

CHAPTER 9***The Opening of the Missouri Plateau***

THE SETTLEMENT OF AMERICA rolled westward across the continent like a series of waves inundating the land. Frederick Jackson Turner, the renowned historian of the American frontier, vividly described the movement in his essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" when he wrote: "Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by. Stand at South Pass in the Rockies a century later and see the same procession with wider intervals between."

The region of which North Dakota is a part experienced similar waves in human occupation. Long before the coming of the white men, a succession of Indian migrants entered the area. White traders began to arrive late in the eighteenth century. Then the metis and the Scots brought in by Lord Selkirk occupied the Lower Red River Valley with an economy based on farming and the buffalo hunt. The next wave, pushed along by the Great Dakota Boom, carried thousands of farmers, land speculators, railroad construction workers, and townsmen—all mingled together—into the Red River Valley and the Drift Prairie.

The rush and excitement of the Great Dakota Boom did not bring many white men to the Missouri Plateau. The nature of the country made a difference; occupation of the plateau presented more difficult problems of adjustment to a semiarid grassland. The Missouri Plateau, or Northern Great Plains, comprises roughly the western half of North Dakota and

extends into Montana, South Dakota, and Wyoming. The portion in North Dakota was not all alike. Only about half of the Missouri Slope, the part lying west and south of the Missouri River, was later classified as being suitable for crops; about half was best used for grazing.¹ A much larger part of the plateau lying east and north of the Missouri was arable.

Throughout the plateau, however, scant rainfall made returns from farming uncertain. Like the Drift Prairie, all of the Missouri Plateau in North Dakota was part of a transition zone between the more humid farming country farther east and the more arid range country farther west. Drought-resistant grasses were its natural wealth. The Indians had long gathered the product of that wealth by hunting the buffalo—their adaptation to the environment. White encroachment broke down this arrangement and called for a new one.

White occupation of the Missouri Plateau advanced in four stages: the military frontier, the transportation frontier, the ranching frontier, and the farming frontier. One followed the other, although to some degree they overlapped and intermingled. The military frontier began when the army established posts along the Missouri River. When the buffalo herds declined, the Indian way of life on the Great Plains vanished. Living beside their agencies, the tribes became dependent upon government rations. They tried to make a living by farming, but drought largely nullified their efforts.

The transportation frontier came with the building of the Northern Pacific Railroad across the Missouri Slope. This brought about some occupation of the country by both ranchmen and farmers. During the ranching frontier, cattle grazed on the free grasses of the open range which had formerly fed the buffalo—the white man's adaptation to the environment. But, like the buffalo hunt, it led to only a sparse population.

The Northern Pacific, key to white settlement, promoted the farming frontier, but its success was limited. By 1900, twenty years after it had first crossed the region, the Missouri Slope had a population of only 22,000. The country north of the Missouri River, served since 1886 by the Great Northern, was even less settled. By 1900 the entire Missouri Plateau in North Dakota—half the state's area—had only about 47,000 people, or 15 percent of the state's population, a sparse 1.3 persons per square mile. As yet the drier half of North Dakota had made little appeal to prospective settlers.

THE MILITARY FRONTIER

¹M. B. Johnson, *Range Cattle Production in Western North Dakota*, North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 347 (Fargo, 1947), p. 11.

By the early 1870's the United States Army had established a military frontier along the Upper Missouri. Its four Missouri River forts in North Dakota (Rice, Abraham Lincoln, Stevenson, and Buford) were supported by four others in the eastern part of the region: Abercrombie and Pembina on the Red River, Totten on Devils Lake, and Seward on the James River. Each fort had a garrison of from one to three hundred men; it was their presence which brought and kept the Indians under control. In 1873 there were 2,652 troops in North Dakota, better than one soldier for each adult male Indian.²

Many of the Indians were living on reservations in the early 1870's. About 3,500 Sioux–Yanktonais, Blackfeet, and Hunkpapa bands of the western Dakotas–drew rations at Standing Rock Agency; thousands of others were attached to agencies in South Dakota. In addition to those at the agencies, many Sioux were living in the country south of the Yellowstone River under the leadership of Sitting Bull. Some 1,300 Arikaras, Mandans, and Hidatsas (the Three Tribes) occupied a village beside Fort Berthold Agency. About 800 Cut Head, Sisseton, and Wahpeton Sioux lived on Fort Totten Reservation south of Devils Lake. The Turtle Mountain band of Chippewas and many of their relatives among the metis made their home in the Turtle Mountain country; they had no reservation or Indian agent and received no assistance from the United States government.

Wild game was becoming scarce, and many of the Sioux were dependent upon the rations issued at the agencies. From 1870 to 1876 the government, believing it was cheaper to feed the Sioux than to fight them, spent more than two million dollars a year for their rations. At Fort Berthold the Three Tribes received food as well as other aid, such as medical care, farm implements, and schools. In the winter of 1869-1870 their agent was feeding the elderly and ill at Fort Berthold, but he had sent the able-bodied Indians by steamboat to Fort Buford and the hunting grounds of the Yellowstone. Suffering from scurvy and hunger, the Three Tribes felt aggrieved that they, who had long been friendly to the whites, were not treated as well as the Sioux, who had made so much trouble. The Indians at Fort Totten, though receiving no free rations except in cases of extreme destitution, were provided with work and paid in provisions and clothing.

The army forts, the agencies and reservations, and the disappearance of wild game confronted the Indians with a problem of readjustment. A

²For garrison strength, see *Report of the Secretary of War, 1873*, pp. 60-63. Populations of the reservations are in the annual [*Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*](#).

free people ruling a vast, semiarid grassland, they had developed a way of life centering on the buffalo. But as the herds disappeared, their adaptation to the environment broke down. At the same time, the army was taking away from them both their freedom and their control of the country. The army put them on reservations and they were compelled to submit, for they were now dependent upon the government for subsistence.

So the Indians had to find a new way to live on the Plains. They needed to become self-supporting, to prepare to live in or with white society, and to come to terms with those who now controlled the Plains. The western Sioux, or Teton Dakotas, whose life ways were more completely centered on the buffalo, had a more difficult adjustment to make than did the Fort Berthold Indians and the eastern Dakotas, who had long lived in part by agriculture.

