

The History Of History

Yankton Co. Historical Society And Museum Cherish The Past, Look To The Future

BY DEREK BARTOS
derek.bartos@yankton.net

While the Yankton County Historical Society and the Dakota Territorial Museum are primarily involved in the history of others, the two have quite a background story themselves.

The quest for the present-day historical society, which owns and operates the museum, began in 1960. With the Dakota Territorial Centennial to be celebrated the following year, Don Binder, president of the Yankton Chamber of Commerce and chairman of the Yankton Centennial Committee, and Dr. W.F. Stanga, chairman of the History Committee of the Chamber, were interested in forming a permanent historical organization for Yankton.

On Feb. 4, 1960, Stanga called a meeting of interested parties to organize such a society, and the Yankton County Historical Society was formed.

The purpose of the society was set out as:

- to collect, preserve, exhibit and publish material for the study of the history of Yankton County;
- to acquire documents, letters, reports, pictures and relics;
- to obtain the narratives of pioneers;
- to obtain and safeguard a gallery of portraiture and events of the past and maintain it up to date and to promote it in all the schools in the county;
- and to study the history of the county and of the state of South Dakota.

Although this society is still alive today, it was certainly not the first.

"There had been historical societies established in Yankton long before the current society was established," said Crystal Mensch-Nelson, director of the Dakota Territorial Museum. "Those kind of came and went."

In 1862, the Old Settlers Historical Association was organized and incorporated with limited membership by the first Legislature in the Dakota Territory.

A year later, in 1863, the Dakota Historical and Library Association was formed to replace the previous organization, and the legislature of 1863 passed an act to unite the Old Settlers Historical Society of Dakota and the Historical and Library Association.

In 1864, the incorporators met and effected a permanent organization, known as the Historical Society of Dakota, which was the parent organization of the present-day state historical society, now called the Historical Resources Center in Pierre.

Before the museum was built, the society met in various places, including the Hotel Charles Gurney, WNAX studios, the Chamber of Commerce office, the Riviera Cafe, the Chateau Dining Room and the Kochi Motel Dining Room.

Conversation revolved around improving the society and building a museum. Committees were appointed and fundraising ideas were discussed. Over time, funds to build a museum began to grow.

While many were interested in building a museum, the structure used for

Yankton's first museum, the Council or Senate building, was anything but new.

"The Territorial Council Building that sits to the south of us has quite an interesting story behind it," Mensch-Nelson said.

The building was originally erected during the winter of 1861-1862 near the southeast corner of Broadway and Fourth Street. Some time after the first Historical Session, it was also used as a law office. Around 1893, it was sold and moved to the Kaucher farm west of Yankton where it was used as a granary and storage shed for more than 40 years.

Around 1933, the owner of the farm, Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company of Newark, N.J., donated the building to the Daniel Newcomb Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution. A restoration project was undertaken, and the entire structure was torn down, rebuilt and restored.

The restored building was first located at Riverside Park and was dedicated during the 75th anniversary of the Dakota Territory in 1936.

To help cover the cost of the restoration, Lawrence Welk played for a dance in Yankton earlier in the year, and a patch quilt was also auctioned off for \$150.

In 1953, the old building was moved to West Side Park and was again dedicated, this time as Yankton's Dakota Territorial Museum.

In an effort to pay off the museum's debt, numerous fundraising projects were held. Yankton and the surrounding communities responded with donations of money, as well as artifacts for display.

In anticipation of the Dakota Territory Centennial Celebration in 1961, the museum was given a new look with log cabin siding.

It was also during this time that the Yankton County Historical Society was chartered.

The newly formed society instantly recognized the need for a larger museum. Many existing buildings were considered, but ultimately the decision was made to build a new facility.

Various fundraising projects were held to build the new museum, including a car raffle and home town talent shows.

When the building was completed in 1970, the biggest task facing the historical society was moving all the exhibits into the new museum. This was accomplished with the help of local volunteers, the D.A.R. Auxiliary, Curator Joseph Vinatieri, Vanita Grimm and her special helpers, as well as the local Boy Scout Troop No. 180.

When it was finally ready, the formal dedication and grand opening for the new museum took place on May 30, 1971.

By Aug. 12, 1973, the museum was debt free.

