

IRISH AMERICAN NEWS  
Chicago September 2011



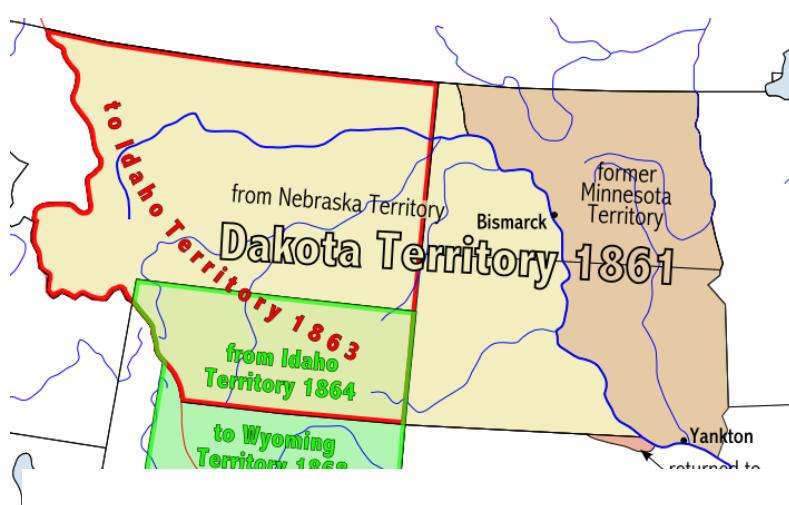
# Irish Colony, Immigrants & Orphan Trains from Boston to Yankton, Dakota Territorial Capital 1861- 1883, On its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Sketch of author, Robert F. Lyons

## Irish Community Proposed, Yankton, Dakota Territory by Corkman, 1869

THE FIRST IRISH immigrants were drawn to Yankton, capital of Dakota Territory, in 1869 by John Pope Hodnett of Chicago, a native Irishman from Cork who had been appointed assessor of internal revenue for Dakota Territory by President Ulysses S. Grant. Mr. Hodnett worked heartily to build up and develop Dakota Territory and to encourage the tide of immigration which was flowing out from the Eastern states. He had a dream to establish an Irish colony in Yankton, the territorial capital. Hodnett, a thirty year old young man from Youghal, County Cork, had been a leader of a political element known as Irish Republicans, the Fenian Brotherhood. Along with many Irishmen after their service in the American Civil War, he joined the

Fenians and was dedicated to the establishment of an independent Irish Republic finally emancipated from England.



George Kingsbury, in his monumental History of Dakota Territory. South Dakota: Its History and Its People, credits this new Irish republican organization with becoming a weighty

voice in the arena of politics in America and the voice was being uttered in distinct tones and in unambiguous language by hundreds of eloquent Irish republicans: "On the free soil of the West that had never been tainted by the footprints of a slave, Irish republicanism had its birth". (George W. Kingsbury, History of Dakota Territory, Vol. 1, Chicago. S. J. Clarke Publishing Company 1915.

During the first summer of his residence, April, 1869, Hodnett took up a claim about seven miles north of the city of Yankton on a beautiful tract of prairie where there happened to be a small body of water within its boundaries to which he gave the name *Lake Lalla Rookh* (an 1817 oriental romance poem by popular Irish songwriter, Thomas Moore). In the exuberance of his fancy, this transplanted Cork man arrayed his new possessions in the apparel of romance, clothing them with beautiful groves, waving grain fields, and brilliant gardens in his promotional pitch. Hodnett declared of his proposed Irish colony, in the lines of Thomas Moore's song that:

"There is not in this wide world a valley so sweet  
As the vale in whose bosom the bright waters meet;  
O, the last rays of feeling and life must depart.  
Ere the bloom of that valley shall fade from my heart."