The western Sioux, though they could not escape the new conditions pressing upon them, looked reluctantly toward the future. Those who had recently come in to the agencies were restless and insolent; they disliked the white invasions of their country. When in 1871, 1872, and 1873 surveying parties marked out the line of the Northern Pacific in western North Dakota and eastern Montana, the army had to escort the surveyors and ward off Sioux attacks. The Sioux resented it when in 1874 Colonel George A. Custer led twelve hundred troopers from Fort Abraham Lincoln to the Black Hills, a region set aside in 1868 as part of the Great Sioux Reservation.

Custer reported gold in the Hills, touching off a rush of prospectors. The resulting quarrel over the Black Hills brought on an Indian war. Resistance came especially from the Sioux who had not signed the treaty of 1868 and who never came to the agencies. Under leaders like Sitting Bull, Gall, and Crazy Horse, they stayed in the unceded Montana country south of the Yellowstone, where buffalo still grazed. There they clung to the old way of life and were called "hostiles" because they resisted white control.

At first the army tried to keep the whites out of the Black Hills while the government offered to buy the region. When, in the summer of 1875, the Sioux refused to sell, the army ended its restraint of the gold seekers, who immediately swarmed in by the thousands.

The Sioux naturally believed that they were going to lose their country. Many of the agency Indians, starving on short rations, joined the hostile bands to the west. In December, 1875, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs ordered all Indians to return to their agencies or be considered hostile. Many Sioux on the Powder and Big Horn rivers ignored the order, and in the spring the army set out to punish them.

The fighting started with the defeat of General George Crook on the Rosebud. Then the Sioux wiped out Custer and 280 troopers of the Seventh Cavalry in the famous Battle of the Little Big Horn. But the army filled the western country with troops and whipped the Sioux in a series of encounters in the summer and fall of 1876. Many of the defeated ones came back to their agencies. Sitting Bull and about two hundred lodges of his followers crossed the international boundary to become unwelcome guests on Canadian soil.

On the reservations, the Sioux gradually submitted to the control of their white masters. In June, 1875, the army had stationed troops beside the agency at Standing Rock in what became Fort Yates. In the fall of 1876, as the defeated bands returned, the army took away their arms and horses, rounding up some 2,200 horses and mules at Standing Rock. These were driven to Bismarck, sold, and shipped east. In the fall of 1876, the Sioux finally gave up the Black Hills for a promise of rations until they could become self-supporting.

They had lost their freedom. Soon the agent deposed chiefs at will and diminished their status by distributing the rations directly to each family. Soon, too, the Indians could not leave their agency without a pass, and they had to live close to the agent's headquarters to be under constant surveillance. The agent could compel obedience by threatening to cut off rations. After authorization by Congress in 1878, the agent organized some of the Indians (called "progressives" because they were in sympathy with the white program) into a police force to discipline the others. At Standing Rock he set up a Court of Indian Offences (authorized in 1883), by which Indian judges helped the agent stamp out polygamy, "heathenish" dances, and the influence of medicine men. They also punished other offenses.

Such controls were meant to bring the Indians to a new way of life, but there were many obstacles. The aim of government policy was for them to become self-supporting by raising crops, but the land and climate at Fort Berthold and Standing Rock were better suited for stock raising. Drought caused many discouraging crop failures. Unfortunately, the government made no effort to establish ranching, an activity suited to both the country and the Indians' love of horses, riding, and group activity; ranching would have been much like buffalo hunting. The government was even slow in sending the needed agricultural implements. Moreover, the Indians suffered from disease, many dying from tuberculosis and scrofula. In 1881 at Standing Rock Agency, deaths (111) exceeded births (105). The certainty of rations from the agent made some Indians indifferent to their own success. Some chiefs opposed the

new ways, which deprived them of power and influence.³

RESERVATION LIFE

Yet many were eager to work, eager to take up new ways of living, and they made rapid progress, perhaps more in the early years than later. The government supplied tools, oxen, milk cows, seed, and instruction, and at first broke the land for the Indians. Agents and missionaries pushed the Indians along. Both the government and the churches established day and boarding schools, which taught farming and homemaking skills in addition to common school subjects. The first school was opened at Standing Rock in January, 1876.

From 1869 to 1882, the reservations were assigned to religious bodies. In North Dakota the Roman Catholic church received Standing Rock and Fort Totten, the Congregationalists Fort Berthold. Eventually, Catholic orders established boarding schools at Standing Rock, Fort Berthold, Fort Totten, and in the Turtle Mountains. At Standing Rock the Benedictine Fathers, led by the Reverend Abbot Martin Marty, opened a boarding school in 1877; the routine was four hours at studies and four in the garden. The devoted Congregational missionary Charles L. Hall and his wife built a church and a school at Fort Berthold in 1876. Four gentle Grey Nuns won the affection of their charges at Fort Totten. By 1890, when there were 8,174 Indians living on reservations in North Dakota, 1,274 children were enrolled in eighteen schools (eleven day and seven boarding) on the four reservations in the state.

Agriculture was the chief feature of the new life. The Indians gradually moved out to individual claims, planted from one to fifteen acres, and put up log houses heated with stoves furnished by the government. Each year they broke and planted more land, acquired more stock and farm implements, and, at Fort Totten, fenced their field. A few, apprenticed in shops at the agency, became skilled blacksmiths and carpenters. Many changed their habits and outlook. They became peaceable and industrious, attended church, and consulted white doctors when they were ill. They gave up polygamy, cut their hair short, and buried their dead in the ground instead of on scaffolds.

