

Exploring Minot 1885-1900

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EXPLORING MINOT 1885-1990

On July 16, 1887, papers of incorporation were drawn up and signed for the new city of Minot, North Dakota located at what was known up to that point as the “second crossing of the Mouse.” The selection of a town site and the laying out of the new town had been already accomplished in relative secrecy, plus some decisions evidently made by James J. Hill himself. This points to the dominance of the railroad in the early days of Minot and the Mouse River Valley. The Great Northern inched its way west through North Dakota in the early 1880’s, coming to Burlington, Minot, and other points from Devils Lake while an engineer-surveyor worked on the final route for the western territory. At each stop a “tent city” sprang up of workers, drifters, gamblers, and hangers-on.

In October, 1886, the railroad and its “tent city” came to the “second crossing” and changed the character of the entire area. Agriculture and the land had been the main reason for settlers’ interest. Belle Currie, later Mrs. Angus MacDonald, was the first person to make final proof on a Ward County land claim when in 1886 she did so on her homestead just west of Burlington. James Johnson and J. L. Colton came to Burlington in 1883 and were to figure prominently in Minot’s history. In May 1883, Erik Ramstad came to Grafton and claimed 160 acres on both sides of the Mouse River. He was in his hayfield that summer day in 1886 when Solomon G. Comstock and A. A. White, who had formed the townsite company and would become the developers of the city, came to see him. Appropriately enough, Mr. Ramstad is immortalized in Minot by a junior high school built in the lowlands. At the meeting Mr. Ramstad agreed to relinquish 40 acres of land on the south side of the Mouse, retaining three forty-acre sites north of the Mouse. The Great Northern Roundhouse and the Minot business district are in the southern acreage today. Comstock and White obtained a government scrip (a certificate issued to the federal government entitling the holder to take up an allotment of land) on Ramstad’s tract and another 40 acres immediately south of it, beyond Ramstad’s original claim. These 80 acres became the original Minot town site. Erik Ramstad kept Comstock and White’s secret.

In March, 1886, J. H. Charlebois established the first blacksmith shop in Minot at 1st Street Southeast, and Christ Lindberg opened the first saloon, just south of the Great Northern depot, but the most famous Minot saloon was Jack Doyle’s, located where the Woolworth store now is. It was above this saloon where Minot’s first Christmas tree was set up and where for Christmas 1886 a party was held for all residents, with gifts for everyone, plus music and singing. Roomers such as J. H. Charlebois also had quarters there while waiting to bring families to the area. In the summer of 1886 Mr. and Mrs. Allen Tompkins came in a covered wagon from Winnipeg and lived in a tent with a wooden floor and wooden walls, near the old Union National Bank on Central Avenue and Main Street. There Allen Tompkins built a bunkhouse which became the predecessor of his hotel, in turn, predecessor of the Clarence Parker Hotel enterprises.

It was also there that in November, 1886, Ernest Minot Tompkins was born, the first white child born in Minot. Ernest Minot later drove the first delivery wagon in the city as a young boy delivering meat orders for his uncle, J. H. Tompkins, who operated a meat market. Minot's first newspaper also was founded, the *Minot Rustler – Tribune* by Marshall McClure; in 1894, J. L. Colton and James Johnson had founded *The Burlington Reporter*, which they moved to Minot in 1889 after the county seat removal from Burlington in 1888. Minot's first physician also followed the railroad from Devils Lake. Dr. Edmund Belvea established himself in a cottage on the site of the campus of the present day Central High School. He also was elected Mayor of Minot in April 1888. In the late fall of 1886 lumber was brought from Towner for some of the first buildings before Minot had a railroad.

The changes from the agricultural base for the Mouse River Valley to the dominance of the railroad are evident in the history of the churches. In the early 1880's itinerant preachers made trips to farming colonies. In 1884 Rev. O. H. Aabe established the Mouse River Lutheran Church of Minot. On October 4, 1886, the first Lutheran service within Minot was held by Rev. T. S. Reishus at the Peter Ramstad home. In his diary that night he recorded: "a train passed over the Mouse River into what is to be called Minot." On July 7, 1887, 10 women of that Lutheran group formed the first ladies aid society in Minot. In 1884 Rev. Pleasant Royce also visited the valley for the Congregational Church and the Pleasant School District (Sawyer) was named for him. In 1884 Roman Catholic priests also appeared, chiefly to administer to the Indians; the first mass was offered in a tent by Father Claude Ebner OSB who came from Devils Lake. Ten minutes after the mass gamblers who had been present started a fight in which one was killed. In April, 1887, Minot's first mass in a building was offered by Father John Henz in a room over the Coleman Livery Stable; a month later the livery stable burned. Father F. J. McCabe was appointed the first resident pastor, a comparatively young priest who was a Doctor of Philosophy and who wanted to try western living. His sermons reprovved the conduct of his parish, from which a delegation of ladies came to beg him not to scold them so severely.

