

# The Great Dakota Boom



by  
Shebby Lee

© 1985

## The Great Dakota Boom

To the casual observer, the summer of 1980 appeared to be progressing without undue commotion. A little too hot; not enough rain; the threatened grasshopper infestation failed to materialize - a great relief. Black Hills towns were cautiously optimistic about the tourist season. Local celebrations came off with pleasing regularity, breaking the routine of long summer days.

Yet there was something different about this summer. Small blurbs in West River newspapers only hinted at the “doings” out East. One after another the press releases announced the centennial celebrations of Huron, Chamberlain, Madison, Redfield, Milbank, DeSmet, Miller.... the list seemed endless. Why so many? And all in one year?

As it turned out, it wasn't just 1980, but the year before, and the year after, and several years thereafter. Nearly every hamlet east of the Missouri (and a few west) was founded during what has come to be called the Great Dakota Boom, and those that survived the intervening century were kicking up their heels in triumph.

Gone are the barren, treeless prairies which greeted our forefathers, stretching endlessly from horizon to horizon and offering both opportunity and despair along with the 160 acres of free land. Gone also are the stony-faced settlers, mostly immigrants, who endured incredible hardships in their determination to conquer the land.

In their place are hundreds of tree-shaded communities with their trimmed lawns, schools, libraries, churches and frame homes. Civilization has come to the prairie, and

though the process took less than a century it has been a hard-won achievement.

Various dates are given by historians for the Great Dakota Boom. Some place its beginning as early as 1873, and its ends as late as 1889. However, the years 1878-1887 are most commonly recognized as the period of greatest growth, with 1883 being its peak.

Given the vast richness of the Dakota prairie and the early settlement of the land to the east, south and west of the territory, the tardy development of Dakota is on the surface inexplicable.

The few settlements existing prior to this time maintained a very tenuous existence on the prairie and several, like Sioux Falls, were abandoned altogether due to Indian scares, drought, or locusts. Sioux Falls came back, but many didn't and the less than 12,000 people huddled in the southeastern corner of the territory displayed more optimism than common sense in their tenacity. Many despaired that the prairie would ever be more than the Great American Desert it had been labeled since earliest exploration.

The Homestead Act allowing 160 acres of free land to settlers had been passed by Congress in 1862, but coming as it did during a national crisis, it had little effect on Dakota Territory at first. Not only were heads of households (who might have led families westward) involved personally in the war, but large numbers of troops were transferred from the West to the areas of combat, thus leaving our frontier forts understaffed and vulnerable.

Then too, there were the panics of 1857 and 1873, which coupled with "Indian troubles" seriously hindered railroad expansion into the new territory. By 1878 there

were only two railroads tentatively extending their spurs into southern Dakota: a 54-mile stretch from Sioux City to Yankton, and 34 miles of track connecting the Minnesota border with Lake Kampeska near present-day Watertown.

The boosters of the territory's largest community, Yankton, could trumpet its advantages all they wanted, but without transportation the settlers had little chance of survival. While not exactly a desert, the northern plains did present different challenges to its pioneers.

The harsh extremes of winter and summer (sometimes measuring as much as 150° difference between the seasons) prevented subsistence farming which had sustained the settlers of other frontiers. Farmers could raise one or two staple crops or graze herds of cattle but could not provide all their needs from the land. Transportation to take their crops to market and bring back necessary supplies was essential for survival on this prairie.

But then conditions began to change, making settlement more appealing and success possible. The years of drought suddenly ended and the prairie blossomed into a tempting promise.

As the economic depression of 1873 abated, the railroads took a new interest in this virgin territory. Although the federal government made no land grants in Dakota as in other territories, there were plenty of opportunities for profit in the founding of new towns. Town lots came dear in a railroad terminus, and since the companies had the advantage of knowing where the track would be laid next, they invariably held title to the choicest lots. Of the 285 towns which were platted during the Boom period, 138 of them were founded by railroads. 89 more were platted along the railroad right of way

by private land companies.