Hodnett's sometimes flowery imagery of oratory combined with his enthusiasm for the delights of Dakota Territory elicited the interest of many successful Irish men in New York, Chicago and Virginia who embraced Hodnett's avowed intention to make fine improvements by breaking the sod, sinking wells, planting groves and erecting buildings. In his History of Dakota Territory, George Kingsbury records that filings were made in absentia for: Col. John M. Collins, provost marshal of Alexandria, Virginia, William Hodnett, Esq., A.B.M., L.I., D., G. W. Babcock, Clothier, New York, John Griffe Hallowin, merchant, New York, Thos. H. Keefe of the firm of C.B. Farrell, Archibald Craig, Esq., Brooklyn, and Daniel Destere Farrell and James Thompson, Chicago. (George W. Kingsbury, History of Dakota Territory, Vol. 1, Chicago. S. J. Clarke Publishing Company 1915.)

The grand plan for the Irish colony on *Lake Lalla Rookh*, failed to mature; the Hodnett claim was abandoned, the scheme collapsed. But an Irish settlement did develop at Walshtown near Mission Hill a decade later.



**Walshtown Cemetery, Yankton County, South Dakota**

#### **Irish Orphans from Boston to Yankton, Dakota Territory, 1883**

In 1880, Irish born Father George Sheehan organized St. Brigid's parish in Walshtown, several miles north of Yankton. Bishop Martin Marty, a Benedictine missionary from Switzerland, the "Apostle to the Sioux", laid the cornerstone for the church in 1881. Sheehan, following his ordination was assigned to Sacred Heart Church in Yankton where he organized parishes at nearby communities: Mayfield, Lodi, Wakonda, Beresford, Clear Lake, White and Davis, all with growing congregations of newly arrived Irish pioneers.

Father Sheehan also organized so-called orphan trains to bring Irish children from Boston to be placed with Irish Catholic farm families in Yankton and southeastern Dakota Territory. A dispatch in the Yankton Daily Press and Dakotian, September 8, 1883 reported:

"Rev. Father Sheehan arrived last evening from Chicago where he went to meet a delegation of orphan boys and girls sent out west by the Home for Destitute Catholic children in Boston...forty boys and girls whose ages range from four to fourteen years, but dropped ten of them at Vermillion, the remainder being brought to Yankton. It is the intention to bind these children out to respectable and responsible families until they are twenty-one years of age [and] to provide them homes and rescue them from vice and sin, which is usually the lot of destitute children in large cities. Father Sheehan will go east again in about six weeks and return with sixty more children".

A week earlier,, the same local newspaper, editorialized on the virtues of Father Sheehan's work to place orphans with farm families in Yankton County on September 1, 1883:

"Rev. Father Sheehan of Walshtown takes charge of another large band of children from the Orphans Home in Boston at Union depot of Illinois Central Railroad....Bringing along twenty-seven boys and girls to Yankton...to be met by members of the reverend gentleman's congregation [where] they will be distributed amongst those who have already applied for their adoption....The exertions of this worthy clergyman in thus providing homes for the forlorn and destitute is deserving of much praise. He acts only through pure motives of charity in their regard".

Father Sheehan worked directly with John Duggan, the able superintendent of the Orphan's Home in Boston to bring the children to Yankton and Dakota Territory. The orphan train movement had originated in Boston in 1850 where the first orphan train took 30 waifs to foster homes in New Hampshire and Vermont. Few children were full orphans. Some had one or both parents living but they could not supply the needs of the child. This Boston model of child-placing was adopted in 1852 by Rev. Charles Loring Brace, founder of the New York Children's Aid Society in 1852. Brace had witnessed abused, abandoned, neglected, or runaway children in the streets of New York City who became street Arabs sent out to beg for money, sell newspapers and matches in the streets. Brace stated his view on out-placement of these children to willing host families in an article in Harper's New Monthly Magazine titled: The Little Laborers of New York, August, 1873, p. 330: "In every American community, especially in a Western one, there are many spare places at the table of life. They have enough for themselves and the stranger too."

