

Yankton And The 4th

Old-Fashioned Patriotic Fervor Has Always Found An Enthusiastic Home In The Mother City

EDITOR'S NOTE: This column by the late Bob Karolevitz first appeared in the Press & Dakotan on July 3, 1995. It was reprinted in the book "Yankton: The Way It Was!" Copies of the book are available for purchase at the Press & Dakotan.

BY ROBERT F. KAROLEVITZ

The Fourth of July was always a special day in Yankton's earlier years.

What is not always remembered, however, is that Dakota Territory, with Yankton as its capital, came into being during the Civil War, so there was much patriotic fervor during the 1860s — Independence Day was the ideal time to display that national ardor.

According to recollections of participants, the first celebration took place in 1861 in a small house on the southwest corner of Broadway and Second Street, where a small group of pioneers joined Col. Enos Stutsman in singing, "with more noise than melody," "The Star-Spangled Banner."

In the year that followed, the *Weekly Dakotan* called for a greater recognition of the day:

"Wake up the old cannon which has slumbered by the river bank! Scour bright the rusty muskets that have lain so long in inglorious idleness and prepare to usher in the next anniversary of our National Independence with a glorious salutation. ... Let's celebrate the day!"

On the Fourth the pioneers fired their cannon, once each for the 34 states and twice for Dakota, heard speeches by Downer T. Bramble and others, and, as the paper said, imbibed "sherry cobbles" and "claret punches" so that "judging from the amount of smiling done, the people were pre-eminently happy."

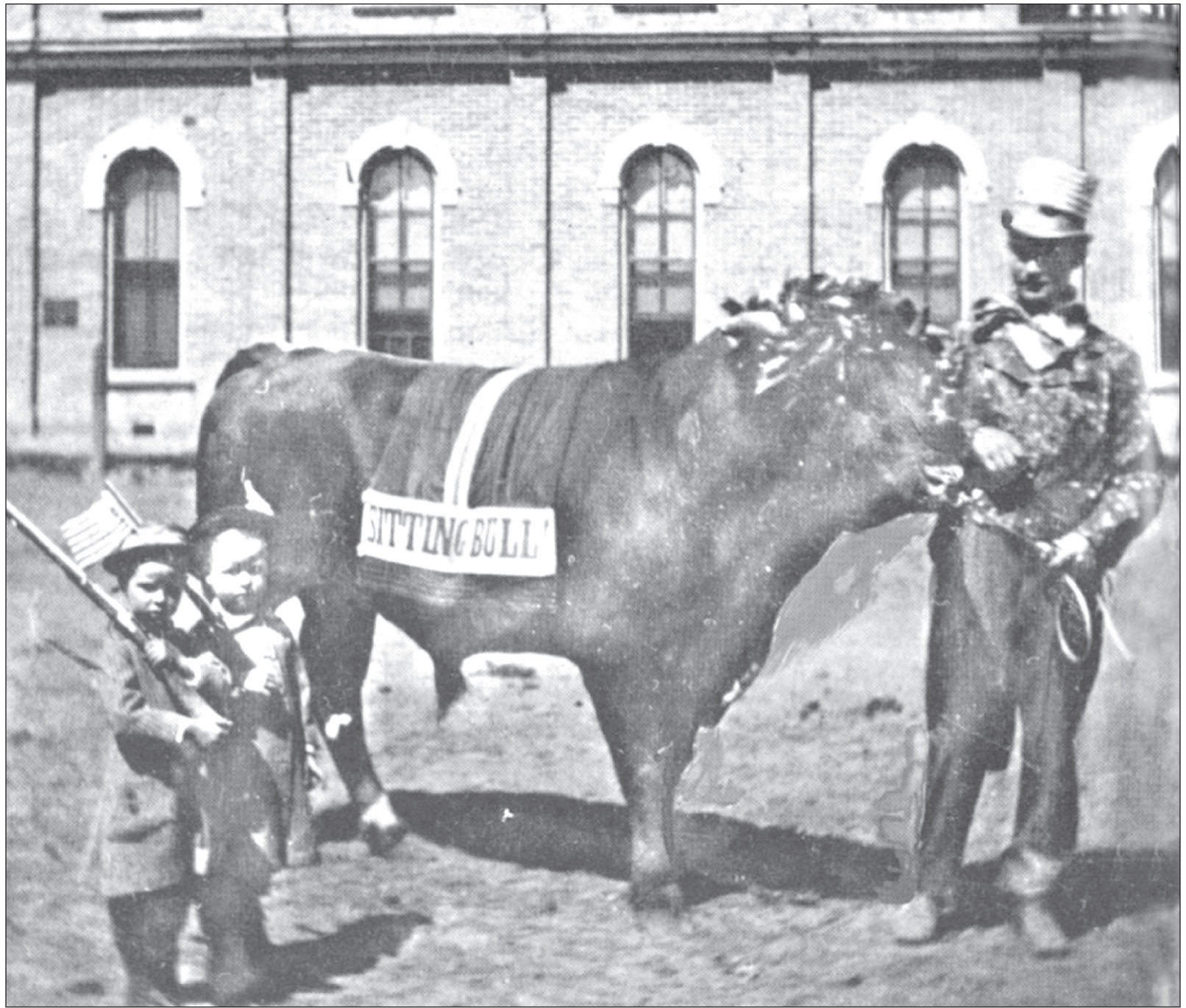
In 1863 once again "the big guns shook the woods and hills" as members of Company B of the Dakota Cavalry saluted the nation, after which Yanktonians gathered at the grove west of town for feasting, target-shooting, speeches and toasts. That evening revelers danced at the Ash Hotel until "their respect for the Sabbath constrained them to desist and go home."

