

Sommerville proposed Helena. Since it was a Union mining camp, the miners balked at the name. Many of the mostly Union camp were reminded of Helena, Arkansas, Sommerville offered a different reason.

Sommerville stood up and rose to his full height. He was a very tall man and he said, "I propose we name it Helena after Helena, Minnesota, in Scott County. That's where I'm from and that's the best town in the best county in the best state in the union."

Helena (pronounced he-LEE-na) won by two votes.

By the time Reginald Stanley returned to visit Helena in 1883, he was surprised to find the city's name was being pronounced HEL-i-na, apparently based on a hack driver misspelling it "Hellena," on the door of his hacks.

Over the next 20 years 3.5 billion dollars worth of gold was discovered in the gulch. By 1888 Helena was home to more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the world.

John Sommerville made rich claims in a gulch near Helena, but lost part of his fortune in expensive litigation over the ownership of one of his holdings. John and Sophronia Perry Sommerville returned to Minnesota in 1867.

After returning from the gold fields, John Sommerville used the money he made in mining to carry out his long cherished idea of manufacturing a harvester to supersede the old platform reaper. He spent most of his money on this, but before he got it completed, the Marsh, Steward & Company beat him to it.

The Marsh brothers believed two men riding and binding could do the work of four men walking and binding. John Sommerville thought the same thing...but he was just a bit too late to cash in!

Sophronia Perry Sommerville died on September 8, 1872, and was buried in the Valley Cemetery in Shakopee.

Becoming disappointed and restless, John decided to start out for the mining country again, hoping to regain his lost fortune. But he did not reach there.

John Sommerville died penniless in St. Paul on March 7, 1889 at the Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor, aged 79 years old.

John Sommerville died from a large wart that he had on the back of his right hand. He used all sorts of remedies to remove it, but without success. It finally turned into a cancer, which extended up his arm and into his body. If he had consented to have his hand amputated way back in October when he was in St. Paul, his life may have been saved.

John Sommerville's remains were brought back to Shakopee, and interred in the Valley cemetery.



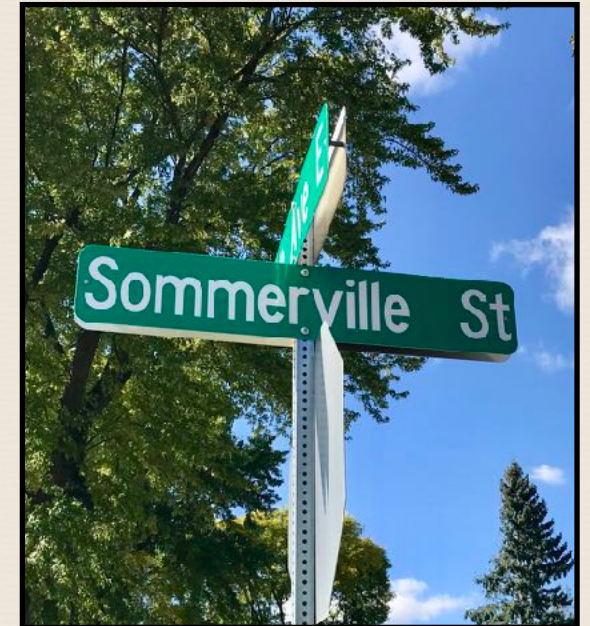
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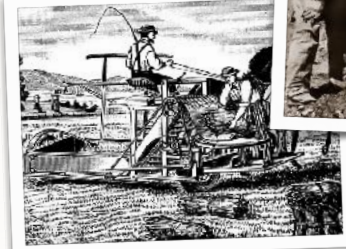


SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY



John Sommerville

1803-1889



Helena Township in Scott County, Minnesota.



Helena, Montana Territory, which was named by John Sommerville from Shakopee.

John C. Sommerville was born in Vermont in 1803. He was in the lumber business in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

He came to Shakopee in the spring of 1851, and was a pioneer associate of Thomas A. Holmes in Scott County. John Sommerville located on a section of land where he built a house in Helena Township, Scott County, Minnesota. Later he lived on the southern extremity of the street named after him: Sommerville!

John was elected county commissioner in Scott County in 1863, and he continued at a commissioner until 1864. He was farming there when he and his wife, Sophronia Perry Sommerville, joined the 1864 Holmes Wagon Train of 1864 to Idaho to look for gold, though they ended up stopping in Montana.

In 1805, members of the Lewis and Clark expedition were the first white men to visit the valley. While investigating the area on foot, William Clark stepped on and had to remove 17 cactus spines from his feet. This caused him to name the nearby creek and valley Prickly Pear. In the early nineteenth century trappers came to the area, later to be pushed aside by groups of white settlers.

In 1862 a group of immigrants in a wagon train decided to build houses for the winter in Prickly Pear Valley, but this settlement proved temporary. In 1864, four ex-Confederate soldiers from Georgia discovered placer gold in Last Chance Gulch, the heart of Helena's present-day downtown. The gold strike attracted hundreds of miners eager to find riches.

Other miners joined the Georgians to pitch tents and mine claims during the summer of 1864. Some stayed but more moved on, discouraged by the scant supply of water. In mid-September, the first group of emigrants arrived with the Thomas A. Holmes wagon train from Shakopee, Minnesota. They arrived at Last Chance Gulch on September 29, 1864.

The train included several hundred men and fourteen women. Only half of their names were recorded. Many hailed from Minnesota, but emigrants also came from Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and some were European-born immigrants. The incomplete roster includes a number of pioneers who stayed and became citizens of Helena, Montana Territory. Among them were longtime Helena attorneys John H. Shober, his partner Thomas J. Lowry, and pioneer rancher Nicholas Hilger.

John Sommerville, who would soon play a key role in naming Helena, was also part of the group.

Most of the emigrants had no experience as miners, and the Montana Post poked fun at them, noting that they used blunt picks and worked "like chickens on a grain pile." But some had good luck. John Marvin Blake of Wisconsin found one of the largest gold nuggets in the area, worth \$2,300.

In the fall of 1864, the miners decided that the camp at Last Chance needed a proper name. They gathered and elected John Sommerville chairman. By October 30, 1864, the town's official christening took place, according to several historic reports from eyewitnesses.

"(S)ome 30 miners crowded into the cabin of George J. Wood," wrote Ellen Baumler. Chairing the meeting was John Sommerville, a towering man who had arrived with the recent Holmes wagon train that had been on its way to Idaho, but had changed its destination to Helena.

The miners jokingly offered names such as Squashtown and Pumpkinville, along with the names of Winona, Rochester and Tomah.