

Progress: Civil Rights And Yankton's Life

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The Press & Dakotan

The story of how the civil rights movement played out in Yankton may not be a particularly exciting one. There were no riots, and there were no demonstrations to speak of. However, one would be amiss in thinking Yankton played no role in the negotiation of equal rights during the 1960s, and even before then.

Numerous articles have been written about how African Americans helped form the community of Yankton. A March 23, 1885, article in the *Press and Dakotan* reported: "There is a considerable exodus of colored people from Eufaula, Alabama, and a large proportion of those leaving their old southern home are coming to Yankton. ... These immigrants belong to the most industrious class of colored southerners and most of them are possessed of means with which to establish themselves. ... They are a desirable accession to our population and will contribute their share toward the development of Dakota's resources."

While Yankton was not devoid of instances of prejudice, discrimination or racial slurs, as referenced in Mickey L. Dennis' book "Buffalo Soldiers of the Western Frontier," it has a history of apparent equal rights, at least in the law books—if not in social practice.

As the capital of Dakota Territory, Yankton first had to establish its view on slavery. According to Dennis, William Jayne, the first governor of Dakota Territory, recommended a law banning slavery within the territory with his first gubernatorial address in 1862. However, the Legislature took the governor's proposal to the extreme and proposed a bill completely banning all people of color from residing in the area. That bill was defeated in the House, and people of all color and nationalities were accepted into the state.

In 1868, under Gov. Andrew Jackson Faulk, the original Organic Act that allowed organization of government in Dakota was modified to remove the word "white" in reference to which citizens would have the right to vote and to attend public schools. The law then read: "Every free male inhabitant of the United States ... shall be entitled to vote at the first election." Equally, public schools would be "free and accessible to all children."

Proof of accessible schooling is found in an 1889 essay written by Yankton High School student Kate D. Chapman, who was African American. In her essay, titled "The Yankton Colored People — How They Are Progressing," Chapman described how people of African American descent could economically survive in areas even where the black population is small, using the inhabitants of Yankton as examples.

Meanwhile, after the initial Indian scare of 1862, Native Americans and caucasian populations also seemed to co-exist fairly peacefully in the early years of Dakota Territory. In his boyhood recollections, George H. Miner, a notable early resident of Yankton, recalled working for Native Americans and finding his best friends in "half white, half Indian" children. Miner also wrote how members of the local tribes would participate in Yankton's Fourth of July festivities, particularly the horse races.

The coming of World War II, decades later, brought with it many social changes. In a Feb. 27, 1995, *Press and Dakotan* article, editor Milo Dailey wrote: "In the early days (of the Dakotas), words may have been insensitive, but there was an equality of opportunity not easily found elsewhere in America."

"That began to change in the hard times of the 1930s and got even worse during World War II as 'old settlers' with little prejudice toward black people were replaced by new generations and Americans



ABOVE: A photo of an AME church picnic. Yankton welcomed African Americans early on, though there were pockets of prejudice. Discrimination became more prevalent as others from more racially-divided parts of the country emigrated to South Dakota. BELOW: This Dakota Territorial Museum photo shows the home place of Red Owl. The site was located about 2 1/2 miles south of Yankton. The date the photo was taken is unknown.

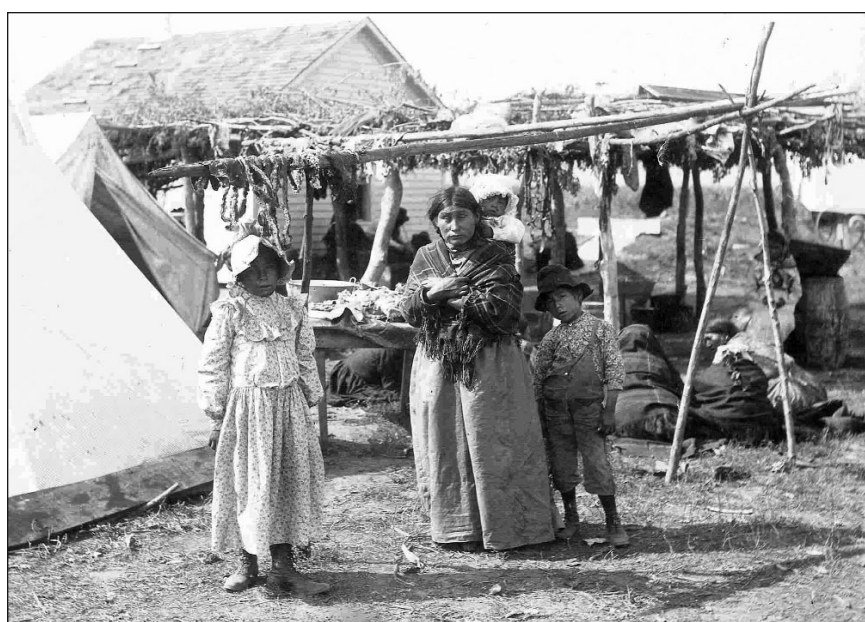


PHOTO: DAKOTA TERRITORIAL MUSEUM

from more prejudiced sections of the country."