Not all made the same progress. Only a few learned to read and converse in English. By 1880, however, all of the Indians at Fort Totten

³Edward A. Milligan, "[The Standing Rock Sioux, 1874-1890](#)" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1948), pp. 17-18, 40-41, 63-69, 88, 91; Darrell De Long, "[A History of Fort Yates](#)" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1956), pp. 12, 20-25, 32; Adrian R. Dunn, "[A History of Old Fort Berthold](#)" (M.A. thesis [later published], University of North Dakota, 1951), pp. 84-91.

were located on individual claims. At Standing Rock by 1881, nearly half the people, 284 families out of 588, had individual claims or allotments. At Fort Berthold in 1885, the Three Tribes began to move to individual allotments, and by the next summer the village was almost deserted. Each head of a family was to have 160 acres of land and each single person 80 acres, although the government held the land in trust for the owner for twenty-five years. In general, the Indian farms were too small for the semiarid climate. In 1900 farms on reservations averaged only 115 acres, with 29 acres of improved land. Again and again drought robbed the Indians at Standing Rock and Fort Berthold of much of the reward for their labor. The agents believed that even white farmers could not have made a living on such land.

The Indians at Fort Totten made better progress toward self-support. They did not receive rations without work, and their land was more fertile and had more rainfall. In 1890 the Fort Totten Indians, except for the aged and destitute, were earning all of their subsistence by civilized pursuits. They wore white man's clothing, and the government was spending only \$20,000 a year on them.

The Fort Berthold Indians, better corn growers than their white neighbors, earned about 70 percent of their subsistence and pieced it out with a little hunting and with government rations. The government spent \$30,000 a year to assist them. The Standing Rock Indians earned only 30 percent of their subsistence; their support cost the government \$250,000 a year.

As the Indians began to live by farming and on government rations, it became obvious that some of the reservations were much larger than they needed to be. In August, 1879, the government reduced the size of the Great Sioux Reservation, taking away more than 5,000,000 acres of land east of the Missouri, mostly in South Dakota. And in 1889 the government took about half of the Great Sioux Reservation, or 11,000,000 acres of what still belonged to the Sioux west of the Missouri, and divided the remainder into six separate reservations. The Standing Rock Reservation had 2,462,000 acres (only 665,000 in North Dakota).

In two cessions, the first in 1880 and the second in 1891, the government took away the greater part of the Fort Berthold Reservation, leaving the Three Tribes about 1,300,000 acres. The cession of 1891, negotiated in 1886, but, to the disappointment of the Indians, long unratified by Congress, gave the Three Tribes \$800,000 in ten annual payments and opened 1,600,000 acres to white settlement. The Fort Totten Reservation, about 275,000 acres, was not reduced.⁴

⁴Charles G. Royce, "[Indian Land Cessions in the United States](#)," [Bureau](#)

Not all of the Indians were willing to adopt new ways. At Fort Totten some left the reservation to roam over the prairie during the summer. The full-bloods at Turtle Mountain were reluctant to send their children to school. Up the Missouri from Fort Berthold, Crow-Flies-High and his 168 followers still lived in 1890 by hunting, fishing, and gathering buffalo bones. They would come to the agency occasionally to have a horse shod and would accept the gift of a steer and some sugar and flour, but they did not live on government rations and were most reluctant to take up farming.

In 1881, Gall, Sitting Bull, and about 1,300 hostiles who had fled to Canada after the Battle of the Little Big Horn returned to the United States. They eventually settled on the Standing Rock and Cheyenne River reservations. Their coming increased the population at Standing Rock to about 4,700. Some of them were among the irreconcilables who expressed their resistance to white culture by taking part in the Messiah Craze of 1890.

This new religion taught that an Indian Messiah would come from the west with buffalo, horses, and the ghosts of the dead. He would destroy white rule and reunite all Indians, living and dead. The religion's ritual was the Ghost Dance, in which the exhausted dancers fell into a trance and talked with their dead relatives. It encouraged a dangerous recklessness, for the dancers believed that they became immune to bullets from white guns. Sitting Bull, defying Standing Rock Indian Agent James McLaughlin, used the Ghost Dance to reinstate himself as leader of the Sioux; he would turn his people away from the road to self-support through agriculture and education. Gall and John Grass, loyal to the government, opposed the Ghost Dance.

So did James McLaughlin, the tall, honest, dignified Scotch-Irish agent at Standing Rock. Unlike most agents, he was a career man. Before his death in 1923 at the age of eighty-one, he had devoted fifty-two years to the Indian Bureau and the cause of Indian advancement. His autobiography, *My Friend the Indian* (1910), is an important document. In 1871 he had conducted a bull train of twenty yoke of oxen and ten wagons to Fort Totten to assume his duties as assistant agent on that reservation. In 1881 he took charge at Standing Rock; his wife served as official interpreter.

McLaughlin was convinced that Sitting Bull exercised a demoralizing influence among the Sioux. On December 15, 1890, acting on orders from the military authorities, McLaughlin sent Lieutenant Bull

Head and forty-three Indian police to arrest the chief in his cabin on Grand River. They made the arrest just before daylight. Though at first submissive, Sitting Bull, gaunt and weak from steam baths and dancing, shouted for help, and his excited followers attacked the police. In the fight, Sitting Bull and seven of his people and Bull Head and five police were killed. After the death of Sitting Bull, soldiers rounded up the Ghost Dancers who had fled from the agencies to the Badlands. In the process, the Seventh Cavalry killed some three hundred of Big Foot's band on Wounded Knee Creek. Ghost Dance resistance to the white man's way was over.

As danger from the Indians diminished, the army gave up its forts in North Dakota. It abandoned Fort Ransom in 1872, Fort Seward and Camp Hancock in 1877, Forts Abercrombie and Rice in 1878, Fort Stevenson and Cantonment Bad Lands in 1883, Fort Totten in 1890, Fort Abraham Lincoln in 1891, Forts Buford and Pembina in 1895, and, last of all, Fort Yates in 1903. The military frontier had passed.

