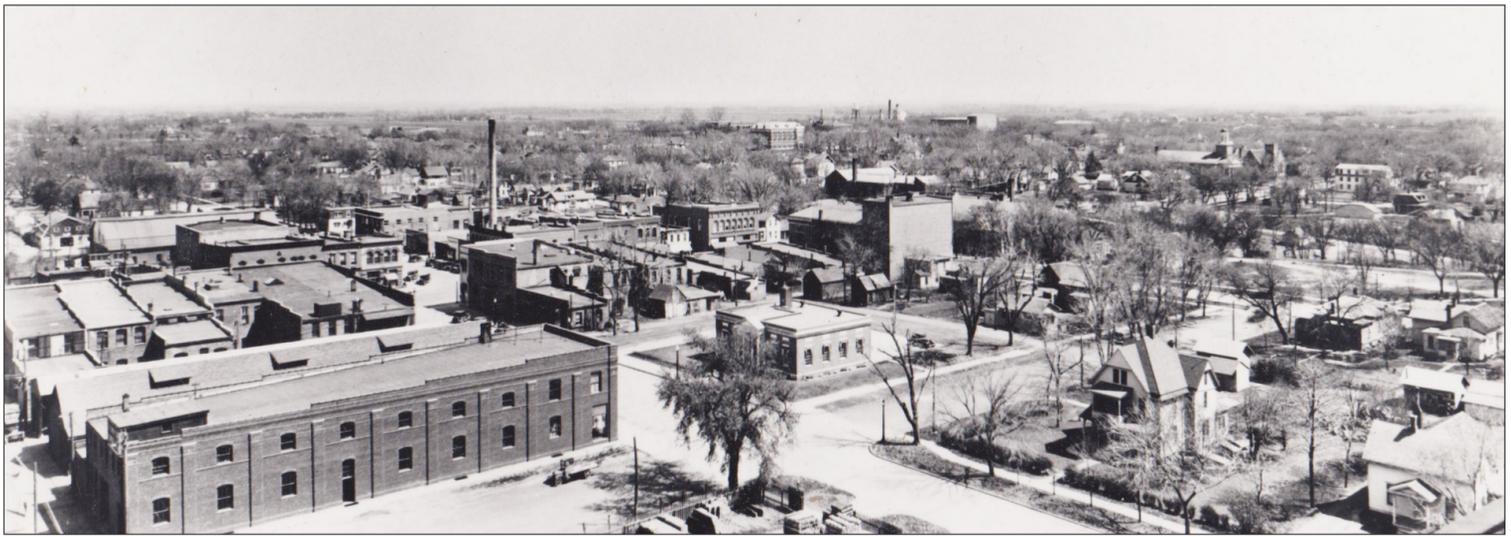


The Roots Of Vermillion



COURTESY PHOTO: CLAY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The community of Vermillion is pictured from the air in this photograph dated from 1934.

The Early Years

BY SHAUNA MARLETTE

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Editor's Note: The following information is compiled from several sources including: Clay County Place Names (Clay County Historical Society); History of Clay County (Herbert S. Schell); Clay County: Chapters out of the Past (Herbert S. Schell); "Life in Vermillion Before the Flood of 1881 and Shortly After" (A.H. Lathrop); "The Vermillion Story" (Everett W. Sterling); "History of Vermillion and Clay County South Dakota" (Elizabeth T. Smith); Dakota Republican Newspaper; and the Vermillion Plain Talk Newspaper.

In 1804 the Lewis and Clark expedition visited the place that the Yankton Indians called Washisha. Lewis and Clark called the place White Stone, and later French trappers and traders named this region Vermillion. The name referred to the red clay found along the banks of the Vermillion River.

White settlers who arrived in southeastern Dakota in 1859 retained the name Vermillion.

Although two or three trading posts had been constructed near the present Vermillion township during the late 1820's, white settlers were prohibited until 1859.

The original Vermillion town site was laid out in 1859 by Arthur Van Metre, located on a narrow stretch of bottom land between the bluffs of the Vermillion and Missouri Rivers. According to the historical records, the location made a good site for settlement because the site could be reached by both overland and river transportation.

Three years later, the town now included a sawmill, hotel, newspaper, general store, church and ferry across the Vermillion River.

In 1862 Vermillion was designated as the site for a state university, which existed on paper only because no funds had been appropriated for the proposed school. Original plans included courses in science, literature, art, law, medicine elementary education and agriculture. It would be 20 years before the first classes were held in Vermillion at the county court house.

Records published in the earliest newspapers of Vermillion show that the community grew rapidly during the late 1860's and early 1870's. The population was recorded as 202 residents in 1860 and 600 in 1870.

1864 saw the first permanent school house built.