Gen. George D. Hill, surveyor general of Dakota, was the featured speaker in 1864, after which toasts were delivered by W. W. Brookings, Rev. Melancthon Hoyt and others. Unfortunately, the celebration was then marred when Capt. G. P. Waldron apparently made anti-government remarks in an impromptu response which was ill-received by his listeners. "His ravings resembled those of a lunatic," the *Weekly Dakotan* editorialized, as it described him as "an ass donning a lion's skin."

Each succeeding year brought new speakers, parades, band concerts and horse races in the driving park on north Douglas and a wide variety of events. In 1870 the local paper reported, "the base ball boys tried their metal [sic] in a sociable game," and thereafter the national pastime became almost as much a part of the annual celebration as the fireworks display. Dances at the St. Charles Hotel and in Stone's Hall were other early-day features.

In his diary, pioneer Wallace C. Brown recorded mixed feelings about the 1876 centennial celebration of the Fourth. He said the Yankton brass band played "the worst music I ever heard," and that the speech by Hon. Solomon L. Spink had at least one "good fault." It was quite short! He told of sack racing, base ball, a fireworks display "that did not amount to much" and the "foreign element" — most likely Yankton's Germans — holding forth in a beer garden.

Although he concluded that "it was the most unsatisfactory Fourth of July I



P&D ARCHIVE PHOTO

Yankton's early day Fourth of July celebrations were gala affairs, featuring parades, orations, fireworks, baseball games, shooting contests and races of all kinds. This vintage photo — taken by Stanley J. Morrow on Walnut Street next to the First National Bank — preserved for posterity four participants in the Independence Day parade of 1881.



P&D ARCHIVE PHOTO

Parades such as this one were once a staple of Yankton's Independence Day festivities. This photo, believed to have been taken in the late 1870s or early 1880s, was shot at Third and Walnut facing north. Turner Hall, the current home of the Press & Dakotan, looms in the background.

ever passed," he noted that many of the business blocks were decorated with flags and Chinese lanterns and were brilliantly illuminated at night with candles in the windows.

By the 1880s bands of Santee and Yankton Indians added to the festivities, joining in the parades and dancing

at Turner Hall and on the unpaved streets. In 1883 Struck-by-the-Ree — then said to be almost blind — returned to his former village as a celebrity, and in a short speech interpreted by Henry Picotte, he said, in part:

"I am 82 years old ... From across the big river [the ocean] your people came

and settled in my land ... I have none of the blood of the president's people on my hands ... I have never played with the whites but have always helped them. It is time to quit our foolishness ... to love God and cultivate the ground."

That year James Wilcox won the clay pigeon shooting match; James Noonan won the sack race; and William Bancroft claimed the money in the blindfolded wheelbarrow event. However, the greased pig refused to run, so no winner was declared, and the animal was given to the Indians.

The Press and Dakotan then described an exciting climax to the day:

"When the first rocket went up during the evening fireworks display near the river, a trail of burning embers ignited the \$200 collection of fireworks on the platform. Rockets shrieked through the air, huge fire wheels tumbled about and roman candles discharged like gatling guns ...

"The crowd stampeded, horses became frightened and carriages were mixed.

Women shrieked and cried; men shouted. The affair lasted about a minute [and] when the gunpowder display ceased for want of more material, the staging burned on fiercely until it was partially torn down."

J. T. Williams and Milt Brisbine on the stage received burns, and two youngsters, the children of John Maag, were run over by a carriage and badly injured.

In ensuing years Great Northern, North Western and Milwaukee special trains brought carloads of visitors to the Yankton celebration. Greased pole climbing, a live pigeon shoot, a biscuit-eating contest and imaginative races were added to the programs. In 1899 Ed Koenig won the \$5 first prize in the fat man's race, and the Walter Main Circus drew tent-filling crowds to its performances near the North Western depot.

For excitement — and injuries — though, probably no Fourth of July could top the Cement City's celebration in 1900. It was a gala affair. The Louis Moritz Brewery reported the sale of

250 barrels of beer as its keg-filled wagon, pulled by big gray horses wearing brass-trimmed harnesses, was an imposing sight about town. Attorney Levi B. French stood on a fire department hose cart at Third and Walnut and gave the oration of the day.

The P&D said he talked politics to about 50 people, endorsing expansion, imperialism, a standing army, trusts and Mark Hanna until everybody left except about four judges. However, the big event of the day was the parade of steam threshers and simulated battleships on Main Street. The battleships reenacted the "Battle of Manila," and that's when all hell broke loose.


As George Atwater impersonated a Spanish admiral on the battleship Riena Christina, he inserted a sky rocket into a tube and lit it with a cigar. As he did, the ship lurched, he stumbled and the rocket ripped into his arm. Flesh and skin hung in shreds, the paper said, as Atwater jumped from the vessel and ran into

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