

EARLY HISTORY OF ABERDEEN

The briefest history of the beginnings of Aberdeen must necessarily include a few data relating to the settlement of the Dakotas. "Dakotah" is an Indian name suggesting a great and broad domain, peopled by friends. The first information of Dakota was obtained from the report of Lewis and Clark, who were the first white men to explore the Missouri River to its source. Their expedition was made during 1803 and 1806, but the report was not published until 1814. The account of the extreme cold and other hardships which the explorers encountered was not such as to make this land inviting to many people. Consequently Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas and Colorado became the "Promised Land" of the eastern emigrants. Dakota was considered a part of the Great American Desert, a land of barren sands in summer, and of snow and frosts in winter. Some time in or about 1850 a few hardy adventurers settled in Dakota and their crops of wheat bore unmistakable evidence that this was indeed a goodly land. By 1858 there were thriving settlements upon Indian lands along the Missouri River and these lands were finally ceded in that year. Subsequently, a move was made for the formation of the Territory of Dakota and this Act was passed in 1861. The gradual influx of people continued until 1875 when the Dakota boom may be said to have begun. At this time gold was discovered in the Black Hills and the papers published such wonderful stories of the precious nuggets found there, that adventurers flocked in from every direction. Not only did they find gold but they found awaiting them, millions of acres of the very best of land and the most healthful country in the world.

After the Indian War, probably in 1865, Francis Rawndelle established himself in trade at Rondell, and anglicized the form of his name. In 1872, the north half of what is now Brown County was created as Beadle County, and the south half as Mills County. Among the first settlers were the Johnson Brothers, who settled at Yorkville on the James River shortly after 1874. The population increased more rapidly after this time.

In 1878 the map was reconstructed as at present, and Beadle and Mills County united to form Brown County, named for Alfred Brown of Hutchinson County, who was then a representative in the legislature which created the county. The center of Brown County was located at an equal distance from the two ranges of hills, with the James River running nearly through the center north and south. At a point less than two miles from the geographical center, the Elm river came in from the West.

Brown County was organized and the first officers elected in 1880. At this time Columbia was chosen as the temporary seat of government, the county seat. This gave rise to much dissension, and was finally changed.

The outstanding event of this early period was the descent of the Great Storm which occurred in October, 1880. Beginning with a snowfall, it developed into a raging blizzard and on the third day became a veritable hurricane. Many are the tales of suffering and deprivation which the pioneers were forced to undergo. People were reduced to extremes in the matter of food and supplies of all sorts were almost exhausted. Bruised barley pancakes, beans without salt pork, sometimes without even salt, formed the menus. If one can believe newspaper accounts, the greatest suffering came from a lack of tobacco! It was purely mental and imaginary, but nevertheless acute. Because there was none to be had, men who seldom used the weed were consumed with longing for it. The following account is taken from an early clipping. "A man named Hilger started across country for Watertown to try to get in some supplies. When he reached Columbia, he found that he would be short of oats before he reached his destination, on account of the time it would take him to drive around the lakes. He struck a settler who had about ten bushels of oats and tried to buy some. The settler insisted that he wanted the oats for seed and refused to sell at any price. Mr. Hilger offered fabulous sums for a small quantity but the settler apparently preferred to keep the oats. No trade could be made, so Mr. Hilger

prepared to depart. Just as he was about to leave, he pulled from his pocket a big plug of tobacco. The settler, who had not seen any tobacco for two months, called him back and wanted to purchase the tobacco. It was now Mr. Hilger's turn to bargain, and he left with a sack of oats for which he had given in exchange as much tobacco as one could buy for ten cents!" Another story is told of Clare Johnson and Bill Young whose names will be recognized by early residents. It was learned that the latter men had succeeded in getting in some supplies. The Johnson place was separated from town by a great expanse of water, and two men, who had been living on barley pancakes for three weeks secured a boat and undertook to row over there. They were gone several hours, and practically the whole town, supposing that they would have a boatload of provisions, went down to welcome them on their return. Before the boat came anywhere near the townspeople, one of the occupants stood up in the boat, excitedly waving something in the air, nearly capsizing the boat. It was a long plug of standard navy tobacco, and not another thing did they have in the boat."

The Junction of the two railroads had been called Grand Junction, but Alexander Mitchell, then President of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railway, named it Aberdeen, after his boyhood home in Scotland. The original plat of the town was four blocks square, now that section of town bounded approximately by Railroad avenue on the north, Washington on the east, Fourth Avenue on the South, and Second Street, West. This plat was made by Charles E. Pryor, and was filed January 3rd, 1881.

R. S. Ellis, who was one of the first men to hold the office of Justice of the Peace, brought into town a large circus tent which he used as a hotel until he built one of sod. The latter was 30 by 50 feet, and three feet thick, and was built on the site of the present Commercial Club.