In 1869, stagecoach and telegraph services would reach Vermillion, followed by the Dakota Southern Railroad in 1872 providing regular passenger services from Sioux City and Yankton.

Vermillion was finally officially

incorporated as a city in 1877 with John Jolley serving as the first mayor.

It wasn't all easy growth for the community as in 1875 a fire destroyed more than half of the businesses in town.

Outbreaks of epidemics and harsh winters also affected early Vermillion, none more so than the winter of 1880 when the spring thaw brought a disastrous flood that swept more than half of the town down the river.

While most of the citizens of Vermillion survived by climbing the bluffs to safety, 132 of the communities 200 buildings were lost in the flood.

This flood would shape the landscape of Vermillion for the future as the citizens voted in 1881 to move the town to the bluff.

Fire would again impact Vermillion in 1890 when 19 buildings were lost.

That same year, the university that had been planned nearly 20 years previously would receive its first land and local residents would support a bond to build the first university building.

Also during this bustling time the first Vermillion City Hall would be completed (1886) and the First Baptist Church would be built (1890).

As Vermillion approached the 20th century, electric street lights would be installed (1895) and a telephone exchange added (1898).

Vermillion's growth did not slow down at the turn of the century, instead it would speed

Did You Know?

The first settler bought the original plot of Vermillion from the U.S. Government.

The area was 120 acres and the price was \$171.73.

The original grant to the townsite was issued in the form of a trust to Probate Judge Ole Bottolfson. He distributed the titles to the original settlers on the city's lots.

The original plot extended from Dakota Street west to a line about half a block west of the old Austin School and from the Vermillion and Missouri rivers north to Main Street.

up with a city sewer (1902), the public library (1904) and the second City hall (1910) would highlight just a few of the additions to the infrastructure of the city during the first 10 years of 1900.

The early years of Vermillion were a busy time of growth that set the path of the community for today.

Vermillion's Infrastructure Sets The Foundation For The Future

BY SARAH WETZEL

For the Plain Talk

Editor's Note: Information for this article taken from "The History of Vermillion to 1900" Masters of the Arts Thesis by Orlan J. Svingen B.A. Concordia College 1969 and "From the River Valleys to the Rising Bluff" a Pictorial History of Vermillion, SD 1859-2009 by Thomas R. Thaden which in turn reference various newspaper publications.

As Vermillion continues to grow and develop, it is interesting to think that the basic infrastructure of the city had to start somewhere.

The Airline Bridge, the easternmost bridge south of Vermillion and is along South Dakota St., was built in 1881 by the Airline Construction Company.

The bridge spans the Vermillion River and was replaced over and over after floods or accidents.

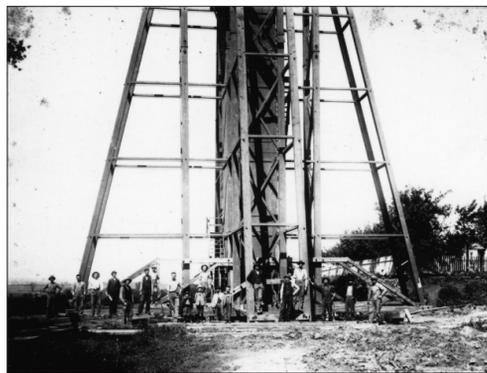
Disasters seemed to fuel improvements in other areas over the years.

"After three devastating fires between 1875 and 1890, the city knew that it had to come up with an adequate water system for water distribution in the city," Thaden wrote. "Put into operation in January 1892, at a cost of \$30,050, the system included wells, a pump house, a large tank, and wooden mains to various parts of the city."

According to Svingen's thesis, however, the final cost of the water system actually totaled closer to \$32,500 exceeded the estimated \$26,000 leading to legal disputes.

Initially, after approval was gained from the city council for the water project, S.V. Selano and many citizens formed the Vermillion Artesian Well, Electric Light, Mining and Improvement Company.

"Company officers included M.D. Thompson, President; S.V. Selano, VP; and C.E. Prentil, secretary," Svingen shared. "After the



COURTESY PHOTO: CLAY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The 100,000 gallon Market Street water tower has been removed from the City of Vermillion water system with the completion of the 500,000 gallon Shriners Street water tower.

company had organized, the city council passed an ordinance, granting the company a charter to furnish water to the city. In addition to providing fire protection, the waterworks supplied water to business and residences."

The waterworks company was technically completed by January 1892 though the city council did not accept the completion.

"The pumps satisfactorily forced water uphill into the water tank, but the water level in the tank did not remain constant because of leaks in various water mains," Svingen wrote, referencing the *Dakota Republican*. "Furthermore, the water tower leaned at an angle, instead of standing erect, its walls were too thin, and the reservoir did not have a cement bottom."

