

Eyewitnesses To A Frontier

The Newspaper's 1936 Anniversary Edition Offered Recollections Of Yankton's Early Days

Imagine Yankton 150 years ago. Frankly, that may be nearly an impossible task for many people. Yankton in the early frontier days was virtually as isolated from the east — from white society — as we are interconnected with the world today, even here in the "remote" Midwest.

It was a different world in 1861, as well as the 19th century. Indeed, it was a different existence completely.

In an effort to shed some light into those dark passages of our past, the Press & Dakotan dug into its archives — specifically, its special 1936 edition celebrating the 75th anniversary of Yankton and Dakota Territory. Several early pioneers were contacted for their recollections of those frontier days, and their insights were nostalgic and illuminating in 1936.

We hope they serve the same purpose here in 2011.

WADE BURLEIGH

... It used to be said, "As goes Yankton, so goes Dakota Territory," for Yankton, the capitol, was truly the gateway into the Territory. As time passed, however, the Territory grew smaller and Yankton larger, till now it has become a city — one of the most beautiful for its size to be found. ...

... Time often places a halo around the days of small things that refuses to be removed. The "good old days" are fixed — fixed to stay. Especially is this true when recalling the exploits of boyhood.

Yankton as a village had the finest set of boys that ever lived. No one could deny it. Yankton had the greatest men, the best teachers, the fastest horses, the best shots, etc., etc., in all the world.

But little grass grew on the streets leading to the river in swimming season. How could any one ever have so much fun as eight or ten boys who would leave their clothes on the fine rock beach near the foot of Broadway, walk perhaps a mile upstream through the willows, swim out to a large floating log, and ride it, roll it, and dive from it? Then from maybe a mile below town they would swim ashore and return to their clothing, possibly or probably to find most of it tied in hard knots and hear an exultant voice from the top of the bank cry, "Chaw raw beef!" and then quickly fade away in the distance, indicating rapid traveling. 'Twas well for him, as we would say in these dull days, to "step on the gas," while the swimmers made good use of their teeth to help untie the knots.

And the steamboats — more than a quarter of a hundred! All stopped at Yankton. And when one would whistle, and all did, what thrills! Not the ordinary, average thrills, but the rare kind that start deep down in the corridors of boy's anatomy, chase each other up and down, and all around each nerve fiber and send a boy (and half the town) to the river bank in time to see the boat land, fresh from the unknown lands of mystery.

Occasionally a "mackinaw" came floating down the river, containing from ten to thirty men (with an occasional woman), miners, deserters, adventurers, all stimulating that most subtle thing in mental machinery, a boy's imagination.

And what local adventures! For example, two boys set out on horseback for Bon Homme Island, the largest island in the Missouri River. Because of warm weather, and also to add a touch of romance, they decided to return home at night by the river road and trail. On descending from the chalk bluffs about ten miles west of Yankton, they heard voices. It was quite dark and about 1:00 o'clock at night. As the horses



P&D ARCHIVE PHOTO

As the years and decades passed, the recollections of those pioneers who settled here during the earliest days of the Dakota Territory came to be sought out by subsequent generations who still could trace their immediate roots back to those days.

slowly advanced, all became still — very still. Suddenly several well-armed men appeared from the shrubbery, ordered them to stop, and demanded to know who they were. Under the circumstances the horsemen were willing to be accommodating. The officers of the law, for it was they becoming satisfied, explained that they were seeking to recapture a prisoner who had escaped from the jail in Yankton and whom they thought might be hiding in the rough land of that region. ...

One morning a new boy appeared at school wearing moccasins and a fur cap, to the rear of which a large wolf-tail had been attached. He was a white boy, but his foot and head-gear were interpreted as an act of open defiance. A "Star Chamber" court was called by the passing of notes under the seats; he was tried and condemned. The boy evidently sensed the situation, for as soon as the closing bell sounded, he made for the door and barely escaped from the building with a mob of avengers at his heels. Once outside, being a good runner and light of foot, he managed to keep ahead of the yelling mob till he bolted within his own front door. It was a hair-breadth escape from insulted, unwritten boy law. The next morning he reappeared, but minus moccasins, fur cap, and of course wolf-tail. This change of regalia was duly accepted as a sufficient apology and he soon became one of the boys.

