



South Dakota State Archives

Reminiscences of Yankton's Early Days - Major Joseph R. Hanson

In the May 1898 issue of "The Monthly South Dakotan," Joseph R. Hanson detailed his experiences during the early settlement of Yankton, Dakota Territory. Hanson came to Yankton from Minnesota in 1858. Part of that voyage is recounted in this article. As you read the reminiscence, think of yourself making the trip to Yankton and what life would have been like when you arrived. What luxuries that we have today were absent in 1858 Yankton? What was needed to form a newly founded community?

Excerpt from "The Monthly South Dakota"

Stories of the early settlement of one's country, state or city, possess features of interest which hardly pertain to any other subject. This is practically true when applied to those who were personal participants in that settlement, and who after the lapse of many years are want to dwell upon the past and think over the names of old associates, and in the gathering of shades muse upon scenes and events as they emerge from the store-house of memory and come trooping along one by one from the dim and rusty past.

It is now forty years since the first settlement at Yankton was made. Those who were then young are now old. Many are dead and the living must soon follow. It is time then that some one of the remaining few should take up the subject and endeavor to save from oblivion the names of our first settlers and some of the incidents connected with that period...In a few years none will be here to answer, and the names and deeds of those who laid the first foundation log and built the first of the many log cabins that gradually came along to supersede the Indian tepee will live only in unending and unreliable tradition. To preserve the names of those men is a duty we owe to posterity, and one which should be performed in some more enduring manner than in a hastily written paper...

It will be surprising to many, if not all of our old settlers to learn that the first cabin was not built by Frost, Todd & Co., but by the Holman party. It stood near the river bank about where Pine and First streets now intersect. It was standing there when I first saw Yankton in 1858, and was burned down by Indians the following October. During the stay of the Holman party at Yankton, they opened a regular claim record

book, in which were recorded the names of claimants and a description of the land claimed by prospective residents. Altogether Mr. Holman says, there were made more than one hundred locations of 160 acres each, locations being made with the view of getting as near the town as possible without much regard to quality of land...they saw a great future for Yankton. Indeed, the very air at that early day was redolent with the importance of the coming city at the mouth of the Jim, and the man who could possess himself of 160 acres of land, anywhere within a radius of from five to ten miles of the town site thought himself well fixed and would strut about with all the importance of a bloated bond holder...

About the first of May 1858, another expedition headed for Dakota, left Winona, Minnesota. The party consists of J.Y. Gilmore, Kirwin Wilson, and John R. Hanson [author]. After being on the road a few days we were joined by H.T. Bailey, John Patterson, Hank Balcom, and Myron Balcom, thus constituting a party of seven. We traveled by ox teams, and struck across Minnesota and Iowa, then practically uninhabited country, direct as possible to Sioux City. After many hardships and narrow escapes from flood and fire, we reached that place the latter part of July, and went into camp for a few days. It had required nearly three months to make the journey, during which time we had been entirely cut off from the outside world...We now decided to go to Yankton, and accordingly began preparations to start, took an inventory of provisions on hand and cash in pocket, and found ourselves painfully lacking in both...However we decided to risk it. We had six big oxen belonging to the outfit which could, if necessary, be converted into food, and by dispensing with such luxuries as flour, sugar, tea and coffee, we thought we could squeeze through. So we crossed the river into Nebraska and made our way up to a point directly opposite Yankton, where we went into camp...We arrived at this point about the first of August 1858. A few days thereafter several of our party crossed over to Yankton and took a survey of the site and adjacent county. We found the two cabins standing as mentioned in Mr. Holman's statement and also met many of the men named above. A few Indian lodges were scattered about, but the large body of Indians were out on a hunt. We soon began looking about for locations, but found that lands for a long distance in all directions were claimed and foundations for log cabins already on the ground and it was not until the destruction of the Holman cabin, nearly two months after our arrival, that I succeeded in finding a location. Through the friendly aid of Frank Chapel I was shown a tract of unclaimed land, just east of the present city limits, upon which I filed a squatter right, and subsequently improved and pre-empted it...

The first sermon preached in Yankton was in January 1860, by Father Martin, a Presbyterian, from Dakota City, Nebraska. He took for his text the 11th verse of the 13th chapter of Proverbs. His first prayer was in line of local public feeling at that time, one sentence of which was impressed on my memory: "Oh Lord, may the people of this town not become puffed up with importance because of their greatness, and

become proud and haughty, but accept this great trust as coming from the hand of a kind and generous Father, to be used by them in the upbuilding of education and religion to Thy great glory.” The first hymn given out on this important occasion was one supposed to be familiar to all, “Old Hundred.” The people had turned out “en masse” to participate in this first religious service, and the room was well crowded...The service was held in the store-room of D.T. Bramble, built in 1859, and stood near the northeast corner of Walnut and First streets. The pulpit used by the reverent gentleman upon which to lay his notes, was the upturned end of a whisky barrel, the only available article in the room. He gave us an excellent sermon.

Questions

Why did Mr. Hanson think the preserving of Yankton’s early history was important?

What was the importance of the Holman party in the first days of Yankton’s history?

Describe Joseph R. Hanson’s trip to Yankton. Where did he come from and how did he get to Yankton?

What warning did Father Martin’s prayer give to Yankton’s early citizens?

In your own words, describe the conditions of Yankton in the late 1850s.