The precarious water tower was eventually declared unsafe by the city and was pulled down on May 7, 1909.

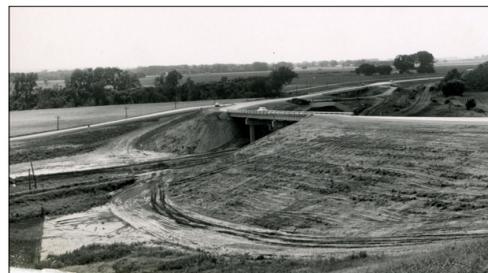
The first ever competency test for the waterworks system failed.

"The city council was exceedingly dissatisfied with the waterworks system," Svingen writes. "First, the council claimed that the work

was not complete because the water mains leaked; second, the system did not comply with the city council claimed that the work was not complete because the water mains leaked; second, the system did not comply with the city council ordinance that prescribed four streams of water to shoot eighty feet high; and third, the council charged poor workmanship against the waterworks company because they believed the pumphouse smoke-stack was in danger of falling off."

After improvements were made to the system so it passed the competency tests, the city refused to pay for it because it had exceeded the initial estimated cost.

"By the time of the second test, costs exceeded the original estimate of \$26,000 and reached \$32,500, further complicating matters with money-haggling over the cost," Svingen wrote. "When it became evident that the city would not purchase the waterworks system, the company attempted to reach a rental agreement with the city fathers. Based on the \$32,500 construction costs, the company offered to rent its services for a seven



COURTESY PHOTO: CLAY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The building of the business route on SD Highway 50 opened up traffic around the community. This undated photo shows the construction just west of Vermillion.

percent rental fee. The city made a counter-offer of \$900 per year, over a thousand dollars below the company's offer. After failing to reach an agreement, the two parties took the matter to court where the company hoped to force the city to purchase the waterworks system or rent at a favorable fee."

After the circuit court ruled in favor of the city council, the council repealed the original ordinance chartering the waterworks system.

"The city council stated that the company had not met the specifications of the city ordinance," Svingen wrote referencing a 1960 Plain Talk article. "From that time, fall, 1892, the waterworks company operated as a private business. In March, 1895, the company agreed to provide city water service for \$1200 per year and to erect a storage tank on level with the town, thereby generating higher water pressure. The quarterly rates were \$2 for businesses and \$1 for each tub or toilet per residence.

"When the waterworks system leased its services to the city, the city council established a volunteer fire department, with C.F. Lotze as fire chief. Sixteen volunteers manned the first fire department, with C.F. Lotze as fire chief. Sixteen volunteers manned the first fire

department whose fire fighting equipment totaled two horse carts. The waterworks system furnished fire protection to the business district and residences in town, but the outlying areas were still vulnerable to heavy fire loss if not connected to city water...The company provided city water until 1912, when it was purchased by the city."

According to Thaden's pictorial history, the first thing the city did after acquiring management of the waterworks was to build a new water tower which was finished in the Spring of 1912 as well as repairing and replacing leaking wooden water mains with iron or concrete pipe.

"Until the system was purchased by the city, the water was not purified or softened; the waterworks pumped water from the well below Market Street into a reservoir where it was allowed to settle," Svingen wrote. "From the reservoir, they transferred water into the storage tank on the hill, ready for city use."

The Prentis Park water tower was constructed in 1959 to keep up with the growing city needs.

The University of South Dakota, expanding with the city, also required more power and water.

"With the addition of five new buildings on campus

between 1902 and 1914 it became necessary to expand the physical plant to supply the needed power and water," Thaden wrote.

"...In 1909, the state legislature provided \$30,000 toward the construction of a new physical plant on campus. The plant was built to the NE of University Hall and was in full operation the following year. The smokestack and water tower were later torn down, but the building currently serves as the mail room and is used by Facilities Management."

Vermillion continued to evolve with the grading and paving of city streets.

According to Thaden's history, the City Council passed a resolution for the paving of Market St. from Kidder to Main Streets and of Main Street between University Street and the courthouse on July 6, 1916.

Equipment used ranged from manual and horse-drawn to gasoline-powered machines.

Buildings downtown changed from wood-frame to brick after devastating fires.

"The streets themselves evolved as time progressed, going from being uneven and made of dirt to being graded and paved," Thaden wrote. "Alongside the streets, boardwalks were replaced by either brick or concrete sidewalks, hitching posts disappeared once the automobile took over, fire hydrants and storm sewers began to appear, and electric lights supplanted the telephone poles."

The light and power plants were built and replaced in turn.

It seems the city was first heated and powered by coal then later by a steam plant behind the Municipal Building.

The steam plant was replaced in 1931 by a diesel-powered light plant below the bluff at a cost of \$100,000.

The city's infrastructure has continued to evolve and improve since then.



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