THE TRANSPORTATION FRONTIER

As the Indians were settling down on their reservations, transportation lines penetrated the Missouri Slope. In 1877 stagecoaches and freight wagons began to travel from Bismarck to Deadwood to accommodate gold seekers rushing into the Black Hills. That February, the Northern Pacific Railroad, the Minnesota Stage Company, N. P. Clark of St. Cloud, and Peter Seims and his associates formed the Northwestern Express and Transportation Company to open the new route. The company invested \$100,000 in the venture. It brought horses, mules, wagons, and Concord coaches and put up quarters for its men and stock at Bismarck and at ten points along the 210-mile route to the Black Hills. At 75 and 150 miles from Bismarck, these were "home stations," with overnight facilities for passengers. The other stations provided only fresh teams. The Deadwood station had a life-size painting of Custer mounted on a horse to advertise the "Custer Route to the Black Hills." The first stages left Bismarck with 68 passengers on April 11, 1877. The company operated a triweekly schedule, charged a fare of \$23, and carried mail on a government contract.

The company's business expanded rapidly. For a time the Bismarck route became the most important one to the Black Hills from the east. Stage and freight lines from Cheyenne, Wyoming, and Sidney, Nebraska, were major approaches from the west and south. By June the company had 26 Concord coaches and 200 teams; in January, 1878, it added 100 mules. On October 17, 1879, it brought several carloads of horses to Bismarck and reported that in ten days it had carried 72 passengers and

nearly 300,000 pounds of freight to the Black Hills. Except for an attack on a stagecoach in the fall of 1877, the Indians did not molest travelers. In 1880 the Chicago and North Western Railroad reached Pierre. That fall, the company began to use a shorter road from Pierre to the Hills, sold its property in Bismarck, and abandoned the old route.⁵

In 1878 the army opened a trail from Bismarck to Fort Keogh. After the disaster on the Little Big Horn, General Nelson A. Miles had constructed Fort Keogh in August, 1876, as headquarters for a winter campaign against the Sioux. The building of Fort Keogh, the site of present-day Miles City, inaugurated regular travel westward from Bismarck. In the summer of 1877, Don Stevenson, an army freighter, made a hay contract for the fort. He took out a party of 125 men, 95 wagons, 20 mowing machines, and 10 horse rakes from Fort Abraham Lincoln. In 64 working days he put up 3,800 tons of hay at \$28 a ton—a gross return of \$106,400.

To supply Fort Keogh with mail and freight, surveyors marked a trail west from Bismarck in 1878, using mounds of earth, each with a strip of canvas nailed to a cedar post. The trail followed roughly the later route of the Northern Pacific but dipped southward east of present Dickinson. In 1880, John R. Miner received a mail contract to make six trips a week each way for \$70,000 a year. Light wagons drawn by four or six horses (or mules) carried the mail. The teamsters, often driving on the run, stopped at way stations every seventeen or eighteen miles to change teams. The stations were one-room dugouts in the side of a hill, each with a pole-and-earth roof and a single window and door. Nearby stood a barn and corral. The home station beside the spring at Young Man's Butte had a big log house, a long barn, and a blacksmith shop.

Those who manned the stations lived a lonely, dangerous life. For a time renegade Sioux under Low Dog made things lively by stealing horses and killing hunters, stationkeepers, and mail drivers. In the summer of 1880, however, Captain Bell and troopers from Fort Keogh killed some of the marauders.

Traffic on the trail increased in 1879 when the Northern Pacific began to push west from Bismarck with construction crews, supplies, and equipment. In December the tracks reached a point thirty-five miles east of Young Man's Butte. The workers stayed on during the winter, and supplies were freighted to them, an operation made possible because Gus Plummer, a former government wagonmaster who knew the country, had put up hay along the Northern Pacific route on speculation. By the fall of

⁵Arthur J. Larsen, "[The Northwestern Express and Transportation Company](#)," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, VI (October 1931), 58-61.

1880 track was being laid at the rate of two miles a day, and reached the Little Missouri in September. Grading was nearly finished to the Yellowstone.

In 1883 the Northern Pacific was completed when a golden-spike ceremony linked the eastern and western sections at Gold Creek, Montana. Neither the Northern Pacific nor the Great Northern built any branch lines on the Missouri Plateau before 1900. For many years its only railroads were their main lines, crossing the region on the way to the Pacific Coast.

The building of the Northern Pacific brought white occupation. To protect the construction workers, the army stationed a company of the Sixth Infantry at the crossing of the Little Missouri in November, 1879. The troops built their quarters, Cantonment Bad Lands, about three-fourths of a mile northwest of present-day Medora. The post had a storehouse, company barracks, officers' quarters, hospital, bakery, blacksmith shop, stables, and quarters for laundresses.

DESTRUCTION OF THE BUFFALO

Many eastern sportsmen came to the cantonment to hunt. Frank Moore, full of good humor and windy talk, was post trader; his store was a sort of clubhouse for the post and region. In November, 1880, Moore opened the Pyramid Park Hotel for hunting parties. He was assisted by E. G. ("Gerry") Paddock, a shifty-eyed guide to Custer and Northern Pacific surveying parties whose questionable operations often got him into trouble with the law. In the fall of 1880, Howard Eaton of Pittsburgh came out to hunt, killing scores of deer, mountain sheep, and antelope. Other sportsmen also came, among them Theodore Roosevelt of New York City and A. C. Huidekoper of Meadville, Pennsylvania. Huidekoper later recalled that Paddock was "the best shot with a rifle I have ever met. He killed a deer running, as a man shoots a bird on the wing."

The railroad made possible the wholesale destruction of game by professional hunters. Large-scale buffalo hunting began on the Little Missouri in the fall of 1881. When the fur became prime for coat robes in October, groups of two or three young men who had caught the "western fever" armed themselves with buffalo rifles, the .45-caliber Sharps single-shot, and set out on the hunt. After the kill, they skinned the buffalo, folded the hides with the hair inside, and stacked them. In cold weather they would cut off the choice meat—hams, shoulders, strips of loin, and tongues, about three hundred pounds per animal. Freighters hauled the meat to Sully Springs, where many carloads were shipped to St. Paul. For months a market in Dickinson sold only wild meat: buffalo,

With the return of warm weather, hunters or freighters hauled the hides to shipping points, Sully Springs or Dickinson, where they made long ricks of them along the station platform. Great numbers of hides were brought in. Two or three partners would kill up to nine hundred buffalo in a season. The hunters were paid from \$1.50 for a bull hide up to \$3.25 for a cow hide, and about a cent a pound for the meat on the range or three cents in Dickinson. In all, they received about \$5.00 for each buffalo. The best cow hides, taken in October and November, were used to make overcoats—many of them for the army—and also caps and gloves.

