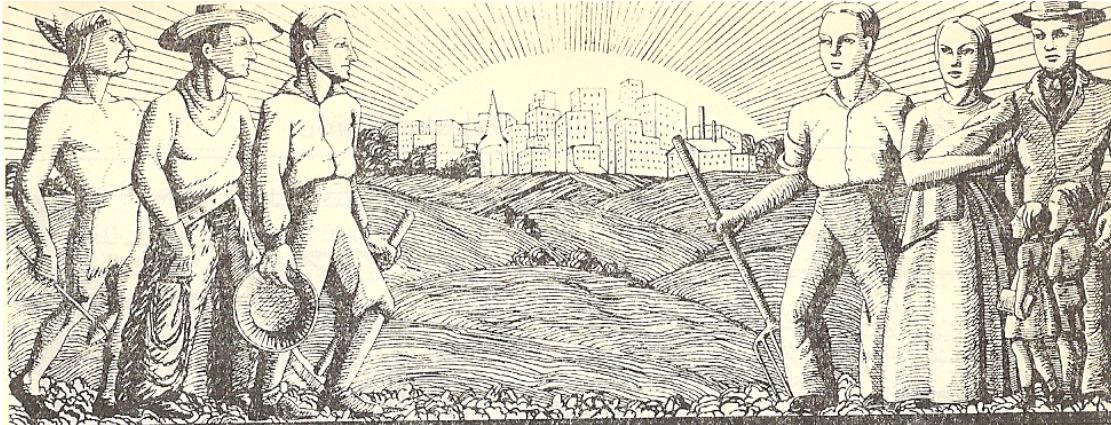


# A South Dakota Guide

By South Dakota Federal Writers Project 1938



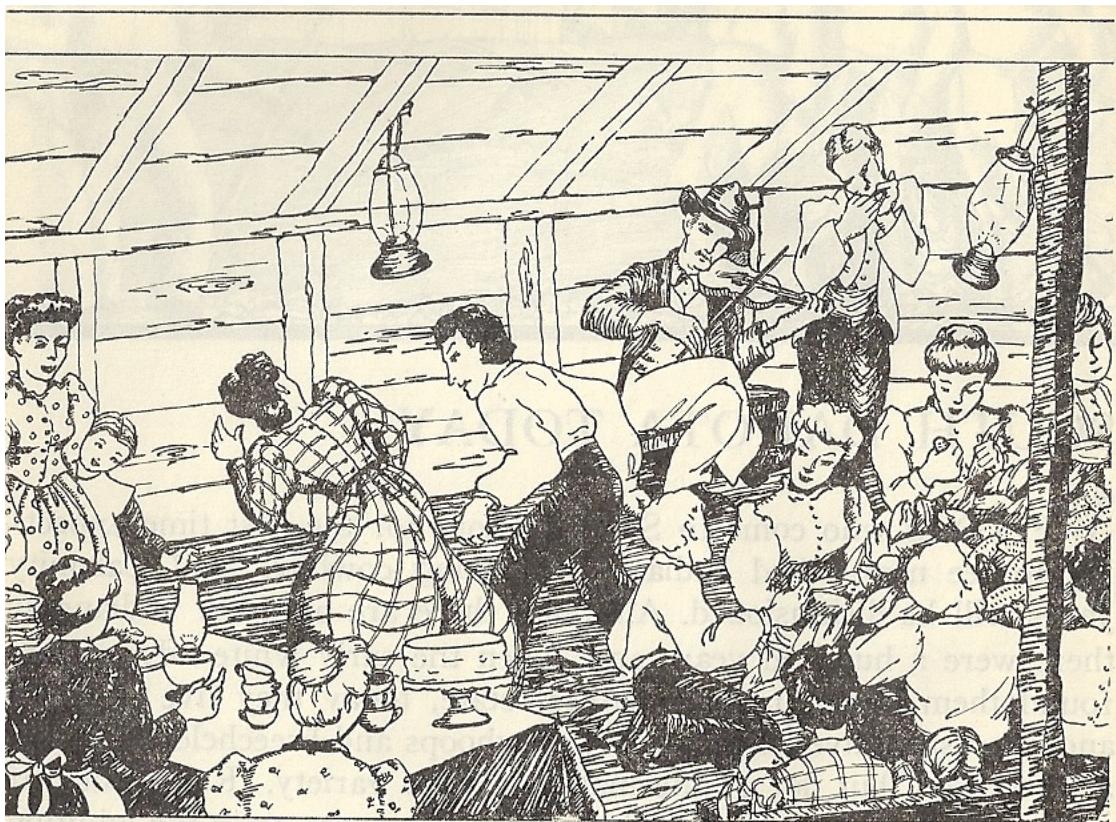
## SOUTH DAKOTA TODAY

**V**ISITORS who come to South Dakota for the first time expecting to see near-naked Indians, gun-toting cowboys, and Calamity Janes will be disillusioned. Although there are as many Indians as there were a hundred years ago, when the early white adventurers found them living in their natural state, today they live peaceful and interesting lives, foreign to war whoops and breechclouts. There are cowboys, but not of the motion picture variety. Recurrence of such early hardships as drought and grasshoppers, with the addition of a new one, the dust storm, for a time arrested prosperity and progress, but it failed to discourage the tenacious people.

To know whence the South Dakotans came, and why, is to begin to understand them. When the land west of Minnesota Dakota Territory until 1889 was thrown open to homestead settlement, school teachers, lawyers, farmers, merchants, and bright-eyed youths turned to the new country to stake their claims, their hopes, their