

# Irish Colony • Immigrants • Orphan Trains

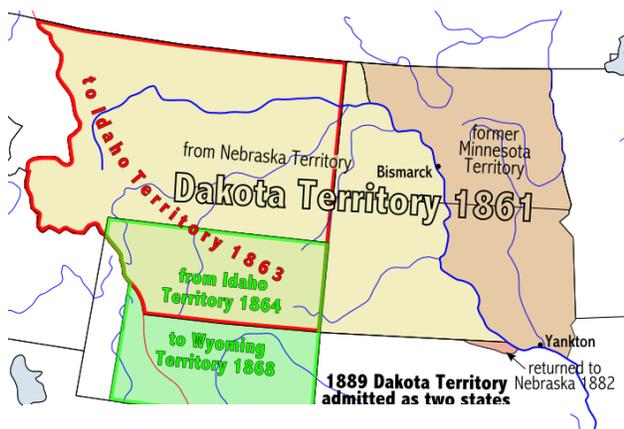
## Yankton • On Occasion of 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Dakota Territorial Capital • 1861-1883

- **Vision of Irish Community in Yankton by Corkman 1869**
- **Irish Immigration Convention - Vermillion 1872**
- **Walshtown established by Irish born Father Sheehan 1881**
- **Irish Orphan Trains: Boston to Yankton 1883**
- ***Song of the Orphan Train***

By Robert F. Lyons

**T**he first Irish immigrants were drawn to Yankton 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 Civil War, he joined the Fenians and was dedicated to the establishment of an independent Irish Republic finally emancipated from England.



Yankton, Territorial Capital 1861-1883

George Kingsbury, in his *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*".

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. Regarding the lake, 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. (*Sung by John McCormack*).

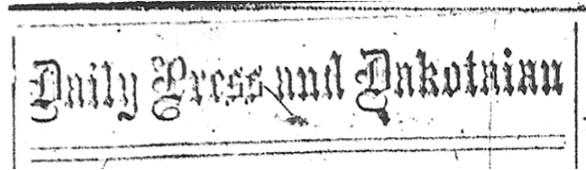
Hodnett's sometimes flowery imagery of oratory combined with his enthusiasm for the delights of Dakota Territory elicited the interest of many successful Irish men in New York, Chicago and Virginia who embraced Hodnett's avowed intention to make fine improvements by breaking the sod, sinking wells, planting groves and erecting buildings. Kingsbury records in his *History of Dakota Territory* 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 Griffie 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. 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 Catholic Cemetery, Yankton County- Graves**

St. Brigid's (also 'Bridget') parish in Walshtown was organized in 1880 by Irish born Father George Sheehan. Bishop Martin Marty, O.S.B., laid the cornerstone for the church in 1881. Sheehan, a newly ordained priest, also organized parishes at Mayfield (*St. Kyran's later combined with St. Bridget into St. Columba's Church of Mayfield in 1902*), Lodi, Wakonda, Beresford, Clear Lake, White and Davis. Stationed in Yankton where Bishop Marty also resided. A [First Communion Photo](#) c. 1890 suggests a vibrant St. Brigid's Parish.

Father Sheehan 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 [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, September 1, 1883, the same [Daily Press and Dakotian](#) editorialized:

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.

Rev. Charles Loring Brace, founder of the New York Children's Aid Society in 1852, imitated the Boston child-placing method. He 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 and sell newspapers and matches in the streets. Brace wrote: *"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."*

**Daily Press and Dakotian**

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1883.

**RAILROAD TIME TABLE.**

CHICAGO, MILWAUKEE & ST. PAUL ROAD

Trains leave and arrive as follows:

Regular passenger leaves Yankton for the east at 8:45 a. m. each day, Sundays excepted, and arrives at Yankton at 4:28 p. m. each day, Sundays excepted.

The east bound train reaches Gayville at 9:17 a. m., Meckling at 9:34 a. m., Vermillion at 9:58 a. m., Burbank at 10:14 a. m., Elk Point at 10:37 a. m., Jefferson at 11:10 a. m., McCook at 11:23 a. m. and Sioux City at 11:45 a. m.