In the words of Bishop Vincent Wehrle, at that time a missionary priest, "He forced them out of the room and wrote that same evening to the Bishop that he found himself ill-suited for the mission in Minot and that he had decided to say goodbye not only to Minot but to the whole territory of Minot." He had lasted less than a month in Minot. Upon receiving the news of Father McCabe's abrupt departure, the Bishop remarked to young Father Vincent Wehrle, "Thanks to God that he is gone!" Father Bernard Hens came to Minot then but he contracted "mountain fever" on a sick call. He died after a few days with the funeral in the Leland Hotel lobby and burial "on some lonely hill south of Minot." In 1889 when St. Leo's was built the corpse was exhumed and reburied near the sanctuary. "We did not want to have him in the city graveyard because there were too many toughs buried there," commented Father Vincent. For a full decade until 1898 Father Vincent Wehrle traveled the circuit of 250 miles from Lakota to the Montana border. Methodist preaching also began in 1886 with services in the Leland House with Rev. D. C. Plannette. The Presbyterians held their first service on March 27, 1887, in a

room above the Field and Coogan Saloon on Main Street. Bethany Lutheran held services in 1886 at homes of members.

On May 1, 1887, the Great Northern Railroad completed the Gasman Coulee Bridge and the secret of the future planning was out; Minot was to be the western center of the railroad instead of Burlington, a great shock to Burlington. An often-repeated tale of that time (and later) was that the decision was the result of a noisy quarrel between the wife of the engineer-surveyor for the Great Northern and the wife of a Burlington settler, with the result that when the surveyor finished his route Burlington was not on it. But a history of the *Minot Daily News* says more seriously that J. L. Colton held out for an exorbitant price for a property needed for a Great Northern right-of-way which James J. Hill refused to pay and made his own decision. The first train west from Minot left in the summer of 1887. However, if the Great Northern decision pleased many in Minot, both in and out of the secret, another event of May 1887 proved disastrous. On May 10 the first of many damaging fires came to Minot when the Coleman Livery Stable, Tompkins Hotel, and other wooden building were completely destroyed. The Tompkins Hotel was to be rebuilt within the year as the Leland House, and the Coleman Livery Stable was rebuilt as the Scofield Livery Stable and Implement Company. The incorporation of the new city as the “second crossing” of the Mouse River that became known as Minot also seems to indicate a personal choice of James J. Hill. Henry D. Minot was a young eastern capitalist who was vice-president of the Eastern Minnesota Railway Company, a company formed by Hill. Minot was also a friend of Theodore Roosevelt. Henry D. Minot was killed in an accident on the Pennsylvania Railway in November 1890 at the age of 30. His connection with the city was only to the extent of furnishing his name, through the agency of James J. Hill.

Under the provisions of the July 16, 1887 Articles of Incorporation the first city election was held on a hot day in August. James H. Scofield was elected mayor in a wide-open, free-wheeling election, destined to be the first of many lively elections in the city. Scofield was backed by Marshall McClure, editor of the *Rustler Tribune* and won over William Hope, a hardware dealer, by about 300 votes. Scofield only served until the next April, when he was defeated by Dr. Belvea. A full city council was also elected, which met in its first regular council meeting on August 31. The major business was filling the appointive offices provided for in the incorporation, such as city attorney. Given the nature of 1887 Minot, the most important appointment for the immediate future was Chief of Police. The first police chief for Minot was William Flumerfelt, who was appropriately a saloon keeper. The council also decided on \$500 as the fee for a saloon license. By 1888 the income for the city from saloon fees was \$5000. The council that fall also recognized that two groups of people inhabited Minot; those who intended a more or less permanent residence and those who followed the railroad. By October of 1887 about 5000 of these transients, commonly called “boomers” were living in a tent city. This rapid growth of population brought the city its permanent nickname “Magic City.” This also brought from the city council a ban against building any more tar paper shacks and thatch roof stables in the center of the business district. Also a ban against haystacks and tents without chimneys had similar motivations. These restrictions intensified hotel and rooming house construction. Rebuilding of the Leland House was

well under way at the north end of Main Street and construction of the Parker House was completed at the south end where the First National Bank is now located. Between the two hotels were more than 30 saloons, dance halls, and gambling houses. The railroad station was a box car set near where the Great Northern Freight house is now. The first post office was in a shack now covered by the Montgomery Ward building. The first store was a contractors supply store on the site of today's Montana Dakota Utility.

