

WILLIS S. FREEMAN (1862 -)

[Editor Note: He was born William Solomon Freeman but used "Willis" all his life. He died 31 October 1942 in Seattle, Washington. From just before 1920 he lived in Linton, North Dakota and neighboring Fort Yates, South Dakota until shortly after this interview when he moved to Seattle. This interview was conducted by the State of North Dakota for a special Historical Data Project. His parents David and Adeline lived in Dale, North Dakota.]

Willis S. Freeman was born Sept. 23, 1862 at McGregor, Clayton County, Iowa. His father was David W. Freeman, and his mother, Adeline Freeman, nee Royce.

David W. Freeman, at the time of his marriage was stationed at McGregor, Ia. as general stage agent for Frinck and Walker [*Frink Walker & Company*] stage line between Dubuque, Ia, and Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn. He sometimes drove the stage himself, and Willis S. still has the little steel box, about 10 inches long, 6 inches wide and 3 inches deep, having 3 compartments, in which Mr. Freeman kept his change en-route in a little cubby hole under the driver's seat. This was in the days of the 1850's, before any railroad paralleled the Mississippi River.

Shortly after his marriage he retired from this service and engaged in a livery business of his own. About 1867, when Willis was about 5 years old, his stable burned down, and he moved to Monona, [*Clayton County*] Ia. where he became a blacksmith for a number of years, until about 1880, when he moved to Fairmont, [*Martin County*] Minn.

At this time Willis S. had four brothers; two older, and two younger than himself. The oldest was Walter Burton, born May 19, 1858. The next was Frank Woodburn, born in 1860. Both these were born at McGregor, Ia. Walter died at Joplin, [*Jasper County*] Mo. about 1935 and Frank at Winnebago [*County*], Minn. in the summer of 1939. The two younger brothers are still living; Allan David at Tamerack, [*Atkin County*] Minn. and Fred H. whose address is Pollock, [*Campbell County*] S. Dak. The youngest was born July 25, 1874 and Allan was about 3 years younger than Willis S. Both these younger boys were born at Monona, Ia.

Willis entered school at Monona when about 5 years old. This was a large 5 room school at which about 200 children attended. There were two large rooms downstairs and one large and two small rooms upstairs. The small rooms were intended for recitation rooms, but when Willis attended it seems that instruction in high school subjects was given here instead. Willis graduated from the eighth grade in the subjects given at that time, namely reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, geography, history and grammar.

During his last year at school he worked at the Monona House, the only hotel in that little city. It was his duty to keep the barroom clean, sweep the floors, keep fires in the kitchen and guest rooms, clean the stables and look after the horses, milk the cow, etc. For these services he received only his board. It was impossible, he says, to eat all he earned but he was glad to be on his own and earn his own way, because there were five boys in the family, all of whom lived at home at that time.

The family left Monona and moved to Fairmont, Minn. when Willis S. was about 17 years old. He and David Allan,

the next younger brother, were to drive two Guernsey cows, afoot, part of the way, until the cows became accustomed to leading. So they set out a day or two earlier than the rest of the family, who were to follow them with a wagon. It was supposed that when they overtook the two boys, the cows would be resigned to being led. When they had traveled about 75 miles they reached a town at which they stopped to have dinner. The cows were tied up behind the building. They were heavy with calf and someone offered the boys \$50.00 a piece for them. They refused the offer. While they were having dinner their parents drove through the town, still hoping to overtake the boys. That night both the cows had calves and the villagers, knowing the boys would be delayed a couple of days, offered them \$30.00 apiece, which the boys felt compelled to accept. They then took the train to Fairmont. Their father was sorry to lose the cows, because they were good ones, but, he said, all he could do was to grin and bear it.

Near Fairmont Mr. Freeman engaged in farming. He bought a 120 acre farm, but sold it within a year and then rented a farm of about 160 acres. The rented farm had no well, but one of Minnesota's 10000 lakes was only about ¼ mile from the house.