The coming of the "Rooshuns" was considered by the boys at first as an unwarranted invasion. More than one conflict occurred. But gradually by general good humor and a spirit of willing comradeship, they won a place among the local boys, as did their fathers among the men of Yankton and Dakota. This happy adjustment was finally effected when it was learned that the newcomers were not Russians but Germans, many of the latter being already among the respected and influential citizens of the vicinity.

In still earlier days several half-breeds (Indian and white) were among the boys of the town. That fact may account for some of the diversions, such as

"camping out," digging "pumlaws" (Indian turnips), whip braiding, hunting and some trapping. Some of the boys owned horses and most of them had dogs, guns, and lariats.

There was enough of real tragedy from time to time to prevent a boy's imagination from becoming dormant. For example, a man who had shed blood at St. James, Nebraska, was held for a time a prisoner in a room on Broadway. As a diversion he made bows and arrows and passed them through the transom, decorated and stained, to some of the boys. Later he was hung. Or, for example, the man who, while being tried for shooting a man in town, made a dash for the door, leaped upon a horse and escaped over the western hills. Later he died "with his boots on" in a double tragedy.

MARY M. DAVIS

Mrs. Mary M. Davis, of Marcus, Iowa, is another pioneer of Dakota still living who took refuge with her parents in the Yankton Stockade in 1862.

Her father, Washington Reed, with his family arrived in Yankton in July, 1862, and took a homestead on Smutty Bear Bottom just west of town, where the John Ryken place now is located.

During the Indian scare the Reed family moved into the Stockade, but being accustomed to border life they soon returned to their farm home, being anxious about their stock.

Mrs. Davis, now quite feeble, lives with her daughter, Mrs. W. J. Satterlee, at Marcus. Two years ago she visited friends and relatives in Yankton. Through her daughter, Mrs. Davis sends the following interesting story ...

"Mrs. Mary M. Davis was born near Des Moines, Iowa, in 1856 and moved to Yankton, Dakota with her father and mother, Mr. and Mrs. Washington Reed and three brothers, Matthew, William and Thomas in 1862. The trip was made by ox team and was a long and tedious trip. They arrived in Yankton, July 2, her sixth birthday. On their way to Yankton they passed through Sioux City, Iowa, and at that time there were only 25 or 30 houses in Sioux City.

"Very soon after arriving in Yankton they acquired a farm on the bottom lands west of Yankton, three miles from town. The Reed family lived on this place until after the death of Mr. Reed in 1901. Washington Reed, her father, was a member of the third and fourth territorial legislatures.

"Yankton at that time was a fort and was sur-

rounded by a stockade. Government soldiers were stationed there for the protection of the people from the Indians who were making raids upon the white settlements from time to time.

"Those early years in South Dakota were filled with many hardships for the pioneers who moved out into this new uncivilized country to settle there and make it their future home. The land had to be cultivated, logs hewn and houses built, and roads and means of communication established. These things were accomplished under very great handicaps. Machinery and tools were very scarce, if they had any at all, and much of the work was done by hand. The first few years the pioneers lived in constant fear of the Indians and during the trouble with the Indians the farmers and their families around Yankton worked on their farms during the day time and were called into the stockade at night. This, of course, made the work even more slow and hazardous.

"Mother tells of one incident that shows the feeling of dread and uncertainty under which the women and children lived during these times. While the men were busy working it was not always convenient for some of them to stay at home with the women and children and they were often left at home alone during the day. One day when Mother was a small girl, she and her mother were alone and saw some one coming and grandmother, fearing it was the Indians, took Mother by the hand and they fled down through the brush and plum thickets along the Missouri river. They hid there for several hours and finally when it began to get late, they decided they would have to return home. They circled the farm and climbed the hills back of the house so that they could get a view of the house without being seen. When they got near enough so that Mother could see the house from her mother's shoulder, they found the house surrounded by people, but they could not discern whether it was Indians or white people. They were fearful of returning but realizing the could not stay in the open all night, they finally ventured forward and soon discovered that the house was surrounded by soldiers. The father returning in the afternoon had found them gone and fearing they had been carried off by a roving band of Indians, had returned to Yankton and brought out the soldiers to look for them. Needless to say, they were very happy to see the soldiers, and the soldiers were glad to find

It's been a pleasure serving Yankton for almost 30 years!



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Mt. Marty College, Cimpl Arena, 1987



Riverside Park Amphitheater, 1992



Midway Bath Houses, 2004



Yankton Fire Department, Station No. 2, 2010