Under these conditions the end of the buffalo herds came quickly. The great hunts on the Missouri Slope were in 1881 and 1882, and the last large shipments in the spring of 1883. That fall, Roosevelt had a hard time getting a single buffalo, but other game was still abundant. In December, 1884, Vic Smith, called the champion shot of Dakota, killed sixty-nine deer and antelope in five days.⁶

The destruction of the herds was followed by a harvest of buffalo bones, which were shipped east to make carbon black for refining sugar. In 1884 bone pickers began to bring their wares to Dickinson and Sully Springs, receiving from eight to ten dollars a ton. Freighters, hauling supplies from Dickinson to the Black Hills, increased their profits by picking up bones on the return trip. In 1886 piles of buffalo bones were stacked on every Northern Pacific platform from Jamestown westward, and the next year, when the Great Northern was ready to receive freight shipments at Minot, bones were the chief item. For months at Minot more than a hundred wagons a day unloaded bones along the track. They were often the first income of the pioneer farmer.

THE RANCHING FRONTIER

The Northern Pacific opened the Missouri Slope, bringing in both ranchers and farmers. The Little Missouri Valley was an ideal cattle country, and the rise of ranching there initiated systematic use of its short grass (the chief natural resource) and permanent occupation of the region.

It was the hunters who first saw the advantages of the country for cattle: nutritious grasses which cured on the stem and which were good for winter grazing, the shelter afforded by ravines and coulees, and water in the streams. All who visited the country were enthusiastic, but none more than Theodore Roosevelt, who wrote perceptively:

⁶Reminiscences of Joe Meyer in [Golden Valley News](#) (Beach), January 21, June 24, October 21, 1937.

The country is covered with a growth of short bunch grass, which cures on the stalk, into excellent cut hay for winter feed; it is very nutritious, and upon it range cattle become as fat as stall fed oxen. Over most of the land there is nothing but this grass and the bitter, grayish stage brush; except for a few weeks in the spring, when the first growth forms a mantle of green, the whole land is covered with a monotonous dull brown, which, joined to the extraordinary shapes and bizarre coloring of the water-worn buttes, gives the landscape a look of grim and forbidding desolation.... This forbidding aspect of the land, however, completely belies its real character; the dull, barren-looking country, clad with withered brown grass, in reality offers as fine grazing as can be found anywhere in the West, while the cliffs and broken valleys offer almost perfect shelter to the animals in winter.... The rainfall is slight, and the snow rarely covers the ground to any depth. The water supply back of the river is scanty, and the country is wholly unfit for agricultural purposes.... The scantiness of the water supply is no harm to the cattle men, as in summer the beasts keep within a few miles of the river, principal creeks or large water holes, and thus lose a great stretch of back country over which they have not grazed, and which can afford them excellent winter feed when ice has closed up all the ponds and streams, and they are obliged to slake their thirst by eating snow.⁷

Obviously, such a country could not be farmed in the same way as regions with plenty of rain, yet its grasses could produce wealth. Ranching was a natural use for much of the Slope—an adaptation to the nature of the land. By 1883 the natural advantages combined with other favorable conditions to bring the ranching frontier to the Little Missouri country. The Northern Pacific provided a way to market; the Indians were docile on their reservations; the buffalo were gone; the cattle kingdom, spreading northward across the Great Plains since the Civil War, was reaching its last virgin range; the nation was prosperous and capital venturesome; and young men like Roosevelt were fascinated by the idea of ranching.

East of the Missouri River the pioneers raised cattle when they lived too far from the railroad to raise grain. Sometimes herders cared for their neighbors' stock during the summer, and in the 1880's there were ranches with from fifty to two hundred head in many places. There were many ranches in Emmons and Burleigh counties, in the country north of Bismarck, and in the Mouse River Loop. There was, however, little or no winter grazing, the pioneers putting up hay for winter feed.

West of the Missouri the first ranches were held by men who had

⁷Ray H. Mattison, "[Ranching in the Dakota Badlands: A Study of Roosevelt's Contemporaries](#)," *North Dakota History*, XIX (April-July 1952), 103-104.

come to the Slope to hunt, to fill army contracts, to work at stage stations, or to build the Northern Pacific. In 1879, for example, stock tenders at Young Man's Butte had a ranch, and a former railroad section hand was ranching just east of the later site of Hebron. Don Stevenson, the army freighter and contractor, and his employees started ranches near the Bismarck-Deadwood Trail on the Cannonball River and on Cedar Creek, a rough, broken country with badlands and winter shelter that later became important for sheep.

The heart of the cattle country, however, was the Badlands, stretching along the Little Missouri River. Here some ranchers had been hunters, some sportsmen, and some Texas cattlemen. In 1881, Howard Eaton of Pittsburgh, after a hunting trip to the Little Missouri, joined guides Frank Moore and Gerry Paddock in setting up the Custer Trail Ranch five miles south of the Northern Pacific crossing. In 1884, one of Eaton's friends, A. C. Huidekoper of Meadville, Pennsylvania, set up the Little Missouri Horse Company with the HT Ranch near HT, or Black Butte. He bought purebred stallions and some of Sitting Bull's war ponies and raised Percherons.

In the fall of 1883, Theodore Roosevelt, then twenty-five and out in the Badlands on a hunting trip, decided to get into the game. He bought the Maltese Cross Ranch, seven miles south of Medora, and formed a partnership with former hunters Sylvane Ferris and A. W. Merrifield. They ran the ranch for him for half the profits. In the summer of 1884 he brought out Maine guides William Sewall and Wilmot Dow to manage his new ranch, the Elkhorn, on the Little Missouri thirty-five miles north of Medora. Roosevelt was a squatter, not holding title to any land for either of his ranches, but he invested \$82,500 and at the peak of operations probably had five thousand cattle.