One day, when they had lived in Minnesota about a year and a half, Willis S. told his younger brother Allan to go to a neighbor to borrow a spade, suggesting that they dig a well. While his younger brother was gone, one of the Fry (?) [*Willis wasn't sure [of last name and similar name could not be found hear them in 1880 Census]*] boys came over, disgusted with affairs at his own home. He wanted to leave home and suggested that Willis go along. Willis had only a nickel in his pocket, but the boys went to Fairmont and obtained a pass on a gravel train to Austin, on the pretext of applying for a job. At Austin he caught a freight train to Postville, Ia. There he caught the stage to Waukon, Ia, where his brother Walter Burton now lived, promising the stage driver he would pay later.

He obtained work in a hardware store in Waukon and held that job one year and nine months. When he settled with his employer he had just a nickel coming to him. He then worked in another hardware store in the same town for three months; then went to work for Boomer Bros. [*Bank of Waukon, Boomer Opera House*] who were in the cattle and horse buying business and also had a bank. It was Willis' job to receive the cattle, weigh them and issue tickets which had the value of checks and could be cashed at the bank. In his spare time he worked at their bank sorting checks and preparing and mailing monthly statements. He worked for them about one year when one of the Boomer Bros. wished to send his wife at Belvedere (?) [*Belvidere, Boone County, Illinois*] Ill. a team of thorough bred horses. Willis was given charge of there [*sic*] horses, riding one and having a set of harness on the other, alternately [*sic*] each day. He left Waukon April 1st, 1885; delivered the horses at Belvidere and then went on to visit an uncle [*Charles Silas Freeman*] at Walnut, [*Bureau County*] Ill. This uncle had a grain elevator, and also a cattle and hog buying business, besides operating 3 or 4 farms. Willis began working for him about May 1st, 1885, buying grain and hogs and giving some attention to the farms. He left his uncle's employ about Aug. 1st and entered that of Kurtz and Wilson [*stock dealers*], horse buyers, and it was his duty to collect the horses bought, and take care of them in the company's sale stables. He continued in their employ until about April 1886.

He now began his railroad career working first on the Illinois Central Road on the Amboy-Clinton Division as brakeman. He did this until late in the fall of the same year. He then returned to Fairmont for a short visit at home. He made the trip by train, though he was without any money, as usual, having again, so he says, only a nickel in his pocket. He rode in the coach, too, and says he never rode in a box. car. He succeeded more than once to do this, no matter how straitened his circumstances. One time he says, he boarded a train at Dubuque, Ia., went into the coach, sat down and prepared to go to sleep. The conductor came along and asked for his

ticket. Willis said he was a company man and didn't need any. Asked where he wanted to go, Willis said his destination was Turkey Junction (where he knew the agent). The conductor asked the name of the agent. Willis gave it and the conductor accepted his story. He went to sleep and woke up at McGregor, where he wanted to go anyway. This was a division point and he had to change cars.

Another time he tried to do the same thing at Monona. He thought it would be easy here, because he knew the conductor, having gone to school with him. But at that school Willis had been one of the "big" boys and the boss. It seems the conductor remembered this. He would not allow Willis to ride on his train unless he paid the fare, and in spite of Willis' pleading to remember their school days, the conductor would have put him off. Then Willis reminded him that he too was a railroad man and that it was *[unreadable.....]* train between stations. If he wished to back the train up to Monona, it would be alright. So the *[unreadable....]* that and Willis got off. *[unreadable....]*.

