

PRICE COUNTY SURVEYOR

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Cursed be he that removeth his neighbour's landmark. And all the people shall say, Amen. Deuteronomy 27:17

5 March 2004

From: Alfred Schneider, Price County Surveyor
Subject: "Townships" versus "Towns" versus "Tiers"

Here are a few definitions to sort of sort out the above related terms:

Township - A township is a unit in the sectionalized land system, typically including 36 mile-square sections, and thus measuring about six miles by six miles. Townships are numbered.

Town - A town is a unit of government, such as the Town of Harmony or the Town of Lake. Often a Town includes exactly one Township, but not always. Towns are named.

Tier - If you look at a map showing the scheme for numbering townships in Wisconsin, you will see they are stacked up like tiers of bricks. The first tier north of Illinois is Tier 1 North, and so on, with Price County spanning Tiers 34 North through Tier 40 North.

Range - On a map of Wisconsin, you will notice the numbered townships, stacked in tiers, are also arranged in vertical "ranges" or rows, which are numbered east and west from the "Principle Meridian" or north-south dividing line. The word "range" is probably related to "rank," as in ranks and files of soldiers, where the ranks are ranges and the files are tiers. Or something like that.

So the proper terminology for a typical numbered township was intended to be, for example, "Township Tier 37 North, Range 1 West."

That got to be quite a mouthful, so over the years people have abbreviated it by dropping the "Tier." Thus "Township 37 North, Range 1 West."

Some go one step further and drop the "Range." Thus "Township 37 North, 1 West."

Because all the tiers in Wisconsin are North, some in Wisconsin go one more step and drop the "North." Thus, "Township 37, 1 West."

And if you are talking to someone familiar with the system, you can substitute initials for words. Thus, "T37-1W."

Incidentally, did you know that Thomas Jefferson was a member of the committee which sat down to dream up this system? At the first meeting, being mathematically inclined, he realized a decimal (multiples of 10) grid would work best with our decimal number system. So he suggested the townships consist of 100 mile-square sections, measuring 10 miles by 10 miles.

He pointed out that the top tier could be numbered 1 thru 10, from left to right, with next tier being 11 thru 20, and so on. That way it would be easy to visualize the location of any particular section. He then excused himself from the committee because he had some pressing business to take care of in France.

The committee proceeded to disregard his suggestion, because they wanted smaller townships. Their vision for the future included each numbered township coinciding with a civil town, where the nucleus community (blacksmith - feed mill - church - tavern - general store, etc.) would be located in the geographic center of the town. They agreed that, for someone living near the boundary of the town, a round-trip wagon ride of 10 miles, in to the town center and back in one day, was too long. They agreed a round-trip of six miles would be OK, and therefore settled on a township of 36 sections, along with its convoluted numbering system.

As it turned out, many civil towns developed with boundaries other than a numbered township's. In Price County, only the Town of Harmony and the Town of Hill coincide with a numbered township. Some include multiple numbered townships, to include enough people and development to justify a civil town government. For example, the Town of Fifield includes four and one-half numbered townships of God-forsaken wilderness. Others adopted borders of convenience and efficiency, such as the Town of Eisenstein and the Town of Lake which settled on the Flambeau River as a common boundary, thus greatly simplifying their road maintenance.

Also, as it turned out, at least in northern Wisconsin, few if any nucleus communities developed at the center of a numbered township. Nucleus community locations were more dependent on geography, such as rivers which provided mill power and transportation, or railroads which had been located based on geography. The arbitrary grid of townships and sections, superimposed upon the land, had no logical relationship to the actual geography and resources, and except for the simplicity it provided for record-keeping, it has been a detriment.