In 1883 and 1884 big Texas outfits also came to the Little Missouri: Towers and Guggell (the OX brand); the Berry, Boice Cattle Company (the Three Sevens brand); W. E. Hughes and John N. Simpson of the three-million-dollar Continental Land and Cattle Company (the Hashknife outfit); and the Reynolds brothers (the Long X). All of these big outfits handled Texas cattle and brought large herds over the trail each summer from their southern ranges. The OX ran 15,000 head, the Three Sevens 30,000, and the Hashknife 60,000.

But the Marquis de Mores was the most spectacular newcomer. A young French aristocrat, a horseman, a sportsman, and an army officer educated at St. Cyr, he had married Medora Von Hoffman, the daughter of a New York banker, in February, 1882. Fascinated with the idea of a meat-packing plant on the Little Missouri, he founded the town of Medora in April, 1883. His packing plant, built at a cost of \$250,000,

began slaughtering in October.

The optimistic entrepreneur poured money into other schemes. He bought 6,000 cattle and 15,000 sheep; he hired 150 cowboys; he began breeding horses and backed a stage and freighting business between Medora and Deadwood which had 150 horses, 4 Concord coaches, and 15 stations. The Marquis also built a church and a school in Medora. In love with the country, he put up a 28-room chateau, filled it with fine furniture, books, pictures, silver, china, and Oriental rugs, and brought his family and guests there during the summer months.⁸

Medora boomed. By January, 1884, it had eighty-four buildings (only four in February, 1883), including three hotels, three groceries, a dry-goods store, and a newspaper, the *Bad Lands Cow Boy*, edited by Arthur T. Packard, a college athlete from the University of Michigan. In 1883 many men had begun to pick out likely places along the Little Missouri and its tributaries to build their cabins and corrals. At first they were squatters, protected in their rights by the custom of the range. They drove herds from Texas or Colorado, or shipped in eastern cattle (“pilgrims”) on the Northern Pacific from Minnesota or Iowa. The herds roamed almost at will and foraged for themselves summer and winter. There were always some winter losses. The smaller ranchers, men like Roosevelt, handled mixed cattle from the East and raised calves.

Roundup time was the high point of the year. The first Little Missouri round up was held in the spring of 1884. About forty men took part, the ranches sending cowboys, horses, and mess wagons, and the big outfits from Montana and South Dakota representatives, or “reps,” to look after their cattle.

The round up brought long hours, hard riding, and dangerous work. Roosevelt loved it; he boasted in a letter to Henry Cabot Lodge: “I have been three weeks on the roundup and have worked as hard as any of the cowboys.... Yesterday I was eighteen hours in the saddle—from 4 A.M. to 10 P.M.—having half an hour each for dinner and tea. I can now do cowboy work pretty well.”

Although Roosevelt was attracted by the high spirits of the free life (he felt, he said, “as strong as a bear”), the cowboy’s lot was full of hardship. George F. Shafer, who grew up on his father’s ranch in McKenzie County and later became governor of North Dakota, recalled that the cowboy on the roundup was “often wet to the skin for days at a time; and, sleeping on a damp bed in the rain, the sleet, and the snow,

⁸George F. Will, “[The Marquis de Mores in North Dakota, Translated from the French](#),” *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, VIII (October 1940), 3-23.

there is little wonder that nearly every cowboy is a victim of rheumatism and a physical wreck at the age of thirty-five years.”

The ranchmen faced problems from rustlers, wolves, and the use of the range. In November, 1884, Roosevelt talked his neighbors into standing together in the Little Missouri Stockmen’s Association to give more force to the unwritten laws of the range. By the end of 1885 ranchers had fully occupied the Little Missouri country.

In the summer of 1886, Roosevelt began to worry about over-stocking. The range was already full, but ranchers were still shipping or driving in more cattle. A hot July, grasshoppers, and drought cut down the scanty supply of grass, and in the fall, fire destroyed part of what was left. The winter of 1886-1887 came six weeks early, with blizzards in mid-December, unusual cold, and deep snow that buried the grass. Cattle starved by the tens of thousands, the Texas dogies and eastern pilgrims going first. In April, Roosevelt came out to the Badlands. Sick at heart, he wrote to Lodge: “The losses are crippling. For the first time I have been utterly unable to enjoy a visit to my ranch. I shall be glad to get home.” Probably 75 percent of the cattle in the Northwest had died.

The open-range cattle industry had suffered a crippling blow. Many eastern and foreign companies closed out. The big Texas outfits, such as the OX, the Three Sevens, the Hashknife, and the Long X, scaled down their operations but went on bringing in Texas cattle into the 1890’s. Roosevelt partly restocked his ranches, but his frequent, happy visits came to an end. After the disastrous winter of 1886-1887, the ranchers avoided overstocking. They used the open prairies in summer, saving the grass in the Badlands, where there was more shelter, for winter grazing. They also made some provision for feeding in a pinch.

Medora, however, died. The Marquis de Mores’ enterprises had already failed: the Medora-Deadwood stage gave up in May, 1885, and the packing plant closed in November, 1886. By 1889, Medora was a deserted village, with the brick hotel and the Chateau de Mores shut up.

CONFLICT AND TRANSITION ON THE RANGE

A way of life—free, exciting, and lawless, but adapted to the semi-arid grassland—was beginning to pass. Lawlessness was a major cause of its demise. The Little Missouri country had a bad reputation: the Dickinson Press concluded in 1884: “If there is any place along the line that needs a criminal court and a jail it is Medora.” Men went armed to protect their rights. Roosevelt wrote to his sister that with his “pearl-hilted revolver and beautifully finished Winchester,” he felt “able to face anything.”

One cause of lawlessness was the tight between large and small

ranchers over free grass, the wealth of the country. In the fall of 1881 a band of twenty vigilantes, organized by big Montana ranchers, invaded McKenzie County to frighten the small ranchers into leaving. The vigilantes, themselves former convicts and horse thieves, threatened men with hanging, killed a hunter, fired the prairie, and burned a barn and five hundred tons of hay at a sheep ranch. They failed, however, to drive out the small ranchers.