In the spring of 1881, a fet tents, board shanties, and sod houses formed the nucleus about which Aberdeen was to rise like a "Sphinx in the Desert." People

began to pour in, but the greatest impetus was received when a wagon train of 50 horses and 75 men, came across country from Cass County, and located in or near Aberdeen. This was on June 6, 1881.

July 6, 1881, the first Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul train reached Aberdeen and from that time there was a steady growth. The lands were held by the government for actual settlers who could secure them by complying with the Homestead, Preemption or Timber Culture Act. There were at this time many evidences of the work of mound builders. They had left traces in a long series of mounds, dotting the banks of the Elm River.

August of this year saw the organization of two newspapers, the Dakota Pioneer, and the Aberdeen Pioneer, the first to be published in the county. They were printed from the same press, and the same day, August 4, 1881. This is one of the first indications of the spirit of rivalry and competition in this western country. The new town of Frederick, about 26 miles north of Aberdeen, wished to have a newspaper, and inducements were held out by the townspeople, which were instrumental in getting the papers started. The Dakota Pioneer was the first to come off the press, but owing to delay, the team which was to carry the paper to Frederick did not get started until The Aberdeen Pioneer was well on its way. The team which arrived first at Frederick would, of course, get the most subscriptions. The two teams started after nightfall for the midnight race over the trackless prairie. The Dakota Pioneer team lost its bearings, so the Aberdeen Pioneer team reached the town first. It was, of course, long after midnight and the men in the latter team decided to retire and get an early start in the morning. Not so with the venders of the Dakota Pioneer! Immediately upon arrival they proceeded from house to house, aroused the occupants from their slumbers, and had everybody subscribed before the other representative appeared on the scene. John H. Drake was the editor of the Dakota Pioneer. Newspapers were an important element at the time, because legal notice of final proof on land had to be published in the district in which the land was located.

The Jumper and Bliss Company were building a store during the summer. Before the train came as far as Aberdeen, they were obliged to cart the lumber 45 miles overland, probably from Andover. This building occupied the site where the Hagarty building now stands, and housed the first postoffice in the town. In one corner of the store, Jumper and Bliss also opened the first bank, afterwards known as the Merchants and Mechanics Bank. The opening date was August 25, 1881.

Twenty-three pupils comprised the first school, which was opened August 29th of this same year. Mrs. C. H. Pleasants was the first teacher and R. S. Elles one of the first trustees. The school was held in a claim shack, and in the spring of 1882 there were two of these shanties, with board roofs and board sides, located on the site of the present Junior High School.

The first child born in Aberdeen was a son of Mr. and Mrs. C. A. Fowler, and he was born in 1881. Mr. Fowler built the first sod house in Aberdeen.

The first marriage of an Aberdeen resident occurred in September, 1881. Hugh Blanding was married in Minnesota. Upon the return of the bride and groom, they were met by a large group of friends with a hay rake, and were escorted around the town, finally being deposited in front of a saloon, where they were obliged to set up a treat.

Aberdeen boasted the largest flowing artesian well. This was the first artesian well tapped in this section of the state. It had a depth of 960 feet, and was at one time considered one of the wonders of the world. The well was sunk by the Milwaukee Railway, at a point on its right of way, several hundred feet north of the present Brown County court house. The well not only spouted water, but it belched forth sand in tons. Much of this sand was used to coat several blocks of Main street. It is reported that people came from as far as England to see this well!

Another boast of Aberdeen was that it had the largest hotel west of Minneapolis, the Sherman House, James Ringrose, proprietor. To celebrate the opening of the Sherman House, November 4, 1881 a large reception and dance was held.

The county was scoured far and wide for all available women. There were 37 in attendance at the party, although there were twice that number of men.

The first Christmas, 1881, was celebrated by a Community Christmas tree. A railroad agent had been commissioned to secure a tree, and when it arrived it was only five feet tall. This did not daunt our pioneers--they set to work to produce a larger tree. A large piece of timber was found and placed in an upright position, nailed to both floor and ceiling. Arms of laths were attached to this, and pieces of evergreen, taken from the real tree, were tied to each lath. The decorations consisted of popcorn and cranberries. The tree was set up in the store of Beard, Gage, and Beard, located at what is now the corner of Main and Third Avenue. John H. Drake performed the duties of Santa Clause, and there was a gift for everyone.

Not much snow fell that winter, and building was continued through most of the year.

The Aberdeen National Bank was established in 1881, as the Brown County Bank.

In April, 1882, a petition was presented asking for city incorporation, and on June 5, 1882, the first city election was held. E. H. Alley was the first president of the Board of Trustees, and served until the next election in April.

The Northwestern Railway came in 1882, and the United States land office was built in that year. The latter was said to be the finest building of its kind in the United States.