Some of Minot's population accepted the rough and tumble existence of Minot quite happily. Others were philosophical, such as a railway conductor on the Great Northern who became a legend in Minot, finding himself in many local and personal stories. He is generally unidentified, as legends usually are, but Judge William Murray in his reminiscences remarks that "he is said to be one, Casper Sands." It was the invariable habit of this conductor in calling the station to say, "Minot, this M-I-N-O-T, the end of the line. Prepare to meet your God!" Some citizens of Minot, however, despaired of the situation and struggled against the tide. Father Vincent Wehrle was not too flattering: "At this time Minot has 3 or 4 decent Catholics in town, the rest were gamblers, saloon keepers, escaped jail birds, men gone bankrupt in other places, men run away from their wives, and wives run away from their husbands. On the prairie were some respectable Catholic farmers."

In the fall of 1887, however, solid construction was everywhere. Churches were built, businesses established, hotels mushroomed. The first bank was organized in Minot, the Bank of Minot, promoted by E. Ashley Mears, who was involved in many early promotions of real estate and finance. It failed and the First National Bank of Minot was established in the same building. It went out of business in early 1890, and had no connection with today's First National Bank. In the fall of 1887, Minot's first school was opened, in a little white frame building 16 by 24 feet situated on the site of Central Campus. In a year the building was enlarged and another teacher added.

In August 1887, William Murray arrived in Minot, a young man of Scottish origins. He was to remain in Minot in a judicial position from 1892 when he became city magistrate, then city police magistrate, justice of the peace, and county judge. The day after his arrival in 1887, Murray was present in a saloon on Main Street when a gambler known as a "gentleman gambler", Shang Foster, was murdered and fell almost at Murray's feet. Foster was buried in the old burial ground, now disappeared with no marking of the location, south of 4th Avenue and near 4th Street Southwest. Also buried there was the victim of a drowning in the Mouse River, who subsequently had the first funeral in Minot, in the spring of 1895. The victim, whose name is now not even remembered, was a member of a surveying crew and had fallen off a raft.

The year 1888 continued with the same sort of activities: consolidation of city government and frantic construction of all sorts of buildings. The first wooden sidewalks were built by the city and Main Street was lighted with kerosene lights for the first time. Evidently the role of Chief of Police was carried out in approval with the city council wishes. William Flumerfelt became the highest salaried official in Minot at \$75 a month. Of course, his duties also multiplied; besides being chief of police, he was also fire chief,

building inspector, street superintendent, lamplighter, jailer, janitor, and scrub man. He was paid an extra dollar or two for mopping out the jail. The first bond election took place in July for \$8000 for the purpose of sinking an artesian well. In the first of many such attempts this bond issue failed. In April, 1888, the Baptists held an organizational meeting at the Presbyterian Church, which had been the first church to be completed in the original townsite, and west of the present First National Bank. In the fall the Baptist Church itself was built across the street from the Presbyterian Church on Second Avenue Southwest, on the site of the present Midwest Federal Building, even though the first resident Baptist pastor did not appear until 1889. In 1888 also the Methodist Church building was completed, built on a plan common to Methodist churches in North Dakota at that time. It was a frame building with pointed arch windows on two sides and on one side of the church there was a league room. Soon after the church building was completed, a tiny 4 room house was constructed on the lot south of the church. This was the Methodist parsonage.

The biggest political storm broke out in the summer of 1888 and gathered political momentum to reach a climax in the fall. The issue was the removal of the county seat from Burlington to Minot. The county was known then as Imperial Ward, named for Mark Ward, Chairman of the Committee on Counties of Dakota Territory, and described as "stately, dignified, with strong personality." Imperial Ward covered most of the Northwestern North Dakota territory. Tempers flared and emotions rode high; arguments split friendships, partnerships, and families. Fist fights were frequent and bloody with the verbal clashes between the newspaper editors colorful and loud. The railroad played a role in the election although James J. Hill remained publicly silent on the issue. His stand probably had been decided two years earlier. In the fall election when the vote was taken, Minot won; a decision which was contested. However, a couple of county officials moved immediately to Minot and upon this action others followed. Gunder S. Reishus was elected County Treasurer in the election (he served only a year, then became Register of Deeds) but before the contest by Burlington was heard. Reishus packed his tax lists and his receipt books at Burlington and moved to Minot setting up his office on the second floor of a brick building on the west side of Main Street, where Brogan and Flumerfelt occupied the first floor with a saloon. Other county offices also moved there until the courthouse was moved. Nothing changed the outcome, but the fire did not leave the issue and the ashes were frequently stirred to rake up charges of dishonesty, corruption, and strong-arm tactics on both sides.