He remained at home about one month and about Feb. 1, 1886 applied for and obtained a job as brakeman on the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul line, sometimes running between Wells, *[Fairbault County]* Minn. and La Crosse, *[La Crosse County]* Wis. and sometimes between Wells and Woonsocket, *[Sanborn County, South Dakota]* Dak. Terr. (The population of Woonsocket at this time was about 700.) This latter run was his first entrance into this territory and he helped transport many settlers to it. This was called the Southern Minnesota division and he worked on it about a year. Then he was transferred to the Austin-Mason City cut-off for a couple of months. A cut-off is a short road connecting two points on two different lines belonging to the same company. He then returned to his home at Fairmont, *[Martin County]* Minn. for a couple of weeks and in the latter part of December proceeded to Whittemore (?) Ia. *[Whittemore, Kossuth County]* where he was married on January 1, 1888 to Miss Ellen M. Scott.

The couple remained at the home of the bride's parents that winter, Willis accepting such odd jobs as he could get. In the spring he built a house in Whittemore and then obtained work as a carpenter on several grain elevator construction jobs.

About Oct. 1888 he went back to railroading. He obtained a job as brakeman on the Milwaukee Railroad on the I & D (Iowa and Dakota) Division. His run was at first between Mason City *[Cerro Gordo County]* and McGregor, at which time he made his home at Mason City. Sometimes his run was between Mason City and Sanborn *[O'Brien County]*. Later he was transferred to the Sanborn and Mitchell, *[Davison County]* S. D. division at which time he lived in Sanborn.

He was a brakeman on freight trains until the spring of 1890. Up to this time he had always been employed on freights. His duties were to help with the switching help and unload freight, sport cars, and to stop the cars by getting up on top of them and applying the hand brakes, something that is no longer necessary.

In the spring he was transferred from freight to passenger train, between Sanborn, Ia. and Chamberlain, *[Brule County]* S. Dak. He was here until the fall of 1890, a period of about eight months. His duties were now a little different. In the first place, he had to buy a regulation suit and keep himself neat and trim. At the end of their run they had to help turn the coaches around for the return runs. This was required to help the agent load and the baggage man unload baggage. He was required to walk through the train and inform the passengers at what points connections could be made with other lines and where they would stop for dinner. He had to collect tickets of passengers going only short distances. He also had to keep a train book in which to enter the numbers and

names of coaches and at which point they were picked up.

The brakemen on freight trains used to go through the emigrant cars looking for stowaways, whom when they found, the compelled to pay fares, which the brakeman, of course, pocketed. Sometimes they would even steal a goose or turkey from these poor people and take it home and have it cooked. This they did already on the Southern Minnesota Division from whence they shipped cars through to Scotland [*Bon Homme County*] and other points in Dakota Territory. They usually had two or three cars a week, but at times they had emigrant cars every day of the week. Most of these emigrants came from Russia and while he was brakeman on the passenger they came by the coach loads. However, during his entire experience there were never more than two coaches full at one time. They always wore scarfs about their heads, often the men as well as the women and children. But the think that made its most lasting impression on Mr. Freeman was the quite horribly nauseating odor that accompanied them. It was something like new cedar, but much worse. He doesn't know how they got that way, but, he says, they had to air their coaches about a month before they were rid of that odor.

The language question seldom caused any difficulty. There were usually enough of their own people near by who could interpret.

He returned to Whittemore, Ia. that fall, and during the winter of 1890-91 remained at the home of his father-in-law and in the spring bought a farm at Ledyard, [*Kossuth County*] Ia. which he operated for about 3 1/2 years, or until the fall of 1894. At this place his oldest son Floyd was born Feb. 9, 1891. He then sold this farm and was employed in the Whittemore creamery for about a year. Here he learned the art of buttermaking, and in this city his second son, Willis, was born March 21, 1895. He was then given charge of a creamery in Cylinder, [*Palo Alto County*] Ia. and continued there about a year. In the fall of 1896 he invested in a pool hall and restaurant, but sold this during the summer of 1897 and went back to Whittemore where he purchased a restaurant and board house. He operated this until the early months of 1898.