The regular passenger train leaves Sioux City for the west, Sundays excepted, at 1:35 p. m., McCook at 1:57 p. m., Jefferson at 2:10 p. m., Elk Point at 2:30 p. m., Burbank at 2:59 p. m., Vermillion at 3:15 p. m., Meckling at 3:39 p. m., Gayville at 3:56 p. m. and arrives at Yankton at 4:28 p. m.

The west bound train leaves Yankton Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 4:45 p. m.; Utica at 5:13 p. m.; Lesterville at 5:40 p. m.; arrives at Scotland at 6:20 p. m.

The train from the west leaves Scotland Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays at 6:00 a. m.; Lesterville at 6:40 a. m.; Utica at 7:07 a. m.; arrives at Yankton at 7:35 a. m.

Trains run on Minneapolis time, which is twenty minutes faster than Yankton time.

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 P&D shows the regularity of trains both east and west. The train from Sioux City arrives in Yankton at 4:28pm, except Sundays. The schedule notes: **"Trains run on Minneapolis time, which is twenty minutes faster than Yankton time."**

The **Orphan Train** by Utah Phillips narrates the story of 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.

cho: **T**ake 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.



**The Journey of Andrew Burke** by John Manesis poignantly captures the experience of these transported young children. The poem describes the journey of young Andrew Burke whose mother had died and who was abandoned by his father when he was four. At age nine, he was shipped out on the orphan train to Indiana by the New York Children's

Aid Society in 1859. In this excerpt, Andrew, standing on the platform of a small train station in the Midwest, reveals his thoughts and apprehensions.

There we stood in a strange place,  
our hands and faces scrubbed,  
dressed in our best clothes  
and ready to be reviewed.  
The farmers crowded around  
and scrutinized each of us,  
a few of them even reaching out  
to squeeze a shoulder or arm  
in order to see which boys  
were sturdy and muscular.

I prayed we all would be among  
the chosen and so it came to pass--  
no one was left behind that day,  
none suffered the ignoble fate  
of being sent to the next town  
and perhaps the town after that.  
Mr. Butler, whose gentle look  
allayed my innermost fears,  
selected me for his family.

Young Andrew Burke was placed with a wealthy Indiana farmer and later enlisted at age 12 as a drummer boy in the Civil War. Afterwards, he found various employments and saved enough money to finance his education at DePaul University in Chicago. In 1880, he arrived with his new wife in Casselton, Dakota Territory with only \$65 in his pocket, but went on to be elected the second Governor of North Dakota in 1891. Another boy from the streets of New York, John Brady, was on the same train to Indiana and later became the three term governor of the District of Alaska in 1897.

Descendants of the orphan trains live in South Dakota. A fictionalized biography, [To Dakota and Back: The Story of an Orphan Train Rider](#) by Sr. Judith Kappenham chronicles the journey of her maternal grandfather, John Donahue from Boston's Home for Catholic Destitute Orphans to a farm family in Worthern, Dakota Territory in Hanson County, south of Mitchell, SD.

[The New York Times, September 28, 1915](#)  
declared with a triple headline:

## Children ready to be sent West to Minnesota & Dakotas

### **55 FOUNDLINGS SENT WEST.**

**Girls in Demand by Those Who Will  
Give Them Homes.**



New York Grand Central Terminal  
from New York Foundling Hospital

Walsh town 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. In 1872, an [Irish Immigration Convention](#) was organized in Vermillion, Dakota Territory by "*Civic minded Irish settlers from 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*".

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 [Press and Dakotian](#) on September 8, 1883 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*". David Kemp, in *The Irish in Dakota*, lists 116 Irish settlements in Dakota Territory from 1854-1889.

The new 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, *“practically grew up in the State,”* pioneered in the Madison area, established the State Democratic Party, was a member of the Constitutional Convention which created the two Dakotas, and became the mayor of Vermillion, SD where he had moved so that all of his children might get a University 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. My grandfather, James A. Donohoe, born 1856, the son of Irish immigrants from County West Meath, moved his family from Iowa to Yankton in 1911 because of *“good farmland, a location near a Catholic Church and a Knights of Columbus Council”* where he became a successful dairy farmer, prominent business man and civic promoter.

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.

Approximately 100 Irish born persons became [naturalized citizens in Yankton County](#) from 1846 to 1915. The Irish make up [10% of the population](#) and rank as the 3<sup>rd</sup> major ancestry group after the Germans - 37%, and Norwegians - 12%. The Irish imprint remains strong and their legacy visible in

**August 28, 2011, Kennebunkport, Maine**

Yankton and the State of South Dakota.



