

Irish Colony, Immigrants & Orphans in Yankton, Dakota Territory

On occasion of Yankton's Sesquicentennial Celebration - August 2011

By Robert F. Lyons

THE 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 seven miles north of Yankton.

Hodnett, a thirty year old young man from Youghal, County Cork, had been a leader of a political element in the United States known as "Irish republicans". Along with many Irishmen after their service in the Civil War, he had joined the Fenians and was dedicated to the establishment of an independent Irish Republic, finally emancipated from England. 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, Hodnett took up a claim about seven miles north 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.

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.

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, 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. The Press and Dakotian reported on September 8, 1883:

"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."

The experience of these transported orphans is poignantly captured in a narrative poem describing the journey of Andrew Burke, orphaned at age four and shipped out to Indiana at age nine by the New York Children's Aid Society in 1859. Standing on the platform of a small train station in the Midwest amid dozens of rows of other small children, the young boy 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."

(John Manesis in *The Journey of Andrew Burke*, www.jmanesispoetry.com/id3.html)

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 who was on the same train to Indiana, John Brady, became the governor of Alaska in 1897.

The orphan trains transported over 200,000 children between 1854 and 1929 mostly to farm families in the Midwestern states. Some descendants of the "orphan trains" live in South Dakota today. A fictionalized biography 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 Worthen, (Hanson County, Dakota Territory) and as an adult, back to Massachusetts in: *To Dakota and Back, The story of an Orphan Train Rider* (Lulu Press, 2010).

Walshtown was but one of many Irish communities that developed in South Dakota where Irish immigrants,



Walshtown Catholic Cemetery, Yankton County

fleeing famine and oppression, responded to the dream of land and opportunity and freedom. David Kemp, in *The Irish in Dakota*, lists 116 Irish settlements in Dakota Territory from 1854-1889. 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, it was 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*" (Press and Dakotian, September 8, 1883).

The new Irish settlers and their descendants rapidly became involved in

the civic and political life of the new State of South Dakota. 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 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 with the State*" (Vermillion Plain Talk, June 30, 1932), pioneered in the Madison area, established the Democratic Party, was a member of the Constitutional Convention which created the two Dakotas, and became the mayor of Vermillion 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, 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*" (Yankton Press & Dakotian, June 11, 2011) 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 successful farms and businesses and communities. The imprint of the Irish on Yankton County and the State remains strong, their legacy visible today.

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