lives. From eastern cities and long-established communities, from Yankee and old frontier families, these adventuring homesteaders brought with them to the Middle Border a deep-set cultural tradition and training, coupled with a determination to achieve economic independence.

The serious task of making a living in the undeveloped country occupied the minds and hands of its people, leaving little time for the enjoyment of esthetic pursuits. The soil was turned by men dripping sweat; store counters were worn smooth by calloused hands. In young South Dakota there were no operas, no symphonies, no dramas. When the corn was picked and the earth left to sleep for the winter, father unpacked his fiddle and uncle his harmonica, mother baked a cake and the children "bugged" to the neighbors with invitations--a husking bee tonight. To lively

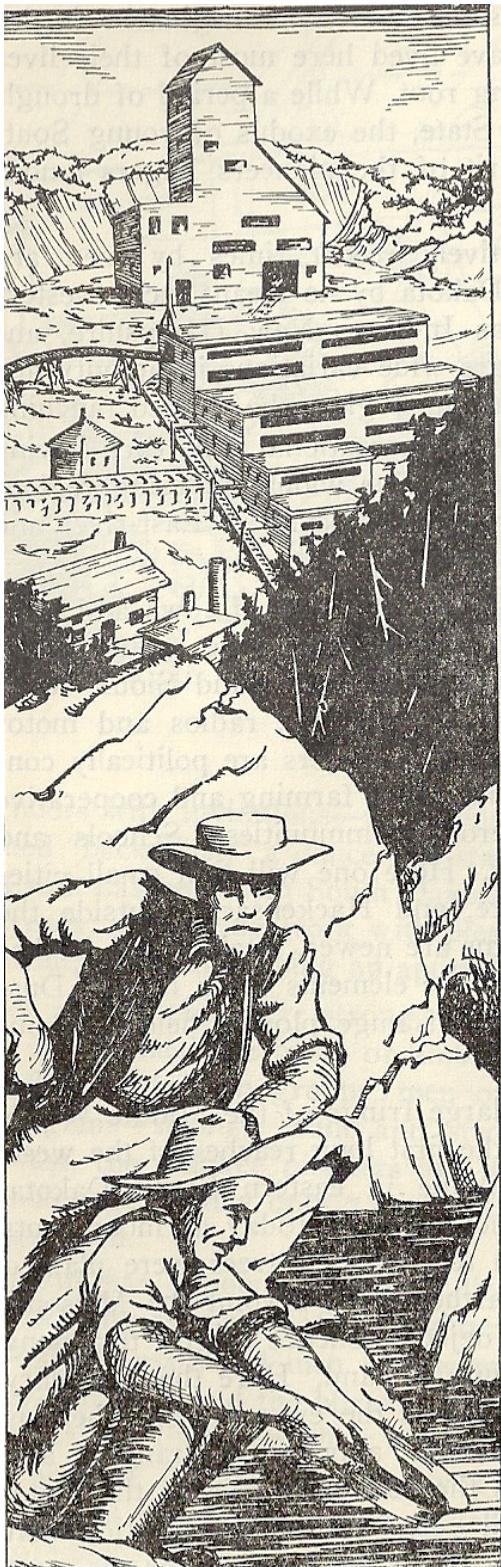
tunes learned "back East," a dance was started and the corn was husked. And so it has been with South Dakotans through the recent pioneering years: combining work with pleasure, making their own entertainment, and still keeping an appreciation of the finer arts.



