The Many Birthdays of the Zenith City

Unnamed employees of Duluth's Peoples Brewing Co. show off the facial hair they grew in 1956 for Duluth's centennial celebration of being platted as a town in 1856. (Image: Pete Clure)

The following story—adapted from Tony Dierckins's *Duluth: An Urban Biography* (http://zenithcity.com/book/duluth-an-urban-biography/)(Minnesota Historical Society Press, April 2020)—was first published in the *Duluth News Tribune* in January, 2020, in celebration of Duluth's 150th anniversary of first becoming a city on March 6, 1870.

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In 1956 every man in Duluth was encouraged to grow a beard—whether or not he worked in one of the local breweries—as part of the city's centennial celebration.

But here in 2020 we're celebrating Duluth's sesquicentennial as a city. So that would make 1970 the centennial, right? Right.

We would have also accepted 1957, 1977—twice—and 1987. They all work, depending on how you interpret Duluth's complex history.

In 1949 Arthur Baum described that history as "a long series of counterpunches at circumstances and events. When Duluth wins a round," he wrote, "it habitually comes up off the canvas to do it." Baum was referring to the booms and busts Duluth enjoyed and endured during its first 40 years.

When northeastern Minnesota opened to U.S. citizens and European immigrants in 1856, Duluth was one of eleven townsites platted between today's Fond du Lac and Lakeside. In one year their combined population boomed from zero to 1,560.

The original Duluth townsite sat between Third Avenue East and Eighth Avenue West, from First Street south to just above Buchanan Street. Its platt was completed on May 26, 1856—Duluth's first birthday and the one celebrated in 1956.

Before the town was incorporated, it was expanded to include several other townsites. It lay between Third Avenue East and Eight Avenue West from Fifth Street to Minnesota Point's Oatka Beach at Thirty-Eighth Street South —essentially today's Central Hillside, Downtown, Canal Park Business District and Park Point.

That Duluth was incorporated on May 19, 1857—its second birthday. But that September brought the Financial Panic of 1857, and with it Duluth's first bust. Three-quarters of the population fled by January.

No wonder Duluth chose 1856 to mark its centennial—1857 was hardly worth celebrating.

Duluth in the 1860s was a deserted, desolate place—the 1865 census counted just 126 residents. Then Jay Cooke announced he would terminate his railroads in Duluth in early 1869, and the population exploded. Duluth became a city on March 6, 1870—the community's third birthday, and first as a city. That year census takers estimated the population at 3,129.

The seal for the City of Duluth, established (for the second time) on March 2, 1887.

Duluth stretched between Twenty-First Avenue East and Thirtieth Avenue West from Fifth Street to Oatka Beach, including Rice's Point. By 1873 5,000 people lived within those borders. But that September Cooke ran out of money, setting off the Panic of 1873—and Duluth's second bust.

Again people fled. The population soon dropped to "1,300 souls" by one resident's recollections. It likely wasn't that low—the 1875 census shows 2,415 living in the city.

But Duluth was also deeply in debt. In 1877 its leaders decided that to rebuild the city's financial house, they first had to burn most of it down. They allowed Duluth's city charter to expire, then reorganized the community as a village.

The plan refinanced Duluth's debt at twenty-five cents on the dollar. As incentive to pay bondholders its borders were retracted to between Third Avenue East and Fourth Avenue West from Fifth Street to Oatka Beach: as the village paid its debts, it would regain its 1870 borders.

Duluth ceased being a city, and became the District of Duluth, on March 4, 1877—its fourth birthday. Its fifth, the day it officially became a village, is October 22, 1877.

Why the delay? Reorganizing first as a district allowed city leaders to resign before Duluth became a village—and thereby avoid being sued by bondholders who had just lost 75 percent of their investments.

Zenith City Press's unofficial seal for Duluth, which was platted as a town in 1856, incorporated as a town in 1857, made a city in 1870, reverted to a district in spring 1877, reorganized as a village in fall 1877, and became a city once again in 1887. (Image: Zenith City Press)

Fortunately the grain industry had arrived in Duluth, followed not long after by the lumber trade. Soon Duluth was in the midst of its third boom. By 1880 the population reached 3,483.

Not everyone was happy. In 1881 Duluthians living south of the canal—frustrated that no permanent bridge had been built to span the waterway—ceded and became the Village of Park Point.
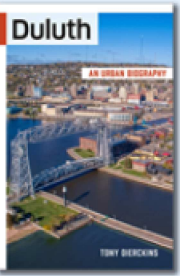
Despite the loss, Duluth's population doubled to 7,800. By 1887, it topped 26,000. That year Duluth finished repaying its debt, and Duluth regained its city status on March 2, 1887—Duluth's sixth birthday, or second as a city.

Baum also compared Duluth to "a dachshund…a city-and-a-half long and a tenth of a city wide." It gained that shape through annexations made between 1889 and 1896, including the neighborhoods we know today from Fond du Lac to Lester Park and above Skyline Parkway.

And also Park Point, enticed by the promise of a bridge over the ship canal.

Happy 150th birthday, City of Duluth!

[Learn more about landmark dates in Duluth's history here (http://zenithcity.com/archive/duluth-history/important-dates-in-duluth-history/)and the city's development here (http://zenithcity.com/archive/duluth-history/duluths-development-1856-1939/).]
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