In the summer of 1882, the settlers were much alarmed by an Indian Hoax. A report spread like wildfire, that a number of settlers had been massacred in Spink County. A party of men had set out to establish the town of La Foon and to liven things up, had perpetrated a joke. A few of the men dressed up in ragamuffin style, and letting out a true Indian yell, had attacked two German youths. They felled one (who was really the confederate of the jokers) with a

blow, which so frightened the other, that he waited to see or hear no more, but set out on a dead run for Redfield, the redskins in pursuit! Arrived at camp, he told the story of being attacked by savages, of the slaying of his companion, and his hairbreadth escape. Authorities sent word to Fort Sisseton, and Regulars of the U. S. troops were ordered to move for attack. The Northwestern president came up from Huron on an engine at high speed, and said he would transport help from there at once. Citizens were requested to have firearms of every description in readiness. A crack army 30 or 40 men on horses were dispatched to the camp. A short distance from town, they met men from the camp who had started out to look for the frightened German boy, and who explained that it was all a joke.

The first Presbyterian Church was built in 1882. The building is not in use as a warehouse of the Dakota Central Telephone Company, and is located in the neighborhood of the Thompson Yards. The first public wedding to be held in this church was that of Mr. And Mrs. T. C. Gage, on June 1, 1885.

In 1887, Aberdeen had increased so remarkably that it was called Dakota's "Young Chicago."

Up to this time, Aberdeen and Columbia had been in dissension as to which should be the county seat. In 1887 Aberdeen obtained the necessary vote for the removal of the records from Columbia to Aberdeen. Subsequently, this election was held to be void by the Supreme Court, and the records were carted back to Columbia. Then bitter strife continued between the two towns for nearly three years. However, at the general election in 1890 Aberdeen was an easy winner over Columbia, and the county seat has always remained here.

An early history would not be complete if it did not contain mention of the great blizzard on January 12, 1888. The day dawned bright and balmy. The forenoon was so mild that residents were remarking on the magnificent climate. But the storm was phenominal in its suddenness and severity. While it was even thawing in places, there came a severe northwest wind. The moisture came with the wind like a wave of dense smoke, and it grew much colder immediately. Strange

electrical phenomena occurred. In taking baked potatoes from the oven, the fork emitted three flashes upon touching the potato. Other shocks were sustained when people touched a stove pipe, or started to shake down a stove. An incident always to be remembered by the participants took place when the storm was raging at its highest notch. An effort was made by some of the court house employees to get to George Perry's house, a block away. The court house was then situated on what is now Aldrich Park. Many attempts were made to brave the storm, but all proved useless. Finally, John Houlihan, register of deeds, came to the rescue with the suggestion that they go out with a line. A ball of twine was secured and one end was fastened to Mr. Houlihan and the other inside the office. S. C. Hedger was one of five men who made up the procession. Two lady clerks occupied chairs, and rode in state. Various set-backs were encountered, but the goal was finally reached. There were many sad tales of people lost in the blizzard. One of the most pathetic was that of the pretty 19 year old school teacher at Northville, who attempted to reach the place where she boarded. This was only 30 yards from the school house. She became bewildered and was lost. Her body was found a half mile from the school house.

In 1889, both Dakotas were admitted as States. The Acts were purposely shuffled by the President, so no one knows which was admitted to the Union first.

One of the important events of the next few years was the Grain Exposition which opened September 30, 1895, and was held in the Grain Palace. This was the event of the season, and the best bands were imported from Chicago to provide entertainment for the crowds of people who came. The exposition was presided over by the Grain Lady, who was called the Queen of Aberdeen. She was wholly dressed in grains and grasses. Her skirt was made of wheat from which the leaves had been stripped, and arranged in even rows with the heads down, to resemble plaits as was the style at that time. Above these were two rows

of oats, arranged in a similar manner, for flowers and frills. The sleeves were made of oats, the heads hanging down gracefully around the arms and resembling point lace. On her head she wore a crown of grains, grasses and flowers. Around her neck hung a chain of sun flower beads. In her left hand she carried a bunch of flowers while her right hand grasped some flax. A prairie pigeon was posed on her wrist.

In 1897 there were such heavy snows that the town was endangered by the resulting high water. When the break up came, the floods were quite serious.

In 1898 the city turned out en masse and tendered to William McKinley an enthusiastic reception. In 1900 Roosevelt came to the city and was given a great ovation.

On March 14, 1901, Mr. Carnegie (through the efforts of Senator Kyle) offered \$15,000 for a library if the citizens would raise \$1500 a year. He asked that it bear the name of his friend, Alexander Mitchell. The gift of a site at Nicollet (now Sixth Avenue) and Lincoln Street was offered to the city by Charles H. Prior and was accepted by the City Council.

St. Luke's Hospital was built in 1902, The United States Postoffice in 1904, and the court house was dedicated the same year.

From this time the history of Aberdeen is recorded in newspapers, articles and books, so that the events of later years are not difficult to discover by those interested.

Mattie Windell Allen
Aberdeen, So. Dak., January 30, 1930