



# James T. Elwell

Farmer, Businessman and Servant of the State

By Karen Klinkenberg

James T. Elwell's name has largely been forgotten in the annals of local history, but 100 years ago he was a prominent Minnesota citizen who made significant contributions not only to the City of Minneapolis and the State of Minnesota but also to Blaine Township and Anoka County.

Elwell was born in 1855 in St. Anthony, attended public school in Cottage Grove and later Carleton College in Northfield. At age 16 he invented the spring bed that led to the development of two of the largest manufacturing companies in the Northwest at the time. These enterprises contributed significantly to the economic growth and progress of both Minneapolis and Minnesota.

As real estate investor in SE Minneapolis, Elwell built three housing developments and planted hundreds of elm trees. To alleviate the problem of marshy wetlands in the area, Elwell pioneered a drainage

system of drain tile and boxes. This experience later proved useful on his farms in Anoka County.

In 1886, with proceeds from his businesses and real estate enterprises, Elwell purchased 52,700 acres of land in Anoka County, including establishment of two livestock breeding farms, Oak Leaf Farm in Ham Lake and Golden Lake Farm in Blaine Township. Again faced with marshy wetlands, Elwell constructed approximately 200 miles of ditching, thereby reclaiming thousands of acres for the surrounding farming communities.

Because his two farms were situated

8 miles apart, Elwell built a straight-line wagon road to connect them at a cost of \$1,000 a mile.

This is considered to be the first highway of its kind in the state and exists today as part of Lexington Avenue between Lake Drive and Ham Lake.

A large tax debt, poor soil conditions, and the Panic of 1893 forced Elwell to lose most of his land in Anoka County. He managed to retain the Golden Lake Farm and moved his family there from SE Minneapolis. He was elected to the state

House of Representatives in 1899 where he fought earnestly in support of good roads in rural areas and was active in promoting stock-raising interests in Minnesota.

In 1901, with his finances improving, Elwell moved his family back to SE Minneapolis. In 1906 he was elected as a state Senator from the University district, serving until 1915. As Senator, he was instrumental in passing the "Elwell Law" for rural highway expansion and was an ardent supporter of the U of M.

James Elwell died in 1933. His contributions to the betterment of the state are taken for granted, but today they remain the result of his hard work and creative imagination.

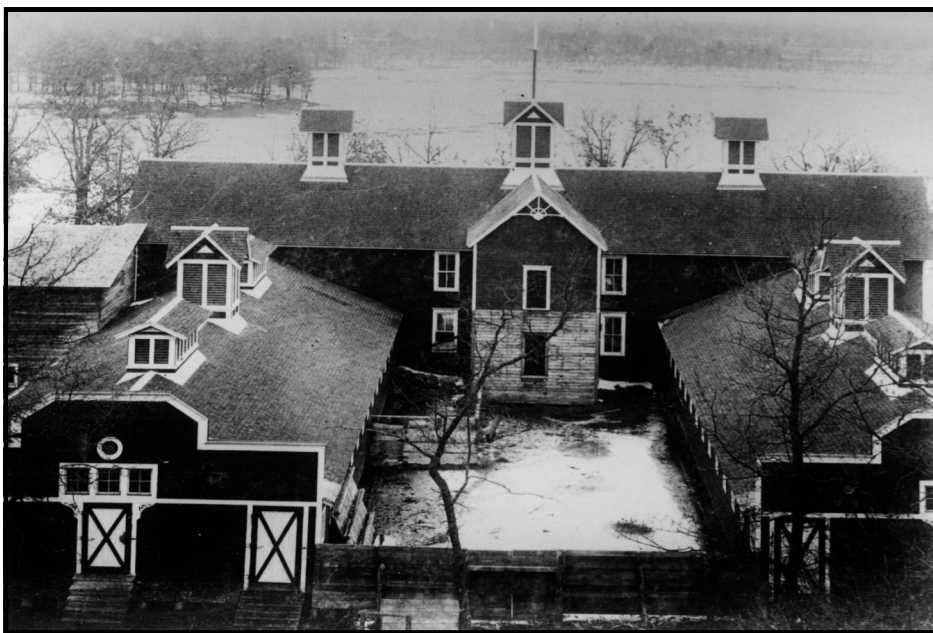
#### Sources for this article

*Forty Years of the University of Minnesota*, by E. Bird Johnson, 1910.

*History of Minneapolis, Gateway to the Northwest*, edited by Rev. Marion Daniel Shutter, Vol. III, 1923.

