when a stack of letters was found in Pete's shack after his death that indicated that several women corresponded with Pete asking him to arrange for rooms for them when various holidays or events occurred that would bring the jacks into town. With his telephone Pete apparently had some contact with law enforcement officials who would call him and tell him that the U.S. revenuers were heading for Craig. He would let all the saloon keepers know so they would duck their stuff before they got there.

In 1950 Pete swung out of his bunk one morning and plunged his feet into ice-cold water. The Big Fork River had flooded from the late, fast melt and half the business places in Craig were flooded. Pete dug out his shoes and waded down to Peggy's Tavern. Peggy was a gal who had been in Craig for quite some time and ended up with a joint of her own. She was a pretty big gal with a heart as big as a bushel basket for people in need. She call^d her man, Richard, and told him to put a cot in the bathhouse and bring in some blankets and towels and stuff and let Pete stay there as long as the flood was up. Pete was in his glory when the town was flooded. He stood out in the street on a dry place and everybody that came to look at Craig under water would be given a lecture on how high the water had been before, how disastrous it was now and had himself quite a time.

The water finally went down and Peggy told Richard that they weren't going to try and wash the stuff Pete had used - he should build a good fire in the burn barrel and take the blankets and towels and everything and throw them in and burn them up. In a little bit Richard came in with the towels and wash cloths and said, "I don't know why we should burn these. Pete's only been here a week, and they've never been used."

Pete's skin became a kind of burnished brown color. It almost shone. His shack was almost indescribable. It was tar-paper covered with building boards like most buildings in Craig, roughly 12' x 24' with a door facing the road and one in back facing the railroad tracks. He had the only building on the east side of the street, west of the tracks. All of the saloons were on the west side of the street, all in a row. Pete was an avid reader and when you came in through his door it was very dark in there. He had books, papers and magazines piled from floor to ceiling on

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both sides of the room with just an aisle to walk through. His living quarters were about the last 10 feet or so of his shack with a partition with a little 4-pane window, a table sat under the window with a 2-burner kerosene stove which apparently smoked a lot because the window was covered with soot and grease, except for a spot which he must have rubbed with his hand to tell whether it was dark or daylight outside. A kerosene lamp sitting on the table had a chimney that had apparently never been washed. The table was piled high with everything with his plate on the corner which he cleaned after every meal by rubbing it with a piece of newspaper.

