

Interview with Christina Styles Dunn

Early Years In Bismarck

CHRISTINA STYLES DUNN, a native of Canada, married John Piatt Dunn in 1873 and he took his bride to Bismarck where he had built a small house and drugstore. She tells us about travel, the town, and some of the interesting people of those early years.

Travel, even by train, was not easy in the 1870s. Would you tell us about your trip to Bismarck?

This trip from Minneapolis to Fargo took one day's journey on the train, arriving in Fargo on June 13, 1873, at 7 o'clock P.M. Two days were spent in Fargo, D.T., before accommodations were available on the N.P.R.R. to Jamestown, D.T. The trip from Fargo to Jamestown took one day's journey, arriving in Jamestown on June 16, 1873, at 9 P.M., where we were unable to obtain sleeping quarters for the night. We were given accommodations in a grocery store. Our bed consisted of some sacks spread on the floor with a buffalo robe for covering. This bed was used for three days due to the inability to secure accommodations to Crystal Springs, which was the end of the track at that time. On June 19, 1873, accommodations were secured in the caboose of one of the crew trains, in which we traveled to Crystal Springs, the journey taking one day, arriving in Crystal Springs on June 20, 1873, at 10 P.M. Our accommodations for the night in Crystal Springs was a box car, and we had our meals with the train crew in the crew's tent cook shack.

On June 21, 1873, we left Crystal Springs in a lumber wagon drawn by eight mules, which was going to Bismarck, D.T. This trip took two days, due to the fact that the wagon was loaded to capacity (4000 pounds) with our additional weight and our four suitcases and two trunks. The stop on June 22nd was made at Sterling, where we slept on the ground. The second stop was made on June 23, at what is now called Menoken. On June 24, 1873, we arrived in Bismarck on top of the lumber wagon at 9:30 A.M.

What were your first impressions of Bismarck?

My first impression of Bismarck was that the town was very rough and disorderly, but it was not nearly as bad as I had expected to find. The tent stores and houses along the street appeared so quaint that they were quite interesting, and I spent many days walking around from one place to the other and spent many hours in the drugstore, helping my husband arrange his stock and waiting on what customers I could.

Are there any events that you particularly remember?

On April 1, 1881, was the worst flood in Bismarck. The water was up to the bank at the foot of 3rd Street, fifteen feet deep. Captain Braithwait landed his boat there to take excursion and sightseeing parties to Mandan. The tops of trees — and just the tops — at the river were sticking out of the water. The boat left from

the foot of third street and went to where the Mandan court house now stands, would turn there and come back again. I went on one of these excursions and the fee was twenty-five cents. The river was at this stage for about a week. There were one or two cabins in what is now the "bottoms," and they were completely covered by water. Gottlieb Huber at that time had a grain storing building at the foot of the bank, at the foot of second street. This building was blown up by an explosion caused by the water getting into the grain. The fire was so hot that it was impossible for the boat to get near enough to land so they had to ride around for two or three hours before it finally washed away. The grain was floating on the water in big chunks but drifted down enough so that the excursion boat could land.

Do you recall any stories about Bismarck's most famous citizen, Boss Alexander McKenzie?

Gottlieb Huber was in charge of the ballot boxes and was responsible for the ballots. No ballot was put into the boxes unless they were stamped with the ballot stamp; this was Gottlieb Huber's job to see that only stamped ballots were inserted into the boxes. During the election of 1896 the train from Wilton and the west bound. N.P. were held over for the poll voters until eight o'clock, at which time the polls were open. Early the night before the election, Alex McKenzie went to Wilton after a man who had a lot of influence and brought him to Bismarck by horse and buggy. He was instructed how to vote and following morning at eight o'clock was taken to the polls by Alex McKenzie and was the first to vote. His ballot was stamped and put into the fourth ward ballot box. When I was to have my ballot stamped, behind the second voter, the stamp was nowhere to be found. The gentleman from Wilton was also missing, and there was a great commotion. The ballot stamp was never found so no other people could legally vote in that ward.



The Bismarck Headquarters of Alex McKenzie, the Hotel McKenzie

At two o'clock Alex McKenzie came back to the polls with a ballot box marked "O'Brien precinct" and handed this ballot box to Gottlieb Huber to open and count at three o'clock. There was no such precinct, as the O'Brien precinct was just one of Mr. McKenzie's crooked schemes. Upon presenting the O'Brien ballot box to Gottlieb Huber, he asked for the fourth precinct ballot box with the one ballot in it. Huber refused to give it to him, and McKenzie got three men to come and take the box from Huber. Huber pulled his six shooter and sat on the ballot box and told them to come and get it. At three o'clock they started counting the ballots in the O'Brien precinct box, which everybody knew was no good. This caused the Bismarck people to become angry; and they chased McKenzie all the way home with a fence post.

Was there much "wild west" violence in Bismarck?

Not much, but there is an interesting story about James A. Emmons, (editor of the Bismarck Sun, 1885-1887) known to the people of Bismarck as Tumbleweed, due to the fact that in his paper he was always publishing articles to the effect that the people of Bismarck should weed the tumbleweeds before they went to seed. He kept this up so persistently that one morning his printing office was all covered and surrounded by tumbleweeds that the people of Bismarck had gathered one night and piled around his print shop. This made him worse, and some of the people finally dumped his print shop into the Missouri River. This finished the tumbleweed business.

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