One event which may have indicated the finality of the Courthouse issue was that in 1889 the *Burlington Reporter* moved to Minot and was rechristened by J. I. Colton as *The Ward County Reporter*, giving Minot another lively and city-oriented paper in addition to *The Rustler-Tribune*. In 1889 also, a second disastrous fire occurred; this time a hot stove pipe caused the fire which destroyed the Parker House. The city council passed a resolution to pay fifty cents a barrel for the first 10 barrels of water delivered at a fire anywhere in the city. The town well was in the middle of Main Street in front of the Coleman and Scofield livery stable. John Strommen was Minot's first fireman; he was in the dray business and his dray was Minot's first fire wagon. By 1890, the character of Minot had undergone change. The population was less than 1300, most of the "boomers"

had moved on, and the emphasis was on internal development. Minot had become a trade center for the Mouse Valley farmers, ranchers, and Indians as well as serving as a railroad center. The earliest trade item was buffalo bones, gathered in the country and brought to Minot. In 1890 buffalo bones fetched from \$6 to \$15 per ton and represented practically clear profit. In 1898 the Soo Line arrived, opening trade to the southeast and northwest particularly; ironically it also brought rail service to Burlington. The development of economic foundation brought people; in 1984 Minot's population was 4000, chiefly due to the presence of the railroad. On November 2, 1889, North Dakota had become a state of the union with a state constitution containing a prohibition of liquor clause. This made keeping law and order a bit simpler but it also removed the major source of city revenue. A substitute for the license system was found. According to a reporter of the time "liquor dealers were not forced to quit business but were hauled into police court in a friendly way and fined at regular intervals."

In 1892, G. A. Johnson purchased *The Ward County Reporter*. Johnson was for a time a law partner of R. A. Nestos, future governor of North Dakota. *The Reporter* plant was destroyed by fire in 1894 and Johnson purchased the plant of the *Minot Journal*, a small Minot newspaper, and continued the paper with the combined name of *Ward County Reporter-Journal*. In January 1897 he disposed of his newspaper to George W. Wilson. Wilson and Marshall McClure established both a sound friendship and a thriving newspaper feud. McClure was anti-prohibition. Wilson was violently anti-drinking, gambling, and pool halls. McClure founded the *Minot Optic* in 1901.

Church organization and construction continued. Both Bethany Lutheran and Zion Lutheran congregations constructed churches. In 1898 Rev. Charles Turner was paying the first of occasional visits to the Episcopal community. In November 1900 a chapel was begun with the first service on October 30, 1901 with 45 people. The same of the church was changed from Mission of the Incarnation to All Saints Episcopal. The Bishop wrote, the town had "many crudities and the confidence which marks a western town." All Saints received fair financial support from its otherwise rather listless congregation. The church cornerstone of the First Lutheran church was laid on October 12, 1892, with Rev. T. S. Reishus pastor of the church known as the "brick church." Other signs of Minot's advances in the later 1890's abounded. The Women's Christian Temperance Union had an active chapter. The Salvation Army established a hall where the old J. C. Penney building now is, in turn where the Waverly Hotel once was, and in 1897 the first hospital was erected in Minot, the Ward County Hospital, later purchased by the Sisters of St. Francis. This became the nucleus of St. Joseph's Hospital, an area which only in 1889 was a horse pasture where cowboys held sales.

Minot's education problems were in evidence. In 1894 the *Minot Journal* faithfully umpired a storm over the amounts charged non-resident students. Since one room mentioned had 16 resident and 14 non-resident students to compose a 30-student room, this amount was considerable. The town of Minot became a special school district in 1890 with a full school board. The first city superintendent received \$30 a month. In 1903 the first Minot High School opened with 26 pupils, 2 instructors, and a four-room building on the southeast corner of Central Campus. In 1904 5 girls and 1 boy graduated.

In 1905 a new building was erected due to enrollment. Maybe a less subtle sign of transition from a raw frontier town to an urban center came with the hanging on September 14, 1900 of Han Thorpe. On a gallows erected near the intersection of Valley Street and 13th Street SE, in Minot's first and only legal hanging, Thorpe with a flower in his lapel, was hanged for the murder of his wife. After the public event had been viewed, the scaffold was dismantled, and the spot left unmarked, and the body went into an undisturbed grave.

In 1894 the Minot Commercial Club was organized with over 75 members: in a subsequent publication they emphasized the Minot of 1900 as a "metropolis of the Northwest: substantial brick blocks of 2 or 3 stories, 2 banks, each with more than \$200,000 on deposit, half a dozen grain elevators, a flour mill of 200-barrel capacity per day, 5 lumber yards, 4 drug stores, half a dozen hotels, one with 110 rooms (The Leland Hotel.)"

Minot had made a spectacular transition from the sod house, which was actually a part of the prairie, to such a palatial residence as the Dr. Carr home, with its third floor ballroom, from the slow, noisy ox-cart transportation to the looming speed of the automobile. Minot was indeed ready for its next transition—into the twentieth century.