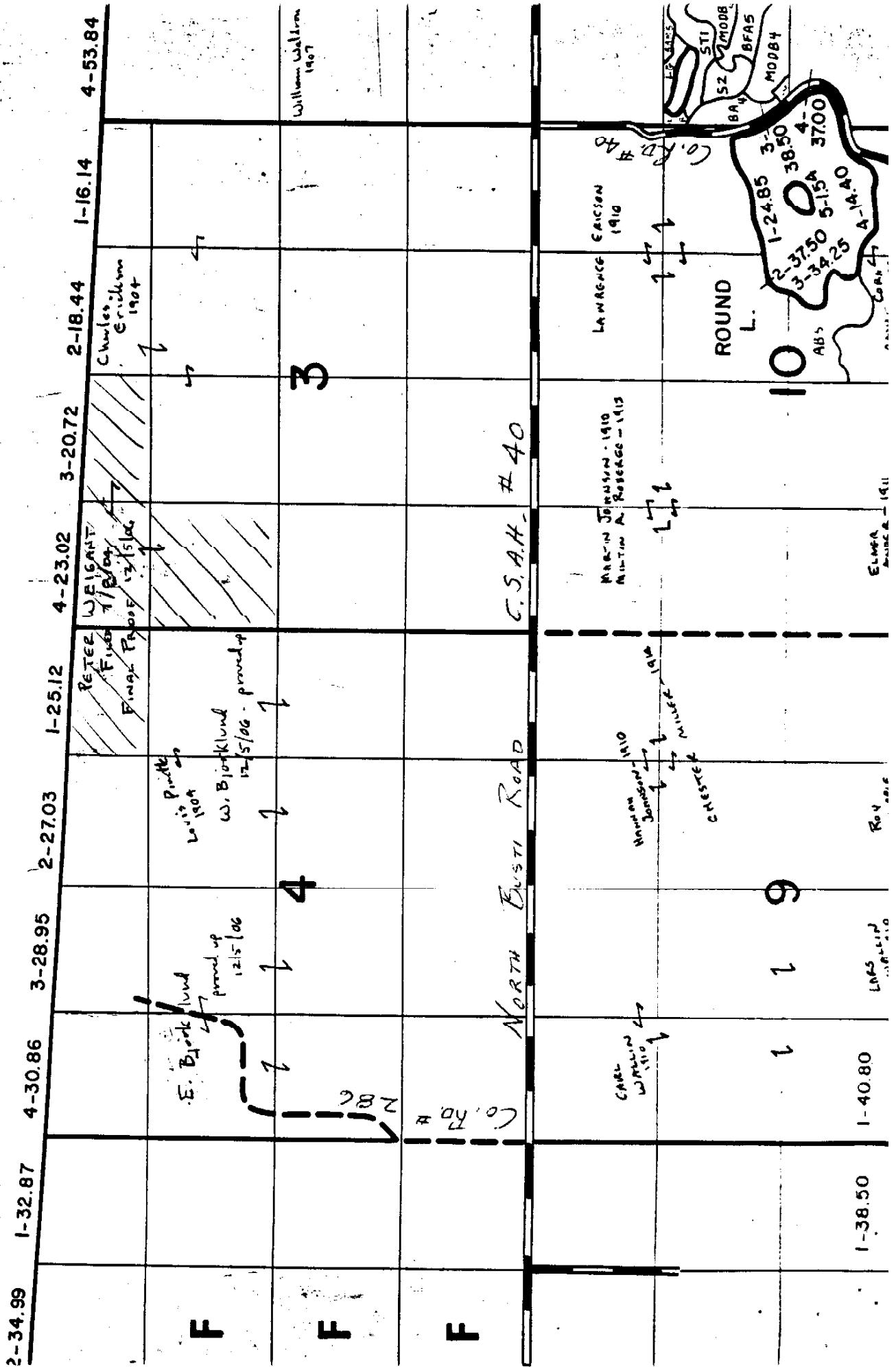
One time Pete came into Effie and came into one of the stores there. He'd hitched a ride into town because his car wasn't working. He wondered if there was any chance to get a ride home. One of the guys in the store said, "Sure, I'll take you home." Pete bought what he always bought at that store - a slab of bacon, a carton of Camels and a case of condensed milk. They threw that on the back of the pickup and headed out. Pete said, "I've got to go to the other store in town." So they went across the street and he bought three or four items there, and he said, "I buy stuff in Bigfork, too." He bought just certain items from each store each time. So they went to Bigfork to the two stores there, and he bought three or four items there and then headed home to Craig. The storekeeper giving him a ride packed in the heavy stuff, and Pete carried the carton of Camels. When the guy came in with the case of milk - (There were 48 cans of milk in a case, which is a lot of milk for a single man to have, and Pete must have drank the stuff, which wasn't very good tasting) he stood holding the case, trying to adjust his eyes to the dark and looking for a place to set the case down because in addition to the table and stuff piled on the floor, he had a bunk on one wall with a blanket hanging in front of it, so he asked Pete where he wanted the milk. Pete said, "On top of that case on the floor. So the guy's eyes get adjusted and there was a case of milk sitting on the floor, and he set it on top of that. He said, "Pete, that's an awful lot of milk for a single man to have - 2 case of milk." "Pick up that case you just put down!", he said. The guy picked it up, and Pete opened the case underneath, and it was full of empty cans. "Put it down!," Pete said. So the guy put it back down. The guy said, "What on earth have you got those empty milk cans down underneath the full case for?" Pete said, "You aren't too smart, are you?" The guy said, "No, I've never been accused of that." Pete said, " This way I don't have so far to bend." Can you imagine how that case of empty milk cans must have smelled the first summer when it got warm.

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There were a lot of characters in the North Woods at that time and most of them had a nick-name hung on them. We never knew what the last name of many of them was. Some of them were not very complimentary, like "Goose-neck Hans", "Mush-mouth", "Stuttering John", "Cross-eyed Jim". I think it must have hurt a little bit when they were called by those names, but "Dirty Pete" was different - he was proud of his title!