The orphan trains from Boston and New York transported over 250,000 children between 1854 and 1929 mostly to farm families in the Midwestern states and to towns in western states, as well as Canada and Mexico. The railroad networks were expanding in the Midwest in the early 1850's. The railroad time table of the CHICAGO, MILWAUKEE & ST. PAUL ROAD published in the daily Yankton Press and Dakotian September 8, 1883 shows the regularity of daily trains both east and west. The train from the East arrived in Yankton at 4:28pm each day, Sundays excepted. The schedule noted: "Trains run on Minneapolis time, which is twenty minutes faster than Yankton time."

The experience of riding the orphan trains is captured by folk-singer Utah Phillips. After speaking with some adult survivors of their childhood journey on the orphan train, "I asked them if there was an orphan train song," Phillips explained. "They said they'd never heard one." He then wrote The Orphan Train, the story of probably the largest migration of children in human history:

“Once I had a darling mother, though I can't recall her name  
 I had a baby brother who I'll never see again.  
 For the Children's Home is sending us out on the Orphan Train  
 To try to find someone to take us in.

Chorus: Take us in; we have rode the Orphan Train  
 Take us in, we need a home, we need a name  
 Take us in; oh won't you be our kin  
 We are looking for someone to take us in.

I have stolen from the poor box, I've begged the city streets  
 I've swabbed the bars and poolrooms for a little bite to eat  
 In my daddy's old green jacket and these rags upon my feet  
 I've been looking for someone to take me in

The Children's Home they gathered us, me and all the rest  
 They taught us to sit quietly until the food was blest  
 Then they put us on the Orphan Train and sent us way out West  
 To try to find someone to take us in.

The farmers and their families they came from miles around  
 We lined up on the platform of the station in each town  
 And one by one we parted like some living lost-and-found  
 And one by one we all were taken in

Now there's many a fine doctor or a teacher in your school  
 There's many a good preacher who can teach the Golden Rule  
 Who started out an orphan sleeping in the freezing rain  
 Whose life began out on the Orphan Train”  
 (Utah Phillips, Orphan Train)



**55 Foundlings Sent West to Minnesota & Dakota**  
**From New York Foundling Hospital at Grand Central Terminal**  
 Photo: New York Times, September 28, 1915

#### **New York Foundlings Sent West to Minnesota & Dakota, 1915**

A triple headline in the New York Times declares: **55 FOUNDLINGS SENT WEST: Girls in Demand by Those Who Will Give Them Homes. Children ready to be sent West to Minnesota & Dakotas.**, (New York Times, September 28, 1915).

The 55 children from New York Foundling Hospital departed from New York Grand Central Terminal in a private car accompanied by four nurses and two Catholic Sisters and

beds and food enough for one day. They transfer at Union Station in Chicago to the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Road for the west where, "The babies are going to homes in Minnesota and the Dakotas. There they will grow up without knowing that they are not the own children of their foster-parents. After three years they may be legally adopted."

The experience of an orphan train rider to Dakota Territory is compellingly chronicled in a fictionalized biography, *To Dakota and Back: The Story of an Orphan Train Rider* by Sr. Judith Kappenhham (Lulu, 2010). She writes of her maternal grandfather, John Donahue, born in South Boston, Massachusetts who lived in the Home for Catholic Destitute Orphans in Boston. In the mid 1850, before he was even 10 years old, John Donahue and his brother, Tom, were put on a train by the Catholic orphanage and sent to Worthern, Dakota Territory in Hanson County, south of Mitchell, S.D. to live a life of indentured servitude. John and his brother were indentured to related Irish families on separate farms, where they worked until age 21. Their younger sister was left behind, and never seen again. Donahue, an avid reader with sparse education, became a teacher, sold real estate and insurance, and eventually bought a newspaper in Ethan, S.D. In later years, he returned to live in Massachusetts, but his father never made any contact with his children. The website, Ancestry.com has an active Orphan Trains Family History & Genealogy Message Board for people researching their ancestors who rode the orphan trains to South Dakota and anywhere else in the United States.