Finally, about 1901-1904, many small ranchers came into McKenzie County, took the public lands for themselves, drove off the range herds, and ended the large-scale operations of the big outfits. Charles Shafer, for example, a hunter-turned-rancher, would shoot a wagon load of deer for winter eating, then take a second load to Dickinson to trade for coffee, shoes, sugar, flour, and other necessities.

The small ranchers in western North Dakota followed a middle course between the methods of handling cattle in the humid East and those used on the open range of the semiarid West. The typical ways of the open range came to the Little Missouri Valley, but no farther east. On the rest of the Slope, the ranchers raised cattle for beef; branded their stock, handled them on horseback, used the free grass on government or railroad land, and called their places ranches. These were all open-range customs.

But, unlike the typical open-range outfits, the small ranchers did not take part in round ups (there were none in North Dakota outside the Little Missouri country), nor did they have the backing of outside capital. They handled mixed native cattle (bulls, cows, calves, and steers) of eastern origin instead of Texas steers. They held their cattle close to the home ranch, often herding them on horseback during the day (a boy's job) and corralling them at night. Sometimes they herded the stock of their farmer neighbors. They put up hay for winter feed and furnished shelter. Some of them had cow camps, where the cattle were taken during the summer so that grazing land near the home ranch would be in better condition for fall and winter use.

Such transitional ranching methods were adapted to all or the Missouri Plateau in North Dakota, a region covered by a grass community with both long and short grasses. On the Missouri Slope, the portion of the plateau west and south of the Missouri River, half the land was classified as best used for crops and half for grazing. On the rest of the plateau, there was more crop land, less grazing land. Thus with a large part of the land better used for crops, methods of handling cattle had to be arranged accordingly.

The settlement of the Little Missouri country by small ranchers and homesteaders forced the big ranchers to fight for their lives. One issue

was county organization. The big ranchers naturally opposed organization, for it would bring taxation of their cattle. In 1903 the farmers and small ranchers in McKenzie County wanted to organize a government in order to build roads, bridges, and, especially, schools. Big and small ranchers without families strongly opposed it; they won a hot fight in 1904, only to have the legislature arbitrarily organize the county in 1905.⁹

Another issue was control of the range. When small ranchers and homesteaders began to take over the country, ending the era of free grass, the big ranchers had to acquire title to their range. Owning the range increased not only the burden of taxation but also the burden of interest on capital invested. Many of the big ranchers, anticipating these difficulties, gave up after the bad winter of 1896-1897.

A. C. Huidekoper, however, fought on. Before 1900 he and his associates bought 63,446 acres of railroad land, leased 5,000 acres of school land, and put \$30,000 in a barbed-wire fence that enclosed 80,000 acres. He fenced not only his own property but also about 21,000 acres of public land. The General Land Office ordered him to remove the fence in July, 1900. Huidekoper refused to do so, and finally, in 1906, he and two associates were fined \$2,300 and sentenced to twenty-four hours in the county jail.

By this time the building of the Milwaukee Railroad was bringing homesteaders to the region south of his HT Ranch. Huidekoper complained bitterly that the range country was being ruined by homesteaders who were settling on semiarid land unfit for tillage, where they would gradually go bankrupt. In 1905 he disposed of his herd of four thousand horses at St. Louis; he sold his land to Fred Pabst of the Pabst Brewing Company of Milwaukee for \$300,000.

A. C. Huidekoper, Howard Eaton, Theodore Roosevelt, and others who sought out the Badlands and the life of the open range were young men—restless, spirited, seeking adventure and fortune. They had freedom; horses to ride endlessly over the plain; game to hunt (Roosevelt killed a grizzly at ten paces); guns; carved saddles, silver inlaid bits, and other horse gear to play with; and buckskin suits, chaps, and sombreros to wear with a self-conscious swagger. They found a new life seasoned with hardship and danger and excitement. Little wonder, then, that they fell in love with the country. Roosevelt, the most articulate of them, wrote to his sister: “The country is growing on me more and more; it has a curious,

⁹George F. Shafer, “[Early History of McKenzie County](#),” [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), IV (1913), 44-61; Luella J. Hall, “[History of the Formation of Counties in North Dakota](#),” [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), V (1923), 224-236.

fantastic beauty of its own.” The Marquis de Mores’ chateau, today a museum (given by his son to the North Dakota State Historical Society in 1936), is, in a way, a monument to an emotion. And in later life, Roosevelt wrote of his days in the Badlands: “We knew toil and hardship and hunger and thirst... but we felt the beat of the hardy life in our veins, and ours was the glory of work and the joy of living.”¹⁰

But the great days were gone. Ranching on a smaller scale, of course, continued, although land hunger and the Homestead Act, feeding an elusive dream of agricultural opportunity on a semiarid grassland, had made it impossible for a few cattlemen to rule a kingdom of free grass.

THE FARMING FRONTIER

The farming frontier overlapped the ranching frontier. Farming began on the Missouri Plateau in the 1880’s in a number of places: in the six counties to the east of the Missouri River; in the fertile Knife River Valley; out along the line of the Northern Pacific across the Missouri Slope; and, to a lesser extent, in the five counties lying to the north of the Missouri River. The Great Dakota Boom brought a considerable number of settlers to the six counties east of the Missouri; by 1890 they had a population of 11,000. North of the river, settlement came later. When the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba built west from Minot, a few towns sprang up along its line. Williston was a colony of tents and log cabins when the construction workers laid track into the town in 1887. Yet there was very little agricultural settlement until after 1900; that year, the region had a population of only 6,000.

Woodhawks, supplying steamboats with fuel, were commonly the first settlers along the Missouri River. John Nagel was such a one. A restless adventurer, he had taken part in the California and other gold rushes before he came to the Upper Missouri after the Civil War. His woodyard at Knife River Landing employed as many as fifteen woodhawks at one time. Nagel himself had a home between Fort Berthold Reservation and the Fort Stevenson military reserve. He was native, took at one time or another eight Indian wives, and spoke three Indian languages. He dressed in a buckskin coat, fringed leggings, and beaded moccasins. He raised horses and cattle.