In 1955, Pete took sick. I don't know if he didn't wash his plate clean enough with the newspaper or what happened, but some fellow in town loaded him into his car and hauled him to the hospital in Bigfork. He didn't take him in because the hospital superintendent was an old Swede gal named Ida Ryberg who felt cleanliness was next to godliness, so they just dumped Pete on the steps until someone found him there. They dragged him in and of course before they put him in bed, Ida had a crew there by the bath tub scrubbing him down. (One of the nurses later told me that in taking Pete's clothes off they found several layers of long underwear, the inner layer plastered to Pete's body with years of accumulated dead skin and oils and the hair from his body in places had grown into the underwear necessitating careful slicing with a razor in order to peel it off. It was tantamount to being skinned alive - Bill Marshall) That was the end of Pete. On July 3, 1955 Pete passed away. After 50 years without any contact with water or soap, that skin could just not tolerate it. He was buried in Itasca Cemetery in Grand Rapids. There were a lot of characters in the North Woods at that time and Pete was certainly one of them and a very unique one at that - "Dirty Pete".

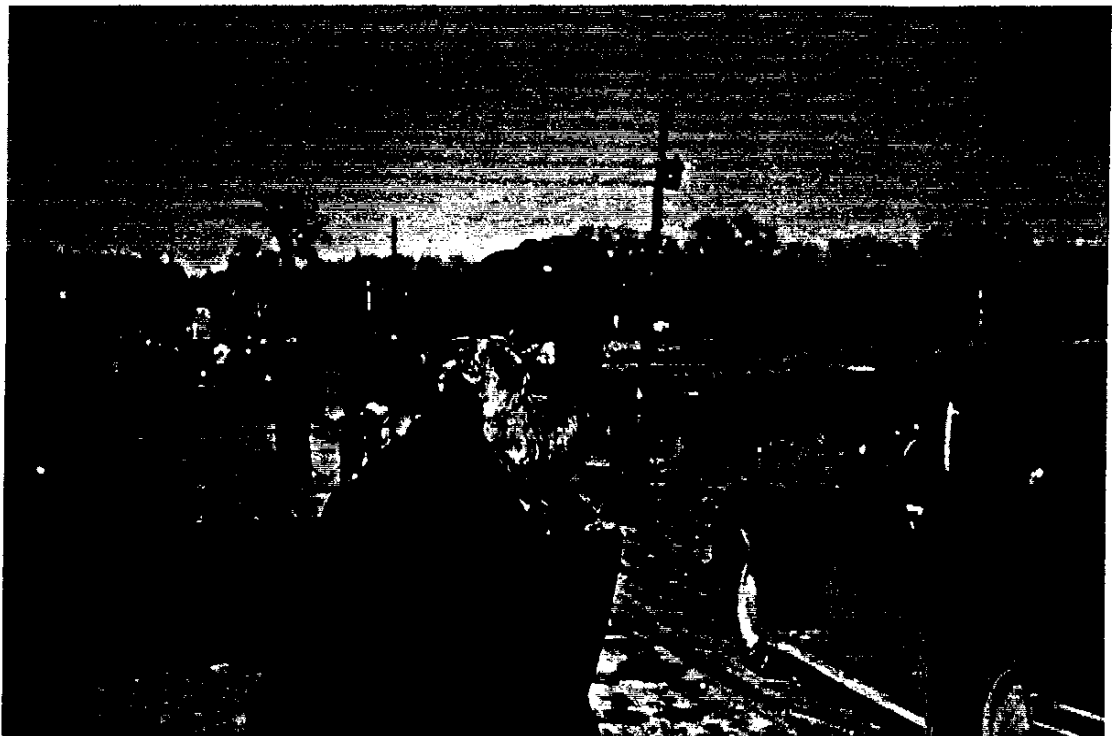
TOWNSHIP 62 RANGE 25



M & R Ry. depot - later Pete Weigant's home



CRAIG, MINN. CA 1930 - looking North



PETE WEIGANT - CRAIG, MINN. MAY, 1950