

Early settlers in Vermillion construct Dakota Territory's first permanent school

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The construction of a new school in South Dakota takes months of planning, and an expenditure of thousands of dollars for the services of architects and engineers before a single brick is put into place.

The first permanent schoolhouse in Dakota Territory was built in a single day with the help of volunteers, and a \$30 donation.

A few settlers had already arrived in what became Dakota Territory by 1860. The territory, which encompasses what is now North and South Dakota and portions of Wyoming and Montana, was created on March 2, 1861.

At the time of the census of 1860, fewer than 1,000 settlers lived in South Dakota and half of them were concentrated in the southeast corner, according to a report compiled in 1980 by Kathleen Block, who wrote about the history of the first permanent schoolhouse constructed in Dakota Territory.

Families who traveled here at that time were trying to build dwellings in which to live and to prove up their homesteads. In 1861, Captain Nelson Miner had organized Company A of the First Dakota Cavalry to protect settlers from possible attacks from Native Americans.

One of his major concerns was to see that his own children and those of the settlers received some form of education. According to Block, in November 1864 Miner asked people to meet with him and he proposed that a schoolhouse be built.

He got the ball rolling on the project by donating \$30 and the services of his men. Several settlers volunteered to provide the logs, and together the men felled trees, hewed the logs and with the help of cavalry horses, dragged the logs into position.

In almost one day, the men constructed the first permanent schoolhouse in Dakota Territory.

Herbert S. Schell, in his book, "History of Clay County South Dakota," notes that the schoolhouse "was a primitive structure with unplastered walls and a floor of rough cottonwood planks."

The school measured 16-by-20 feet and had walls about eight feet high. The roof, made of boards covered with dirt, leaked water and mud on the homemade seats during every rain. The roof was eventually replaced with clapboards or rough split shingles. The building had a door facing south and a small window on both sides.

The building soon began serving not only as a place to educate children, but also as a general meeting place. It housed church services, was used as a polling place and was the center for political gatherings. It was used by singing societies and a penmanship class met there.

In 1870, it even housed a territorial convention for one of the Republican factions.

John L. Jolley, who taught during the winter term of



The first permanent schoolhouse in Dakota Territory was constructed in late 1864. By the time this photo of the structure was taken in 1880, the school had outlived its usefulness and became a private residence for a family. It was later used as a paintshop, and during the latter part of 1881, according to newspaper accounts, the building was torn down and its logs transported to the country.

(Photo courtesy of the Clay County Historical Society)

1866-67, related among his experiences that "34 pupils were enrolled with 34 different kinds of readers; that of the 34 pupils, nine were women and at the close of the term everyone was married and he always considered it an unusually successful year." Pupils brought any readers their parents might have brought with them in their wagons.

Block writes that pictures of graduating classes in these early days show them all barefooted. The curriculum consisted solely of the basics. However, "McGuffey Readers," even in the second grade reader acquired by the log schoolhouse recreators, used excerpts from "Pilgrim's Progress" and The Bible, difficult to be sure.

Arithmetic was taught to enable men to survey the vast wilderness, to be able to measure precisely in order to fit a building together with few or no expensive nails. Women canning for the winter had to know proper quantities and be able to buy needed amounts of supplies of sugar, salt, etc. without tying up extra scarce funds.

And writing letters to families left behind back East helped keep both men and women occupied when cooped

up during long cold winters.

By 1872, the school had outlived its usefulness and became a private residence for a family. It was later used as a paintshop, and during the latter part of 1881, according to newspaper accounts, the building was torn down and its logs transported to the country.

The first teacher to occupy the new schoolhouse was Amos F. Shaw, a member of Company A who was released from active military duty for the occasion. He conducted a four-month winter term and was followed by Sarah Baker who taught a term of equal length during the summer of 1865. Miss Baker, later married to James Beaty, had arrived in Meckling Township in May 1864 as a member of the New York Colony.

Statistical data for Clay County schools appeared for the first time in the official report of the territorial superintendent, James S. Foster, in December 1865. Shaw had about 30 pupils and received compensation from the parents at the rate of \$2.50 per pupil. Miss Baker had an enrollment of 35 students and received the same rate of pay.

Timeline of Education in Clay Co.

1860

- First private classes are held in Clay County.

1864

- Original log schoolhouse is constructed.

1866-1903

- Independence School No. 1 is established in 1866, leading to the construction of dozens of schoolhouses over the course of the next few decades.

1872

- A school building is constructed on Church Street near the bluff that later becomes the high school.

1873

- The log schoolhouse is replaced by a two-story building on Court Street.

1886

- Spirit Mound School No. 15 is destroyed by fire, rebuilt the same year.

1897

- Austin Elementary (West Side) School is constructed on West Main Street.

1902

- Jolley Elementary (East Side) School is constructed on South University Street.