In the spring he purchased a team of horses and a wagon, fixed a cover over the wagon and traveled north as far as Duluth, Minn., then back to Ahely (?). Here he met a railroad contractor and engaged to work for him. His horses and wagon were shipped to Minot, [*Ward County*] N.D. and the family's fares paid. He worked on the railroad grade west of Minot until the threshing season opened. He helped with the threshing in northern North Dakota and the season was just completed when his son Willis died at Glaston, (?) [*Gladstone, Stark County*] N. Dak. The family accompanied the remains to Whittemore, Ia. by train. A friend at Gladstone later disposed of the horses and wagon. From that time until the fall of 1900 he again worked at the carpenter trade in and around Ledyard, Ia. and Fairmont, Minn.

In the fall of 1900 he sold his house and lot in Fairmont, accepting a good team of horses and the balance in cash, as payment. He shipped an emigrant car containing the team of horses, his household goods, including tables, chairs, beds, bedding, clothing, dishes, kitchen utensils, etc. and 100 bushels of potatoes. His wife and only surviving child, at this time, were also in this car, as stowaways, of course. He kept their presence a secret by keeping the doors closed. He had a good bed in the car and they also did their cooking in it. One thing, he admits, probably helped him. While his car was on a side track at Watertown, he was making himself a pot of coffee outside when a brakeman came along. Fortunately, he knew this man and he helped protect Freeman. Arrived in Eureka [*South Dakota*] he was met by the Scotts (who had emigrated the spring before). The Scotts hurried to his car which was just ahead of the caboose, to inform him that the marshal was on his way to

investigate his car. Mr. Freeman opened the door on the opposite side from the depot, helped his wife out, and she with her sister-in-law walked away. When the marshal came, only he and his son were there and they showed no interest in the boy. The trip to Eureka had required about two days.

In Eureka he bought a wagon from Robb (?) [*William Robb Implement and Feed Store*] an implement dealer, and proceeded northward to Emmons County, to file on land near the Scott's location. He arrived in Eureka about the 20th October and arrived at the Scott's place two days later. The following day he filed on the *SE¹/₄SE¹/₄ Section 24; N¹/₂NE¹/₄ Section 25; SE¹/₄NE¹/₄ Section 25 of Township 130 Range 78*, adjoining his father-in-law's land to the west.

He lived with his father-in-law that winter and in the spring began the construction of a stone house on the westernmost forty acres of his claim. It was built of stone walls, cemented with a mixture of dirt and straw to fill the crevices. He was also holding a job as carpenter doing general repair work at Fort Yates [*Sioux County*] and earning \$3.00 a day. He was, therefore, quite busy. He had built the walls up to a height of the windows when a couple of Russian brothers, named Meyers, (possibly Meiers), offered to complete the walls to a height of eight feet for thirty dollars. This offer was gladly accepted, for it was cheaper than he himself could do it. The house was L shaped, the longer portion about 16 ft. x 32 ft. and the shorter about 16 ft. x 20 ft. It contained three rooms and 6 windows, one of which was a double window, in the living room. The other two rooms were a bedroom and a kitchen and each contained two windows. There were two outside doors and double doorway openings between the rooms. After the walls were up he built a roof of rafters, *_ ? _*, and shingles, and finished the rooms. This was his place of residence, except for occasional absences of comparatively short periods, until about 1918, when he sold the farm and moved to Linton.

In the spring of 1901 he also broke about 10 a. of land mostly with his two horses, but from his father-in-law he obtained the use of an extra horse to complete this work. He planted sod corn, jabbing holes in the sod with his spade and dropping a few kernels in each hole. In the fall he picked it and obtained a little feed.

For water he had not far to go. About 15-20 rods from his house was a spring which bubbled the year around. It never froze in winter until the temperature fell to about 20 degrees below zero. So he never dug a well.