*History of Circle Pines and Lexington Minnesota*, Manuscript by Stephen Lee, 2000.

*If you sleep well at night, drive on good roads and live in a house with a dry basement, you may well have this man to thank.*



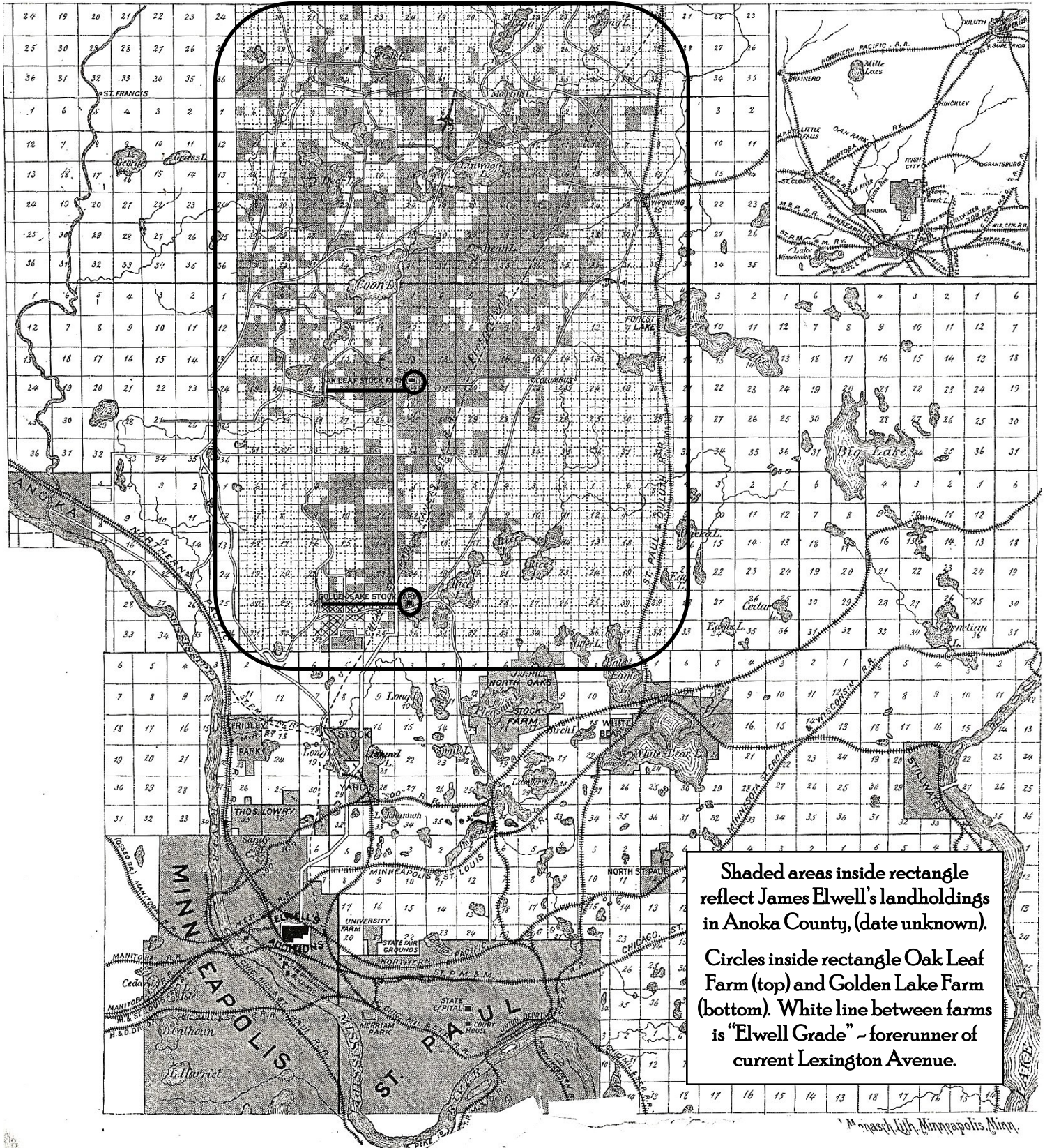
*Cattle Barns of Golden Lake Farm in Blaine Township*



# MAP SHOWING FARMS AND ADJOINING LANDS IN ANOKA CO.

OWNED BY JAS. T. ELWELL, MINNEAPOLIS, MINN.

TELEPHONE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN FARMS AND OFFICE



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