These were placed every 7-10 miles along the tracks to provide a marketplace for the farmers within driving distance by team and wagon. While the presence of a railroad meant instant prosperity for a community there was often distrust of the giant monopolies which could place the depot, tracks and outbuildings to their best advantage rather than the town's. For this reason, future townsites were often discreetly bought up by agents of the company and a certain amount of skulduggery was not uncommon in the rush for profits.

The influence of the railroads cannot be overemphasized in both the rapid settlement and ultimate success of Dakota Territory. They tended to neutralize the negative weather and conditions by bringing in fuel, food, fencing and building materials - all unavailable on the treeless plains. And of course the railroads brought the farmer closer to his marketplace.

During the Boom years over 2,000 miles of track were laid by the two rivals: the Milwaukee Road and the Chicago and Northwestern.

After a reluctant start in Dakota Territory the railroads enthusiastically took up the banner of free land and bally-hoed the virtues of Dakota far and wide. Many a Scandinavian or northern European immigrant first heard of this new land of opportunity from a railroad brochure, poster or flier printed in his own native language. Dakota Territory is located on the same latitude as these countries and the sturdy agrarian peasants adapted their lifestyles and their crops easily to the new land. Many had relatives already living in Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin or Canada who joined the newcomers on their way West.

Unlike earlier pioneers who formed caravans of prairie schooners across the plains, these settlers came by rail, often to within just a few miles of their final destination. By 1890, one-third of the population of the new state of South Dakota was foreign-born, mostly Norwegian. Next came Germans, Russians, Irish and Swedish. They came in such numbers that newly arrived passengers often camped in dusty streets surrounded by their families, livestock and household goods for want of adequate lodging in the infant towns.

In 1882, near the height of the Boom, as many as 18 trains arrived daily in Huron. One thousand passengers disembarked per week, 250 freight cars were unloaded every month. A Huron public house served 400-500 meals daily during this period.

Arriving simultaneously with the settlers were the newspapers. While some exemplary members of the fourth estate set up shop to serve the people of the community and proved their good intentions by outlasting the Boom, most early Dakota printers were opportunists who managed to give the profession a very bad name in an amazingly short period of time. These were not really newspapers at all but printer jobbers set up to publish the legal land claims of the settlers - for an exorbitant fee - as required by the Homestead Act. As all the land was taken up in a given area, the printer would pack up his (very portable) press and move on to a newer settlement and fresh claim fees.

It was an exciting time - the great land grab of the eighties - some said the last frontier in America.

The Black Hills gold rush notwithstanding, it is probably the most important event

in South Dakota history. In two short decades the population ballooned from 11,766 to 328,808, the 1,700 farms became 30,158 farms, and the six platted towns grew to 310. Ultimately, the burst in population enabled the territory to enter the Union as two states rather than one in 1889.

And then, as quickly as it had begun, it was over. By 1887 most of the prime land was claimed. That, added to a three-year drought which began in 1886, effectively reduced the flood of emigrants to a trickle. A few allowed the hardships and loneliness of homesteading get to them and they retreated. But most remained to form the rigid backbone of the developing state.

Rigid is a harsh word. One prefers to apply gentler adjectives to one's own ancestors. But this land which our forebears settled and which we now inhabit is tamed only until the next spring blizzard or hailstorm or tornado or flood or prairie fire - all of which can wipe out a crop or a herd or a homestead as easily as it did one hundred years ago. And in this still largely agrarian state the people reflect the same toughness and perseverance of their forebears.

One hundred years is not a very long, time, but filled with all the hardships - natural and man-made - which South Dakotans have endured, is it any wonder that they wanted to celebrate?

"We did it! We're still here!!"

Happy Birthday, Centennial Towns:

Altamont	Elkton	Milbank
Andover	Ellis	Miller
Arlington	Folsom	Mt. Vernon
Aurora	Hayti	Plankinton
Bridgewater	Hitchcock	Redfield

Chamberlain  
Colman  
Creston  
DeSmet

Humboldt  
Huron  
Kimball  
Madison

Salem  
Wakonda  
Waubay  
Wessington  
Wilmot