**Robert F. Lyons**, originally from Yankton, lives in New England. His Irish ancestors from counties Waterford and West Meath pioneered in South Dakota. His book is available on-line: [Dakota Imprints: A Sesquicentennial Anthology: Contributions by Lyons & Donohoe Families.](#)

The author wishes to acknowledge that much of the material for this story was taken from: George W. Kingsbury’s monumental *History of Dakota Territory. South Dakota: Its History and Its People* (Chicago. S. J. Clarke Publishing Company 1915). Kingsbury founded with Frank Ziebach the *Weekly Dakotian*, in May 1862, predecessor to today’s Yankton Press & Dakotan. The author is indebted to Dave Kemp, historian for clarifying aspects of the Walshtown Irish settlement and for his excellent book: *The Irish in Dakota.*

## SOURCES

- Kappenman, Judith, *To Dakota and Back: The Story of an Orphan Train Rider*, (Lulu, 2010)
- Karolevitz, Robert F., *Yankton: A Pioneer Past*. (North Plains Press, Aberdeen, South Dakota. 1972)
- Kemp, David, *The Irish in Dakota*. (Mariah Press, Sioux Falls, SD, 1992) and interview June 29, 2011
- Kingsbury, George W., *History of Dakota Territory. South Dakota: Its History and Its People*. Vol. 1 (Chicago. S. J. Clarke Publishing Company 1915)
- Mulrooney, Margaret, *Fleeing the Famine: North America & Irish Refugees 1845-1851*. (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003)
- Sioux Falls Catholic Diocese Archives
- Yankton Press & Dakotan: September 1 & 8, 1883; June 11, 2011

**Robert F. Lyons © 2011**



## LINKS - YANKTON IRISH

- **Irish Immigration Convention: Vermillion 1872: Irish Entrepreneurs for Dakota Territory: URGE IRISH TO GO WEST.** Civic minded Irish settlers from Yankton...devise plan to encourage the Irish "To Make Their Homes in the new Northwest, Dakota Preferred". [MORE>>](#)
- **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.** *Press and Dakotian* September 1, 1883. Bringing along twenty-seven boys and girls to Yankton. [MORE>>](#)
- **Orphan boys & girls, sent out West by Boston Home for Destitute Catholic Children.** *Press and Dakotian* September 8, 1883. Father Sheehan left Chicago Thursday with forty boys and girls whose ages range from four to fourteen years...being brought to Yankton. [MORE>>](#)
- **ORPHAN TRAINS TO DAKOTA: New York Times Sept. 28, 1915: "55 FOUNDLINGS SENT WEST: Children ready to be sent West to Minnesota & Dakotas".** [MORE>>](#)
- **SONG OF AN ORPHAN TRAIN RIDER:** Once I had a darling mother, though I can't recall her name .... the Children's Home is sending us out on the Orphan Train >> [Song of Orphan Train](#)
- **"Meeting of the Waters",** John Hodnett's vision for Yankton Irish Community in 1869, >> [Sung by John McCormack](#)
- **IRISH Naturalizations Records: Yankton County, SD 1846-1915.** Approximately 100 Irish born persons became naturalized citizens. Names and dates. [MORE>>](#)
- **GRAVES, Walshtown Cemetery, Yankton Co., SD 1881-1912.** 55 graves, mostly Irish (Maloy, Kinsella, Hickey, Walsh) compiled by WPA 1940. [MORE>>](#)
- **Walshtown: St Brigid's Church, First Communion Photo c. 1890.** [MORE>>](#)
- **IRISH: 3<sup>rd</sup> largest ancestry group in Yankton County:** [Yankton County, SD - Ancestry ...](#)



The **National [Orphan Train Museum and Research Center](#)** is dedicated to the preservation of the stories and artifacts of those who were part of the **Orphan Train Movement** from 1854-1929. The research center is located at the restored [Union Pacific Railroad Depot](#) and contains the records of orphans that were sent from east coast cities to be placed with families across the country from 1854 -1929.

**National Orphan Train Museum  
Union Pacific Railroad Depot – Concordia, Kansas**