In the 1920s and '30s, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) became a presence in South Dakota. Alleged cross burnings in Yankton and Sioux Falls prompted the N.A.A.C.P. (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) to form chapters in those communities, according to Dennis and a Feb. 20, 1995, *Press and Dakotan* article by Dailey. While the scare tactics of the KKK were primarily aimed at Catholic and Jewish residents in the state, the fear they instilled was felt universally, and the question of civil rights became more urgent in South Dakota.

Yankton's real contribution to the civil rights movement of the 1960s can be primarily traced to one man: Ted Blakey. While other members of the Blakey family were well-respected members of and im-

portant to the Yankton community, Ted was certainly the most influential. As a member of nearly every organization Yankton had to offer—the Old Time Fiddlers, the Masons, and the Jaycees, just to name a few — Blakey used his public presence to draw attention to equal rights for black and Native American peoples alike.

According to an article in the Aug. 28, 1981, edition of the *Olney, Ill. newspaper Daily Mail*, Blakey joined the N.A.A.C.P. in the early '60s and, in 1962, helped to pass a law in South Dakota making discrimination in public places illegal. This followed several incidences in Rapid City where black servicemen from the nearby air base were denied service in a local café and hotels. The incidents drew national attention, and South Dakota, which once prided itself as truly being a "land of the free," was dubbed "a pocket of northern resist-

ance to legal efforts to erase radical discrimination in public places" by the *New York Times*.

Blakey worked hard to change that image. In 1963, Gov. Archie Gubbrud took notice of Blakey's work and appointed him Emancipation Proclamation Centennial state chairman. Blakey and his family traveled to Washington, D.C., for a conference commemorating the signing of the document.

In 1964, he headed up a committee at the prompting of the N.A.A.C.P. that succeeded in making South Dakota the 38th state to ratify the 24th Amendment, eliminating the poll tax that targeted minorities and the poor alike.

Blakey credits his membership in the Jaycees for motivating him to push for social change. Dailey quoted Blakey as saying: "That was a big turn in my life because (the Jaycees') motto at that time was, 'Young men can change the world.' 'Little did I know how much young men could change the world.'"

There were certainly things that needed changing in Yankton.

The Harlem Globetrotters, the famous barnstorming basketball team comprised of African American players, came to put on an exhibition show in Yankton but were denied a place to stay in local hotels. The men instead had to sleep in their cars.

In "Buffalo Soldiers," Blakey states: "Up until [the 60s], a black person could not get a haircut in Yankton until after 5 o'clock. He (the barber) pulled down the shades and then cut your hair. There was not a barbershop in Yankton that would cut a black man's hair in 1963."

Native Americans were also pointedly discriminated against. In the book "Yankton County History," Leonard Bruguier, former adviser of the Native Studies program at the University of South Dakota, recalled growing up as a Native American child in Yankton:

"I was in one of the first graduating

classes of the new Yankton High School, class of 1963. ... When I was a boy, I experienced prejudice many times. ... There was a lot of prejudiced white people in Yankton. There were stores that Indians didn't go into. If you did, you never got waited on. If it was a restaurant, you'd never get served. There were places we just flat didn't go to because we didn't feel comfortable when people were rude to us."

The book "Yankton County History" also featured an interview with Cheryl Marie White, a member of the Arikara tribe in North Dakota who moved to Yankton as a young woman. "I found very little prejudice against Indians in North Dakota," White said. "When I came to South Dakota it was a shock to experience racial discrimination."

However, there were havens of tolerance in Yankton that actually encouraged inter-racial socialization. School, sports and church activities were important for building communities comprised of people from all backgrounds. Bruguier called sports "the equalizer" of his life, as it didn't matter what color a person's skin was on the playing field.

Yankton High School and Yankton College were both well-known for their integrated student bodies and athletic teams. For Yankton College specifically, civil rights seemed a given, not something to eventually be incorporated into its doctrine. African American students attended the college as early as 1917, with the college yearbook, "Okihe," listing Mabel Morgan and Julia Smith among the members present.

In the '30s, Yankton College was the school of choice for notable Yankton High School athlete Leonard Smith. In an excerpt from an as-yet unpublished manuscript by Betti Van Epps-Taylor, South Dakota historian, Smith eliminated the University of South Dakota as a college choice due to "Vermillion's egregious racism," instead heading to YC.

In an era in which higher education was hard to come by for people of any race, and in an area of the country in which few people even completed high school, Yankton College not only accepted students from all walks of life but also actively recruited students from different backgrounds as well.

In the president's letter attached to the program of the Miss Black South Dakota pageant of 1977, held at Yankton College, then-president Alfred M. Gibbens wrote: "Throughout the history of Yankton College, minority students have added much to the educational experience here. ... They have brought varied backgrounds and new points of view to the campus, and they have enriched and been enriched by students from other locations and backgrounds."

In regards to criticism Yankton College may have received about its recruiting habits from other South Dakota schools with primarily caucasian student bodies, former Yankton College student, coach and administrator Ron Bertsch said in a phone interview with the *Press and Dakotan* that he dismissed such criticism, if he heard it at all.

"We looked at a student's academic and athletic ability," Bertsch said. "We didn't look beyond that."

During the late '60s and '70s, Yankton College hosted many notable black civil rights leaders, who lead discussions and forums on campus. James Farmer, Julian Bond, Channing Phillips and Dick Gregory all visited campus— Farmer visited several times— and gave empowering, thought-provoking lectures on civil rights and race relations.

Although no protests were staged at

RIGHTS | PAGE 15B

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