### **Irish Immigration Convention, Dakota Territory Urges Irish to Come West 1872**

Walshtown, Yankton County, was but one of many Irish communities that developed in South Dakota where Irish immigrants, fleeing famine and oppression, responded to the dream of land and opportunity and freedom. David Kemp, in his book, *The Irish in Dakota*, lists 116 Irish settlements in Dakota Territory from 1854-1889. In 1872, an Irish Immigration Convention was organized in Vermillion, Dakota Territory by "public spirited sons of the Green Isle resident in Yankton, Clay and Union Counties [who] devised a plan to encourage the Irish located in the densely populated districts of the East....to Make Their Homes in the new Northwest, Dakota Preferred". John Stanage, Yankton farmer, was chairman of the convention. His pioneering parents were from Co Cavan, Ireland and he had the distinction of being the first white child born in Dakota Territory in 1854. Delegations from every organized county in Dakota Territory (twelve) and from Northwestern Iowa and Northwestern Nebraska were in attendance. The Irish Immigration Convention Committee on Resolutions reported as follows:

- Whereas, It has pleased God that the pressure of bad government, and the force of circumstances and of choice, has transplanted one-half of the Irish race from their own soil to this free land;
- And Whereas. Many of our brother Irishmen, through poverty, negligence and apathy, have located in the densely populated districts of the East, where if they remain, many of them must remain poor, indigent, and subject to the contaminating influences of city life;
- And Whereas, Our experience has taught us that life in the West is conducive to the independence, wealth, dignity, health, honor and purity of Irishmen and their families;

#### **Wherefore, be it resolved:**

1. First, That we earnestly invite and beseech our people in Ireland, Canada and the East to seek new homes in this free, independent, healthy and productive land;
2. Second, That we appeal to our wealthy, powerful and educated countrymen in the East to foster, promote and encourage Irish emigration to the Northwest;
3. Third. That we, the Irish-American and cosmopolitan citizens of this convention, pledge our experience, sympathy and aid to such of them as may come.

**WE**, the Committee on Experience and Addresses, recommend that the chairman call upon the citizens of this convention, residents of the Northwest, to write their individual experience in the West, and place it in comparison with the East, and that such experience be published for the information of emigrants (George W. Kingsbury, History of Dakota Territory, Vol. 1, Chicago. S. J. Clarke Publishing Company 1915.)

### **Irish Pioneers Imprint on Yankton and State of South Dakota**

The Irish continued to respond to the call to the West and joined thousands of others to find their way to Yankton and Dakota Territory so that by the early 1880s, the Yankton Press and Dakotian reported that, "Prairie schooners continue to pass through our city daily en route to Douglas and Charles Mix counties. In many cases, herds of cattle accompany the immigrants" (Yankton Press and Dakotian, September 8, 1883).

The Irish settlers and their descendants rapidly became involved in the civic and political life of the new State of South Dakota. My great uncle, Richard F. Lyons, born 1848, the son of Irish immigrants from County Waterford, led a wagon train of 44 Irish settlers from Iowa to Dakota Territory in the 1880s. My grandfather William F. Lyons, born in Chicago, joined his older brother with others on this journey West and pioneered at Lake Badus near Madison, South Dakota and eventually homesteaded in Wagner. Richard Lyons organized the State Democratic Party and was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention which created the two Dakotas in 1889. He later became the mayor of Vermillion, S.D. where he had moved so that all of his children might get a University education.

My grandfather, James A. Donohoe, born 1856, the son of Irish immigrants from County West Meath with his wife, Mary Burns, daughter of immigrants from Cork, moved his family from a prosperous Irish farming community in Johnson County, Iowa to Yankton, South Dakota in 1911 because of "good farmland, a Catholic Church and a Knights of Columbus Council" (Robert F. Lyons, A remembrance on occasion of 100th anniversary of Marty Council of the Knights of Columbus Sacred Heart Parish, Yankton, Yankton Press & Dakotan, June 11, 2011). He rapidly became a successful dairy farmer, prominent business man and civic promoter. Mr. Donohoe subscribed to the views of Thomas Jefferson that, "if we're going to have a successful democratic society, we have to have a well educated and healthy citizenry". He sent his three sons and three daughters on to academies and colleges of higher education.