For some time the old Territorial



ABOVE: The Dakota Territorial Museum moved into its current home at 610 Summit St. in 1971. (Dakota Territorial Museum photo) BELOW: The Mead Building on the old campus of the South Dakota Human Services Center may become the museum's new home. The Yankton County Historical Society has received grants recently to go toward the preservation of the structure. (South Dakota Historical Preservation Society photo)



Council Building was used as a Boy Scout meeting hall. However, it was once again used as a museum when additional donations were made and the space was needed.

Over the years, the museum has acquired many collections and exhibits. In 1976, the Gunderson Rural School House No. 15, which was used as a school from 1906 to 1969, was moved to the museum grounds. In 1978, the Old Great Northern Railway Depot was also moved to the museum complex. Recently, the museum acquired the

Hovden Log Cabin, which is being restored with a grand opening planned for Aug. 5.

Mensch-Nelson said the interest in various exhibits varies.

"It really gets spread out," she said. "It seems like the older visitors really enjoy seeing things they remember having in their house when they were a kid — like a handheld mixer versus an electric. For the little boys, it's the military items — seeing the cannon and the gatling gun and some of our civil war items. For the girls, it's usually the older dresses and tea sets and the toys the kids would play with."

Mensch-Nelson added that she has enjoyed the challenges of covering such a history-rich region.

"It's been a lot of fun," she said. "There's never a day where I don't leave work without learning something new. You never know what is going to walk in the door."

Although the museum deals with the past, its eyes are on the future as well.

Much of that future is focused on the Mead Building, which is being restored for the purpose of becoming the museum's new home within the next 3-5 years.

The Mead Building, located on the southern side of the Human Services Campus north of Yankton, was built in 1909 and was originally the women's hospital. It was named after Dr. Leonard C. Mead, who served as superintendent of the center from 1891-1920. Constructed in the Renaissance style, it is characteristic of many of the buildings on the campus with its symmetry and rear open courtyard.

After being vacated in 1980, it endured 30 years of deterioration. In 2009, it was named one of the National Trust for Historic Preservation's 11 Most Endangered Places in America.

The YCHS has leased the building from the state with the intent of rehabilitating the structure into a museum and cultural center.

Currently, the project's focus is on the roof restoration. Two Deadwood grants totaling \$50,000 have been awarded for this area.

Additionally, the YCHS has received \$2,500 from the Favrot Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which will go toward architectural fees.

Mensch-Nelson said big plans are in store for the building.

"We plan for the Mead Building to not only be the museum, but it will also be a research center and a cultural center — a place to hold banquets and to have traveling exhibits and other things we can't provide in the current museum because we don't have enough room," she said.

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CRYSTAL MENSCH-NELSON

Past Due: Yankton's Story Is Filled With Mysteries

BY CRYSTAL MENSCH-NELSON
Dakota Territorial Museum

To summarize Yankton's history in just a few simple words is complicated if not almost impossible when it is speckled with numerous business and religious entrepreneurs, political giants, comfortable living, elaborate construction, immigration, dedication, bawdy houses, tyrants, and even murder. Just a glance through historic newspapers of Yankton would produce intriguing details about who visited whom and many "flowery" funeral entries.

Although we are celebrating this year, our story actually began before 1861. The story of Yankton's history has been told and told again by the great historians of the 20th century and the minute details will always remain controversial.

Did Lewis and Clark really wrap a Yankton Sioux child in an American flag when they arrived in 1804? And was that child the Yankton Sioux leader who signed over his native lands to the U.S. government in 1858 and whose name is unverified between Strike-the-Ree or Struck-by-the-Rhee? Where exactly was Jack McCall hanged and buried, and how many times has he been moved? Where did General George Custer stay in Yankton after an April blizzard nearly wiped out his 7th Cavalry?

With the lack of responsible journalism in early newspapers, dime novels looking to make a quick buck with elaborate stories, and the inaccuracy of one's own personal memories, some things may just always be Yankton mysteries and local legends.

On the other hand, many stories in Yankton's past are well worth the hunt. Although you may end up finding more questions than answers, it is the journey that will provide you with the most valuable information.

However, in all humble efforts to tell our modern story, it began July 10, 1859, when the news of the treaty ratification arrived in present day Yankton. The steamboat Carrier traveled upstream while "Old Strike's" seemingly peaceful Yankton Sioux tribe packed their belongings and followed it to their new home. George D. Fiske, who already had an established home in the Frost Todd Trading Post building located in what was soon to be the town of Yankton, was then joined by a handful of other entrepreneurs.

Initial surveying laid out claims for Charles Picotte who was instrumental in seeing the peaceful transi-

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