



South Dakota State Archives

Early History in the Black Hills - John R. Brennan Diary, 1875-1876

In October of 1875, John R. Brennan left Denver on an adventure to the Black Hills. His journey included evading the military, stopping at the Gordon Stockade, and creating the town of Rapid City. Brennan's diary describes some of the history and people of the early Black Hills region. This primary source document helps the reader understand the dangers of settling and traveling through the Black Hills in the mid-1870s. While reading the diary, think of how travel has changed from the mid-1870s to the present and what it meant to take such a long journey to the Black Hills in this time period.

Excerpt from John R. Brennan's Diary

Left Denver for the Black Hills in company with Geo W. Stokes and E.W. Hawley. Arrived in Cheyenne W. T. camped in emigrant corral of Morris Apple. Arrived at Plat River and camped at mouth of Laramie River about two miles above west of Ft. Laramie, remained there 10 days. Reason of this delay, we were informed that Col. Pollick of the U.S. Army was on his way out from the Hills with remnant of Prospectors belonging to the Jenney Expedition who had remained in the Black hills after the expedition had returned. Pollick had orders to round them all up and remove them from the Hills. The report proved correct. Our party had increased during the 10-day stay at the Plat to 45 persons. Knowing that if we encountered Pollick we would be turned back, we kept Scouts out and as soon as they reported Pollick in sight or on his way to Ft. Laramie we broke camp and pulled out through a canon some three or four miles west of road leading to Laramie, from what was known as Gov. Farm, some 8 to 10 miles north of Fort. That night, Pollick with his command and the Prospectors camped at the Gov. Farm while we camped in the canon four or five miles west of the Farm. There we organized for the trip, elected a captain of the outfit, Bob Ralston was elected to this position. Next day, Nov 2d, we started for the Black Hills following the Trail made by Col Pollick on his trip out. This trail took us by Raw Hide Buttes here we joined by the noted Scout California Joe down the Little and Big Cottonwoods and to the Cheyenne River a point opposite the mouth of Red Canon. Here we camped for two days, our course from this point was up Red Canon our next camping place was at Pleasant Valley and from there to Custer City.

This town was laid out in summer 1875 by Custer's troops and Jenny Prospectors. (F-the town of Edgemont is built on spot where we camped.) Named in honor of Col. Custer on our arrival at Custer we found nothing in the way of improvements except the Log Barracks occupied by Custer's Troops during the Jennie Expedition we met there some five or six prospectors that Pollick failed to round up. The same day we arrived at Custer, November 10th, 1875, we all went down French Creek to what was known as the Gordon Stockade. This Stockade was built by the Gordon Party from Sioux City, during the winter of 1874-75. (This was the first party of white people to locate in the Hills) They were taken out to the Hills by Gov. Troops during the winter 74-75.

We found the stockade a splendidly built affair 200 feet long by one hundred feet wide, heavy timbers 20 feet long set on end in ground as close together as it was possible to set them. [Ground Floor Plan of Stockade] it was supplied with Port Holes all around it with quite number in each of the projections at each corner. A well was dug in center of stockade. We found on arrival here quite a lot of provisions belonging to the Prospectors who were taken out by Pollick. Pollick would not allow those men to take anything with them, he however left a Mr. Wood in custody of the provisions and personal affects of those who he took out. Mr. Wood was the only person at Stockade when we arrived. We remained at the Stockade for two or three days while here, learned that there was some 25 to 30 persons, all told in the Hills the comprised part of the prospectors who accompanied the Jenney Expedition and who did not go out with the Expedition nor had reported or surrendered to Pollick. Some of this were located on Castle Creek and Rapid Creek, some of them on Rapid Creek near what was then known as Camp Creek (afterward called Pactola) and three or four of them further north on what was afterwards named Deadwood White Wood Creek. Our party quite the stockade and pulled out north arriving at Spring Creek same day, camped at point where Nuton's fork centers into Spring Creek and where Hill City was located a few months later...

On February 25, 1876 the town of Rapid City was located among the locations was W P Martain, J W Allen, James Carnely, Major Hutchinson, Wm Niettle, Sand Scott, Wm Marston, and J R Brennan. By the aid of a pocket compass, tape line, the survey was made by Sand Scott, assisted by Brennan, Carnly, and Allen. The ground laid out covering an area of one square mile, embracing the original town-site of Rapid City. J W Allen was chosen recorder. The Six Blocks occupying the center of the plat were divided into Lots, and drawn by Lottery. Each person present being allowed the privilege of drawing five Lots, the Raffle taking place at the intersection of 5th and Rapid Streets that bring the center of the Plat...

Before March 1st there was in the neighborhood of 200 people located in the Town of Rapid, about March 1st a party of Bismarkers landed in rapid after looking through situation over they decided to locate but before doing so they demanded that they be made a present of every other block or half of the town

site, this request was refused by the Locations. The Bismarkers there left in a body and went up the Creek some 3 ½ miles and located a piece of land claimed by California Joe (afterwards owned by William Morris) and called it upper Rapid City from that time on for several months, we had a lively townsite fight on our hands. It finally became a question which town could stand off the Indians the strongest this to determine where the Rapid proper or upper Rapid would go to the Wall. Finally, some time in August, the Indians made it so hot for upper Rapid that they send word to us to come up and help them move down that they were ready to abandon upper Rapid. We helped them move (there was only about 10 men left in the town out of some 100 who first located the town). Thus ended the effort to establish a rival town to Rapid.

Questions

Why are Brennan and his party avoiding Colonel Pollick?

In your own words, explain the story of the Gordon Stockade.

Describe the initial steps for the creation of Rapid City.

Who are the Bismarkers, where are they from, and what are their goals and ambitions?

Could you create a town today like Brennan and his party did? Why or why not?