Frank Byrne, born 1858, the son of Irish immigrants, rose from homesteader in Sioux Falls, to state senator, lieutenant governor and two terms as the eighth governor of the State of South Dakota, 1913-1917.

An anonymous pioneer woman wrote in her diary one wintry day in Dakota's Red River Valley (North Dakota);

"When God made man  
He seemed to think it best  
To make him in the East  
And let him travel West."

This widely quoted verse resonated with the variety of new immigrants pouring into Dakota Territory during the 2nd half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: German, Norwegian, Irish, Czech, Danish, English, Swedish, Dutch, French, Polish, Italian, Scottish and Russian. It resonated deeply with thousands of Irish pioneers whose circumstances were aptly described by the Dakota Territory Irish immigration Convention in 1872:

"It has pleased God that the pressure of bad government, and the force of circumstances and of choice, has transplanted one-half of the Irish race from their own soil to this free land. ...Our experience has taught us that life

in the West is conducive to the independence, wealth, dignity, health, honor and purity of Irishmen and their families." (George W. Kingsbury, *History of Dakota Territory*, Vol. 1, Chicago. S. J. Clarke Publishing Co. 1915. )

John Pope Hodnett's vision for an Irish community in Yankton County evaporated, but he performed valiant service by publicizing for prospective parties the opportunities available in Dakota Territory. It may not have been "...the vale in whose bosom the bright waters meet", but for Irish immigrants and their descendants, Yankton County and Southeastern Dakota Territory proved to be a fertile landscape in which they might establish their growing families and farms and build businesses and communities.

Dr. Carmel Halton, University College Cork, Ireland, in a text message to the author on August 29, 2011 wrote: "These are stories of great sadness, resilience, success and vindication. We must celebrate our ancestors and their fight for freedom and survival. I sit in awe and wonderment when reading stories of lives full of courage and determination. In today's Ireland we badly need people in positions of leadership who have vision and practicality and above all else, integrity and no guile. In these current times of world recession, with many stories of personal struggle and discouragement, Brendan Kennelly's poem 'Begin' has particular significance:

Though we live in a world that dreams of ending  
 that always seems about to give in  
 something that will not acknowledge conclusion  
 insists that we forever begin."

This 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of Yankton, the capital of Dakota Territory (1861-1883) provides the occasion to review the energy and odyssey of our pioneer Irish ancestors who responded to the call to come West. They arrived in this new land and lived, not as victims of the oppression they had fled, but as confident and contributing citizens who saw that their own fulfillment was in helping to build this country, its schools, farms and businesses and social services and music halls. They would acknowledge no conclusion to their journey to the West, but saw a forever beginning. The Irish imprint remains strong and their legacy visible in Yankton and the State of South Dakota. It is a dream of beginnings, fulfilled.

**Robert F. Lyons**, originally from Yankton, South Dakota, lives in New England where he teaches Irish Studies at the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, University of Southern Maine. He has taught in lifelong learning programs for the past fifteen years at Dartmouth College, University College, Cork, Ireland, and Tufts University. His Irish ancestors from counties Waterford and West Meath pioneered in South Dakota. His published works include: **FIRST DAKOTANS: The Lyons Experience** by Thomas D. Lyons (1991), an edited collection of twenty-two essays about life in South Dakota which first appeared in *Commonweal* (1940-1947) describe the Lyons' family experiences from the time when his father led a wagon train of 44 Irish immigrants in 1880s from Iowa to Lake Badus, Dakota Territory and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **SOURCES:**

The author wishes to acknowledge that much of the material for this story was drawn from George W. Kingsbury's monumental *History of Dakota Territory. South Dakota: Its History and Its People. Vol. 1* (Chicago. S. J. Clarke Publishing Company 1915). The Yankton Community Library provided invaluable research assistance by providing copies of original Yankton Press & Dakotian (original spelling of Dakotan) articles on Rev. George Sheehan and the 'orphan trains' to Yankton 1881 and other related material.