



South Dakota State Archives

Living in Dakota - Autobiography of Andrew Williams

Andrew Guppy Williams, first mayor of Gettysburg, SD, was born in 1861 in Wisconsin. After the death of his father, Andrew worked on a surveying crew in northern Dakota. He homesteaded near Milbank, SD and proved up his claim. In 1884 he moved to Gettysburg, and a few years later married his wife Carrie. His autobiography gives a good insight into homesteading, hardships, and the social life of early Gettysburg. While reading the autobiography, think of how individuals interacted with each other in their community; compare that with how they interact today. What are some of the hardships Andrew faced? Would you have enjoyed living Andrew's life on the plains of Dakota?

Excerpt from Autobiography of Andrew Williams

I went to Milbank, South Dakota, and tried homesteading near there. The government required that I live on the land so I built a sod shanty. I had no stove so the fire I had was built on the earth floor and the smoke went out a hole in the roof as best it could. A fellow who had a piece of land lived with me for a short while, but we had a slight argument and he walked out and I never saw him after that. It was a long walk to Milbank for supplies and the snow was heavy that winter. One time the shanty was buried in snow and the only way to get out was through the roof. I got to Milbank all right, but it was hard to find the way back with the blowing snow covering my tracks and no land marks on that whole flat prairie. I finally found the place, but I slipped and fell into a well that I had started to dig and thought for a while I had broken my leg. Somehow I lived through that winter and proved up on my land. It was mine — my first piece of land. But I sold it right away and somehow the money got away. It was easy to lose money in those early days.

There was nothing to do in Milbank, and I had heard about Gettysburg, a new town farther west and I thought there might be a chance to get started there. I had no money to ride, so I walked into Gettysburg June 19, 1884 with two dollars and a half in my pocket. It wasn't much of a town. Just one main street of wooden buildings. Some one told me [about] the Buffalo House at the end of the street. There I paid Grandma O'Brian who ran the hotel a dollar and a half down on my room and board and went out to see what I could see. There was a poker game going on in one of the wooden buildings. I got in it and lost my last dollar. I used to tell my children that right then and there I decided that I was no poker player...

One night we went to a school house dance about five miles south of town. It was a small school and it was lighted by lanterns hung from the ceiling. The desks were stacked in one end of the room to make space for the dancers, and perched on the desks was old Klingensmith with his fiddle. He was a little man with bright blue eyes and a long white beard and when he started playing such a look of peace came over his face that you imagined that if you lifted up the beard doves would fly out. The little school house rocked with happiness and the stomping of as many feet as the floor would hold.

It was the night that I met Carrie. She was the teacher of that school -- a little girl with blue eyes wide set, brown hair in long braids tied with red ribbons to match her dress. She has come from Knightstown, Indiana with her family and was living with them on a homestead a few miles from the school. Her father was Henley Harley Ayres, originally from Bethesda, Ohio. Her mother was born Minerva Fithian in Knightstown, Indiana. She and Mr. Ayres had married and lived there until their children Ed, Carolyn, and Anna were half grown. Deciding to go west, they settled in Tecumseh, Nebraska first, and in a short time, with Carrie and Anna, they moved to South Dakota...

In the little school house Carrie had five Jordeth children who spoke only Norwegian, Archie McKinnon, a crippled boy of peppery Scottish-Irish ancestry and a few others. She must have been a good teacher because the Jordeth's learned English, and all their successful lives they gave credit to their first teachers. It must have been a dreary life for a young girl. Carrie always said that the meadow lark's song made her sad because it reminded her of her walks to and from the little school house and her father's homestead...

I had bought a team of black ponies which helped with the courting I did. We went on picnics near the Missouri River and to parties in Gettysburg. We were as gay as a Methodist father would let us be...Carrie and I were to have been married on November 17th, her birthday, but an epidemic of typhoid fever hit Gettysburg and I was taken sick early in November...We were married in the Ayres home in Blunt on February 9, 1886. Carrie wore a gray wool dress she had made. They wore basques then with buttons all down the front. The wedding ring I gave her was a wide gold band and cost two dollars and eight-five cents. It was all I could afford. She wore it until our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary when I gave her a new one and also her first diamond ring.

It was bright and sunshiney on our wedding morning. Soon after the ceremony we started our thirty mile trip from Blunt to Gettysburg, driving the black ponies and expecting to spend the night at the Half Way House. We hadn't gone far when it commenced to blizzard, but I figured the ponies could get through. Soon we couldn't see a thing and ice froze in the ponies eyes. I would get out to try to thaw the ice away and to try to keep them on the road. I had never heard horses cry, but those ponies certainly made noises like crying. We soon found that they were going in circles and I thought there was little hope

for us; but as night came on, away in the distance we saw a little light and made our way to it. It was a homestead and there we spent our bridal night. The next morning the storm was over and we drove into Gettysburg to our first home -- a fairly large room over my office which Carrie fixed up by partitioning it off with curtains. She was my best girl, my companion, My Missus I called her.

Questions

Describe Andrew's living conditions while homesteading near Milbank?

How did Andrew get to Gettysburg, and why is it surprising?

What kinds of entertainment were there for Gettysburg residents?

Describe the events surrounding the marriage of Andrew and Carrie.

What important events (past, present, or future) would you mention in your autobiography?