The years 1901 and 1902 were those of greatest prosperity for him. At this time he was employed by the government at Fort Yates as a carpenter at \$3.00 per day. During this time he was not required to live on his claim. A furnished house was set aside for his use and he was also allowed a certain amount of coal, which was more than sufficient. The portion that he did not use he hauled to his homestead, although his wife and child also lived at the fort most of the time. Mr. Freeman also had a cow and his wife baked and sold milk to the soldiers. The demand for milk grew to such an extent that Mr. Freeman had to buy another cow. Then a couple of companies from the Philippines were transferred to Fort Yates and he bought two more cows. Sometimes Mrs. Freeman's income from baking and selling milk amounted to \$90.00 a month. Mr. Freeman was earning \$75.00 per month, making a total of \$165.00 per month, which, considering they had no rent or taxes to pay and free coal and range for the cows, was very good.

During this time they did their trading with Carrigan at Fort Yates, or with Mr. Wilson at Winona (Emmons County, North Dakota). In 1903 he was transferred as carpenter in the civil service to Genoa, (Nance County) Nebraska. After his return from Nebraska he engaged in general farming.

During 1902 his eldest son Floyd attended school about 2 1/2 miles southwest of their home. Prior to this he had gone to school at Fort Yates. At this country school, a widow named Mrs. Sleasing (Freeman unsure of spelling) - *[Probably is correct spelling. Andrew Sleasing lived in same township, Wife Alta, Daughter Ada]* taught. She had a daughter who also attended. The McConville, Tracy, Bales, Hanley families and others sent their children to this school. The school was about 16 ft x 24 ft. It had six windows, three on each side. It had two doors, one outside door and one leading from the entry and cloak room into the schoolroom. The seats and desks were factory made, there was, of course, a blackboard, also a globe, but no maps or library. A large iron heater stood in the middle of the floor and wood hauled from the river was the most common fuel. Coal was also burned. The schoolhouse was built of lumber and is still used as a school, located at the same place.

Mr. Freeman never was a church member and very seldom attended. The same was true of his father. His mother and wife were members of the Methodist church and during their residence on the farm in Emmons County he sometimes accompanied his wife to the church at Dale (Emmons County), North Dakota. This church was about 20 x 30 and was constructed of lumber. It was already there when the Freeman's came to this country. It had a steeple, but no bell. It had about 6 windows and one door. Rev. Lemmery of Linton came occasionally to hold services.

All of the Scott family, including Mr. and Mrs. Samuel L. Mark (possibly Mauk), Frank, Alta and Nina with her husband Charlie Adzet (possibly Adzit or Adsit), came to Emmons County from Whittemore, Ia (Kossuth County, Iowa) and vicinity in the spring of 1900. The Tracy and McConville families had come long before that date. Mr. Cabbagerider only a few years before, and Mr. Knudsen and his wife came there about 1901. Mrs. Lutze did not arrive until about 1904.

Mr. Freeman was elected a delegate to a party caucus held at Linton about 1902. At this caucus Bill Pagel was nominated for sheriff and D. R. Streeter for the Senate.

During their residence at Fort Yates they often attended dances and balls. At one of these, a masquerade ball, Mrs. Freeman dressed as a flower girl. Mr. Freeman still has a couple of photographs showing Mrs. Freeman in her pretty costume.

Mr. Freeman recalls one severe snowstorm during his residence at Fort Yates in 1901. He was leaving the carpenter shop to go to dinner and the wind was fortunately at this back. The wind was very strong and blew the powdery snow about his face like flour so that he was unable to see his hand before his face. There was a large gate back of his house which was the last in the camp, and the gate led to the road leaving the camp. If he had gone through this gate he would inevitably have been lost in the storm, but fortunately he ran into a gate post and knew where he was. He knew he had already gone too far, so retraced his steps and found the house. The blizzard raged about 24 hours. Every house in the fort had 4-5 bushels of snow in it after the storm.

Leonard Jellema, Field Worker
Linton, N. Dak. Feb. 19, 1940

This document was transcribed in August 2003 and February 2015 by Michael Alden Peterson a great-grandnephew of Willis S. Freeman. A complete copy of the document was provided to him, with many thanks, by Ellen C. Woods, a member of the Historical Society in Emmons County.