**THE HUSKING BEE**

Not always physically strong, these homesteaders were mentally alert and formed the bases of ambitious communities. Then came an influx of foreign groups, men of the soil--Germans, Swedes, Norwegians strongly built and strong of will. The assimilation was fast, the Yankee pioneers and foreigners uniting in business and marriage. Today only 7 per cent of the State's population is foreign born.

All this has happened within a lifetime. Many of that famous homesteading cavalcade of the eighties are still living. They are the grey-haired weathered men and women who tell strangers of the county-seat fight and the blizzard of 1888. They love to recall their hardships, yet they keep their sons at home to run the farm or the store because "we've had mighty good crops, and they'll come again." That second generation makes the State of today. Whether in professions, business, politics, or the kitchen, South Dakotans want it known that their parents or themselves originated farther east, but that they themselves have lived here most of their lives. Now the third generation is taking root. While a period of drought has retarded immigration to



the State, the exodus of young South Dakotans is also slight. The spirit of the pioneers lingers among them.

Although settled in comparatively recent times by men and women of eastern origin, South Dakota by no means lacks western color. In this State, as large as Indiana, New Hampshire, and South Carolina combined, there are wide variations in activity and scene. There is the broad, flat farming region, the rugged ranching country, the mountainous mining and recreational area, each having its own type of citizenry and culture. The widely differing regions divided by the Missouri River are known locally as East-river and West-river.

The eastern half of the State is a continuation of Iowa and Minnesota farm land, with the latter's recreational lake region duplicated in the northeastern section. In the James and Sioux River Valleys, the barns are large and well-stocked; radios and motor cars are as common as plows; and their owners are politically conservative and deeply religious. Diversified farming and cooperative societies have made for prosperous communities. Schools and churches are large and numerous. Here one will find small cities not unlike Oshkosh, Terre Haute, and Hackensack. Outside the long, narrow valley-lands, the farms are newer, smaller, and farther apart; the people are busy fighting the elements for a living. Dust storms raised havoc in this region of huge plowed fields without windbreaks.

Across the Missouri River the large fringe of the Middle West's rich farming region merges into the first long reaches of the western cattle and mining empire. While in eastern South Dakota, groves of trees around the farmhouses stand today as monuments to the homestead period in which ten acres of trees were planted and nursed to secure the land, farther west, beyond the

Missouri River, abandoned shacks stand in dejected silence to give testimony of over-optimism and the unwise use of land. Here the legendary "wide open spaces" roll away as far as the eye can see. There is something about the vast expanse that appeals to strangers and holds the scattered inhabitants. In the northwest part of the State, the original pioneer ranchers still color the homestead tide that swept over the country in 1909 and 1910 and receded for the most part in the years following. Today "honyock," or farming homesteader, and old-timer live peaceably side by side, and each has learned much from the other. The old-timer taught his neighbor the art of stock raising on the range, and the honyock convinced the old-timer that some forage crops could be raised and that it was not good economics to ship out a carload of cows and ship in a carload of condensed milk.

