

# History of Fort Yates

By  
FRANK  
FISKE

**N. B.**—The Fort Yates Commercial Club passed a resolution to have a short history of this interesting place compiled, and the committee appointed to perform this delicate and serious task is composed of Rev. Father Bernard, Hon. J. M. Carignan and Frank Fiske. Appearing in serial form in the Sioux County Pioneer, and then in book form it necessarily means that much thoughtful consideration be maintained throughout that in the end the work will not have been done in vain. With all the data and statements presented, it follows that some will be found false in the great crucible of common knowledge. But we are going ahead, gallantly and almost recklessly, feeling and trusting that when we are proven to be in the wrong the correction will not be made with resentment, and we will be thankful for any criticisms that may set us right.

**S**INCE the establishment of the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Agency and Military Post at Fort Yates, North Dakota in 1873, changes have occurred at this place with a degree of importance and rapidity that is almost unbelievable when viewed with the vision of the present year of 1917. During the intervening years a multitude of people have come here, tarried a while and moved away, and each person has left the stamp of his handiwork to more or less an extent. Not alone have these people made changes, but nature, herself, has been at work in a manner quite momentous for a locality that was once supposed to be far out of the world of affairs. And as the doings of nature, in an evolutionary state have always preceded the advent of man, we shall give her first consideration in this work.

Take for instance, the conduct of the Missouri river, on the west side of which, this place is located, and which stretches its mighty length for twenty miles north and south along here. It has been cutting up something prodigious ever since the first white men laid eyes on the grass-covered heights here, and probably long before. It no sooner accomplished the huge task of cutting away the yielding banks from one side of the valley back to solid, rock bluffs, when it starts in to cut them away from the other side. At the present time its course is nearly straight for a distance of fifteen miles, extending from the shore at Battle creek, nine miles north, to the foot of the bluff below Fireheart Butte, six miles south. It was not so in '73. At that time, when the big, black smokestacks of a wood-burning steamboat hove in sight coming up the river, she poked her nose around a heavily timbered point away over under the bluffs about two miles due south of the little town of Winona, which is directly opposite the Agency. A chain of small lakes may be seen there now, surrounded by a densely timbered bottom, this upper lake lying about where the channel of the river was then. This was called the "Lone Tree Landing," for the reason that the bluff shore was bare of timber, with the exception of just one tree. From here the boat crossed over into the foot of the bend and following it in a graceful curve came in under the plateau, on which the fort was built, and running along this shore, the remains of which still exist about 100 yards out, parallel with the edge of the table land, she landed about opposite the present location of the Carignan store. When the steamboat had discharged her consignment of freight and passengers, she pulled out from this shore a little above the Agency, and pointed her bow, with the big spars hanging slantwise, to the northeast. She crossed over to the foot of a bend on the east side, and when she finally passed from view, she was up under the old bluff shore about two miles straight north of Winona. Between this point and the place where she first showed up lay a fine, heavily timbered piece of bottomland, its western shore running along very near where the present Fort Yates shore lies. Therefore it may be seen that where the river now flows was at that time solid land, and it was a favorite camping place for the old time Sioux, especially the Indians of the Cannonball district, who then swore allegiance to the banner of Chief Two Bear, peace be to his ashes. A woodyard was kept there by the late Andy Marsh, a pioneer of the '50's, and many a cord of cottonwood he sold to the passing steamboats at all hours of the day or night. The river cut this whole bottom away and also the bend south of the Post, and moved over to the old Winona shore, and as the years passed a wide bottom was built up on the west side opposite the post on which the timber grew rapidly. Each year the steamboats were obliged to make their landings farther and farther down along the Fort Yates bluff, while this was going on, and where the remains of their "dead men" may still be seen. The last landing place was nearly a mile below the One Mile creek, where there is a slough now. Then the boats began landing out opposite the Agency again, on the new bottom. This was in the 90's, and since then the river has been industriously trying to work its way back to the old channel, and at the present rate of cutting it will be but a year or two until the boats will be putting off freight below the Carignan store again, while on the Winona side there is a piece of new land a mile wide covered with flourishing young cottonwoods. So it goes. The old bends on the west side of the river, north and south of the post were thickly timbered, from which logs were obtained for the buildings, and a government saw mill stood on the edge of the hill a short distance south of where the Agency hospital now stands. Many a deal of cottonwood lumber was cut here for construction purposes.

Many tales we hear of those early days, the truth of which must be left to the reader. Each year the river comes up about ten feet with the "June rise," and it has been said that one summer the steamboats were enabled to run around to the west of Proposal Hill, the big butte back of the Agency, which means that the water came up about 50 feet. The late Paddy Finn, who was loved by all the old timers, is credited with having said that when he first struck the country, the picturesque Fireheart Butte, that rises in majestic solitude on the hills to the south, was but a mole hill, and that the mighty Missouri was but a babbling brook. Obviously these statements were somewhat exaggerated, and no one is asked to believe them. However, there are two peculiar circumstances, the truth of which is vouched for by all reliable old timers, and that is that up until 1885 the first creek below town, known as the One Mile, was merely a gentle depression in the general lay of the land, hardly noticeable to one as he rode over it. Today we find it to be widened and deepened to a degree that would earn for it the title of a river in an older country. The apparent reason for this is that its waters used to sink into the ground out by the foot hills, and through the accumulation of detritus they have been diverted. And there is the large two-story Halsey residence, down on the north bank of Four Mile creek. Not longer than 20 years ago, this could be seen fully and plainly from the post grounds, while now it is completely hidden from view across the grass covered plain. We offer the explanation that the high winds have gradually built up the ground at some intervening point, and leave it to geologists to confirm.

Another thing is the great amount of enterprise displayed in the matter of erecting fences. Not a great number of years ago, one of your committee was out on the foot hills, three miles west of town, riding a stumbling old mule, who had a weakness for falling head-over-heels at least three times while being induced to leave the stable. He was called "Tug," because you had to tug on the reins so much in order to keep him headed for the open. However, on this particular occasion, he took it into his long-eared head to come right home. Taking the bit in his pearly teeth, he raced across the flat at a rate of speed that caused the rider no little anxiety for the time being, though the saddle had a very staunch pommel for hanging on purposes. But without once stumbling or falling a-slant a prairie dog hole, he tore along until he dashed through the Post and into his beloved barn below the hill. This simply could not happen today, for too many fences bar the way, and most of that flat is under cultivation.

(Continued Next Week)