The first agricultural settler in the region near the confluence of the knife and Missouri rivers was Edward Heinemeyer, who arrived in 1882. That year, Bob McGahan, a riverman, filed on the first homestead in Mercer County. The territorial legislature laid out the county in 1883,

¹⁰*Theodore Roosevelt: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1913), pp. 103-104.

and Stanton won the county seat after a fight. The first settlers took up land near the Missouri River, and later arrivals pushed out the Knife. Some ranched; others farmed. Heinemeyer picked up corn from the neighboring Fort Berthold Indians and by careful selection bred an excellent variety, Heinemeyer Flint, which made Mercer County a corn producer.

German immigrants from Russia made it a wheat country. In the last half of the eighteenth century, Catherine the Great had attracted German peasants to southern Russia. A century later, their descendants began to come to America's Great Plains. Some of the first settled near Yankton in 1872, and in 1885 they began to migrate to McIntosh County. The next spring, a party moved north from Scotland, a settlement of German Russians northwest of Yankton. They had loaded thirty covered wagons with bedding, cooking utensils, tools, and plows. Seeking black, level land suitable for raising wheat, they marched up the James River Valley, turned northwest to Bismarck, crossed the Missouri on a ferry, and pushed out the line of the Northern Pacific. At Hebron the land seekers found settlers bringing in loads of buffalo bones worth six to fourteen dollars a load. Short of cash, they themselves camped north of the town to gather bones.

Visitors to the camp told them of good land north of Stanton. After looking it over, they located their claims near present-day Krem. By 1889 some thirty families had settled north of the Knife. Encouraged by Carl Semmler, an immigrant agent for the Northern Pacific, German Russians began to come directly from Russia. By 1910 some 55 percent of the population of Mercer County had either been born in Russia or were the children of parents born there. The German Russians made good settlers, for they knew the soil, the crops it would grow, and how to live frugally. But Mercer County grew very slowly. It had only 1,778 people in 1900, and Oliver County, its neighbor to the south, settled by Germans from both Russia and Germany, had only 990.

Farther south the Northern Pacific had created a string of little settlements across the Slope. Town building rather than farming was the first step, and merchants and land agents were the leaders. When the railroad crossed the Missouri River in 1879, Mandan sprang up. Dickinson began as Pleasant Valley Siding when the railroad reached that point in 1880. The first settlers were railroad men, some of whom married girls who cooked for the construction crews. Cattlemen and former prospectors also drifted in, and the place became a shipping point for buffalo bones and cattle. In 1882, Father Patrick Cassidy began to say Mass once a month in a Dickinson hall, section house, or private home.

Both the Northern Pacific and townsite companies established towns.

The Richardton Improvement Company laid out a townsite twenty-five miles east of Dickinson in 1883, putting up a large building which served as a store, post office, hotel, and church. In 1890 the firm sold its store to Sebastian Mischel, Sr., the leader of a newly arrived group of German Russians.

The Northern Pacific built Glen Ullin, sending agents into Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ohio to organize prospective settlers into a colonization society. In May, 1883, Northern Pacific trains brought several hundred settlers to a siding on the empty prairie, and the town sprang up overnight. Each winter, E. R. Steinbrueck, the only German and Catholic in the original band, would go east to talk to prospective German settlers. He also wrote letters to German-language papers, seeking, as he remembered it, to “make the Easterners’ mouth water for the wealth of the west.” Gradually, Glen Ullin became a Catholic German and German Russian settlement.

The Northern Pacific cooperated with the Deutscher Evangelischer Colonizations Verein (German Evangelical Colonization Society) to found New Salem some twenty miles east of Glen Ullin. In the fall of 1832 some Illinois and Wisconsin pastors of the German Evangelical church organized the society, which sought members by sending out literature to pastors, by publishing reports in *Friedensbote* (the official paper of the synod), and by writing letters to German-language newspapers. Full of energy and zeal, it placed an agent in New York to talk to German immigrants as they disembarked. It also chose a pastor for New Salem and planned a church, a school, and a “Christian hotel.” For a twenty-dollar fee, the new member was to be given two lots in the projected town and help in getting settled. By the spring of 1883 the society had recruited more than two hundred members, collected \$4,410 in fees, and sent the first settlers to New Salem. The town prospered. In 1883 the society established a second colony at Hebron, thirty-three miles to the west.

The Hebron and New Salem settlers early turned to dairy farming. In 1883 a Sioux Indian told young John Christiansen that by plowing he was turning the sod “Wrong Side Up.” Legend has it that this phrase made Morton County a leading dairy center.¹¹ Long before dairying

¹¹C. B. Heinemeyer, *History of Mercer County, North Dakota, 1882-1932* (Hazen, N. D.: *Hazen Star*, 1932), pp. 22-25, 28-29, 37-39, 43-45, 53; E. A. Wilson, H. C. Hoffsommer, and Alva H. Benton, *Rural Changes in Western North Dakota*, North Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 214 (Fargo, 1928), pp. 18-19; *Souvenir of Golden Jubilee of St. Patrick's, Dickinson*, pp. 50-58, 60; Marion and Theodore Mark (eds.), *Early Hebron: Fiftieth Anniversary, 1885-1935* (Hebron: Marion and Theodore Mark, 1935);

became important, however, the southern Pacific began to mine lignite at Sims, eight miles west of New Salem, bringing in more than a hundred miners, mostly Cornishmen.

Although Dickinson, New Salem, Hebron, and other towns persisted, settlement of the region had scarcely begun. In 1900, some twenty years after the Northern Pacific crossed the Missouri Slope, its population was scattered thinly along the railroad; the back country was vacant except for an occasional ranch. The colonization efforts of the Northern Pacific, the availability of railroad transportation, the conquest of the Sioux, and the attraction of free land had not brought many settlers to the Slope—a semiarid short-grass country.

E. R. Steinbruek, "History of Glen Ullin," [North Dakota Historical Society Collections](#), I (1906), 297-299; Minutes of the German Evangelical Colonization Society, Hebron Papers, Orin G. Libby Manuscript Collection, [Chester Fritz Library](#), University of North Dakota.