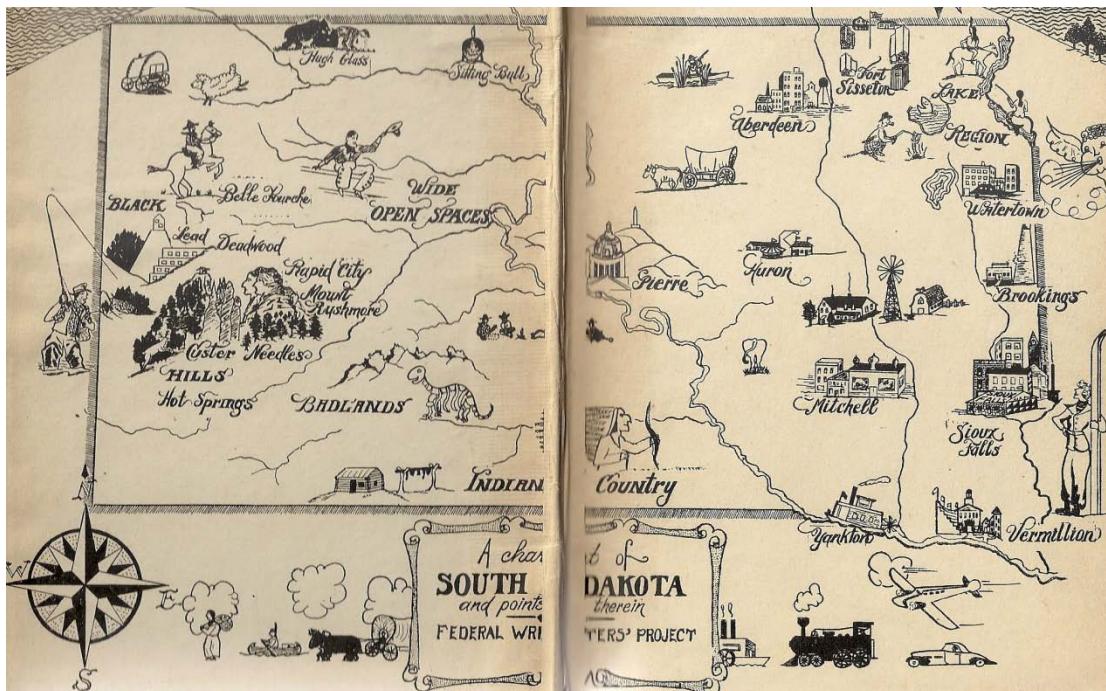
Although largely unfit for farming this region is being utilized for ranching with further potentialities undeveloped. In this range country inland prairie towns still retain their hitching posts and general stores.

### **WHERE OLD AND NEW MEET**

Farther on in the Black Hills a current mining boom suggestive of the gold rush of 1876 gives an increased prosperity to towns clinging like swallow's nests to the mountainsides. The Black Hills people, strangely world-wise though isolated, are in the midst of an artistic, scientific, and industrial awakening. To the visitor, the general knowledge of these native South Dakotans, so far removed from cities and culture, is puzzling. The explanation lies in the fact that, with spasmodic discoveries of valuable minerals, the Hills like a magnetized needle attract financiers, engineers, prospectors, gamblers, and entertainers from the world at large. Artists, writers, and sculptors come here for the color; scientists come to study the secrets of earth and air. From contacts with the famous and notorious, idealist and realist, great and near-great, these people have absorbed a cosmopolitan atmosphere. Whether in new tweeds or ragged packet, the man who is confronted by a visitor will probably be a composite of many men who have come this way before. He may seem at first a merchant, a rancher, or a prospector, then a woodsman or hunter; as the day wears on he may reflect the artist who stopped off the previous year to paint wild animal life, or the paleontologist who came to track down a triceratops. Next summer he may have also the characteristics of his recent visitor.

Throughout South Dakota, a stranger will notice in the cities and along the highways a human familiarity like that of a small village. On the streets the resident speaks to nearly everyone, and calls by their first names half of those he meets. Visitors will often find themselves being greeted on the street by natives with whom they have had only the most casual contact. South Dakotans pride themselves on the number of their acquaintances over the State. While the transition from the "firsts" to the modern scene is reflected in nearly every town and city, it is

more clearly marked in the West-river region. There an unpainted, frame, false-front store with its board sidewalk and porch stands alongside another building of brick, steel and concrete; wide-brimmed, tent-shaped hats and high-heeled boots are worn with cravats of Park Avenue style; grizzled prospectors pick the earth in the shadow of million-dollar gold mine shafts.



Culture, in the urban sense, has had to wait on the unhurried assimilation of external elements impinging on a society essentially pioneer in character. When Hamlin Garland wrote of the endless drudgery and loneliness of life on the prairie in "Main Traveled Roads" and "A Son of the Middle Border," his homesteading neighbors would have nothing to do with him or his books. It was fifty years before he was accepted as a native son. Meanwhile, South Dakota furnished settings and characters for many novels, among them Rolvaag's "Giants in the Earth," Stewart Edward White's "Gold" and "Claim Jumpers," and Rose Wilder Lane's "Let the Hurricane Roar." Today there is a serious effort to acquire culture. Farm families meet weekly in rural schools to discuss new books furnished by the State's free lending library; villages have active literary societies and imported lecturers; people in cities turn out en masse to band and orchestral concerts, to local and road-show dramas, operas and art exhibits. In nearly every town are libraries and historical museums, in which are proudly exhibited collections of Indian relics and those of pioneer days.

South Dakota has been, and still is, a pioneer State. \*\*\*\*\*