Lesson 1

Railroads and the Great Dakota Boom

By 1878, Dakota Territory looked promising. Wheat crops were good in the east. There were rich gold mines in the west. Two things were needed: railroads and more people. Two companies took up the challenge. The Chicago & North Western Railway (the C&NW) was one. The other was the Chicago, Milwaukee & Saint Paul Railroad (the Milwaukee Road). These railroads built tracks and brought new settlers.

The first railroad came to Dakota in 1873. It was a short line from Iowa. It ran to the new towns of Vermillion and Yankton. Another line stretched across empty prairie. It ran from Minnesota to Lake Kampeska. There were no towns along that line and no trains, either. This was unusual. Most railroads came to towns after they had been settled—like Yankton. But for much of Dakota Territory, the railroads would come first.

The C&NW built its first railroad line from Minnesota to Volga. The year was 1879. The railroad then **platted** town sites in between. These were Aurora, Elkton, and Brookings. Then the Milwaukee Road started its first line. This railroad stretched from Canton to the new town of Mitchell. Every seven to ten miles, the railroads set up a town site. Often a town was named for a railroad **tycoon**. Mitchell was named for Alexander Mitchell. He was president of the Milwaukee Road. Later on, Faith and Isabel were named for the daughters of another tycoon.

Within two years, the tracks of the C&NW reached all the way to Pierre. That was another brand-new town. It was on the east side of the Missouri River. The Milwaukee Road ended at Chamberlain. Neither railroad could cross the river into

the Great Sioux Reservation. It was not open for non-Indian settlement.

To bring people to eastern Dakota, railroads bragged about its **virtues**. They urged people to come and stake a claim. "Best Wheat Lands, Best Farming Lands, Best Grazing Lands in the world. . . . FREE TO ALL," one **advertisement** promised. Soon homesteaders were claiming farms near the new towns that railroads had set up. The Great Dakota Boom was underway.

Some homesteaders came by covered wagon, but most settlers boarded trains to come to Dakota. Trains were a new and exciting way to travel. "Trains went faster than horses can run," wrote Laura Ingalls Wilder. "They went so terribly fast that often they wrecked. You never knew what might happen to you on a train." Trains carried people, supplies, food, and fuel. They brought them to the new towns along the tracks. From the towns, the settlers spread out around the countryside.

Settlers from older states came to file homesteads. Immigrants from Europe did too. Many had little money, and most came with the hope of owning their own farms. The Homestead Act of 1862 (you read about this in Unit 5) let an adult man claim 160 acres of land. Single women could also stake a claim. The homesteader had to live on the farm for five years. Some also took tree claims. On a tree claim, the owner had to plant ten acres of trees and keep them alive for eight years.

The immigrants came from many different places. They brought new customs to South Dakota. Many came from Germany and Austria. They settled near Sioux Falls and Aberdeen. Those who came from Russia also spoke German. These people first moved from Germany to Russia. Many settled in Hutchinson and McPherson counties. Some were part of religious groups who set up Hutterite colonies.

Many Scandinavians also homesteaded here. They came from Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. Many settled near Canton and Sioux Falls in the south. Others were near Watertown and Aberdeen in the north. Czech immigrants settled around Tabor. Dutch immigrants homesteaded in Douglas and Charles Mix counties. No matter where they came from or where they settled, they were Dakotans now. The population had **boomed** in just a few years.

Vocabulary:

advertisement (n.), a message bought to persuade people

boomed (n.), grew rapidly

platted (v.), planned or mapped out a town

tycoon (n.), a powerful businessperson

virtues (n.), good things

Lesson 2

Town Life and Hard Times

In the beginning, most of the railroad towns looked pretty much alike. Streets ran east and west, north and south. The train depot perched at one end of Main Street. The railroad tracks often formed a "T" with Main Street. At the other end was nothing but open prairie. Buildings lined streets of bare earth or mud. Some had false fronts that made them look two stories high. Schoolhouses were often one of the most important buildings in town. They became centers of the community, a place where people got together for fun or public business.

Newspapers were an important business on Main Street. Small towns had newspapers that were printed once a week. Larger towns had newspapers printed every day. The newspapers let everyone know who had claimed what land and where it was. Some were printed in different languages because immigrants could not speak English. They brought news from the outside world. They tried to bring more settlers to Dakota. They knew that the wealth of the town depended on the number of farms around it.

Most families who came to Dakota farmed on their 160-acre claims. They had to build a house there to prove that they were living on the land. Some people bought lumber in town and put up claim shanties**.** These tiny houses were drafty and cold. The floors were dirt. Because wood was scarce, many homesteaders built sod houses. These soddies were made of blocks of prairie **sod.** Some were leaky and dangerous. The roofs could **collapse** under rain or heavy snow.

Snow was something Dakotans soon knew a lot about. The Hard Winter of 1881 took many by surprise. Temperatures **hovered** below zero for weeks. Snow fell so deep that trains could not get through. For most families, that meant no food, fuel,

or supplies. There was no **kerosene** for lamps to light long winter nights. "The dark came in, loud with the roar and the shrieking of the storm," wrote Laura Ingalls Wilder in *The Long Winter*. There was no flour for bread. There was no coal to heat the freezing air inside their houses. Families burned twisted sticks of hay instead. They ground wheat seed for flour. When the spring thaw finally came, the Missouri, Big Sioux, and James rivers flooded their banks. The Missouri River swept the whole town of Vermillion away. The flood broke up so many steamboats that steamboat travel on the Missouri River soon ended.

Farming during the 1880s was also harder than it is today. Many new farms had been started on sod that had never been plowed. Breaking up sod took days of labor. A horse or mule to draw the plow helped, but many farmers used hand plows. Even so, wheat crops were good at first. Then prairie fires and drought hurt harvests; prices for corn and wheat crops fell. Some homesteaders packed up and moved back east. By 1890, the Great Dakota Boom was over.

Yet many Dakota towns grew and did well. Sioux Falls became a **thriving** center for business and industry. The local rock made good stone for buildings. It was called quartzite. Cutting, or quarrying, this rock added jobs to the Sioux Falls area. The rock itself added beauty to the towns all around. Up north, Aberdeen was the **hub** city for many railroads. Farms around the city did well. The railroads took the crops to eastern markets. They brought back food, lumber, tools, and supplies. Aberdeen businessmen began to resell these goods to other stores. They took them out to small towns in wagons. Aberdeen became an important wholesale center.

Vocabulary:

collapse (v.), to fall down suddenly

hovered (v.), lingered; hung about

hub (n.), a center

kerosene (n.), an oil used in lamps

sod (n.), a piece of ground covered with growing grass and its roots

thriving (adj.), successful

Lesson 3

The Open Range and New Land Openings

Another pocket of open land in South Dakota was the western strip. It had been opened to settlement in 1877. This was the Black Hills and the range land north and south of the hills. Settlers came here, too, although not by railroad at first. Homesteaders soon found that this land was better suited to ranching. The main reason had to do with rainfall.

Different parts of South Dakota get different amounts of **moisture** each year. Eastern South Dakota gets the most. As you go west from Sioux Falls, less and less rain or snow falls. The Black Hills are like an island. They get as much rain and snow as the eastern part of the state. But north and south of the hills, very little rain falls each year. That means that plants that need a lot of water will not grow well there. Wheat and corn do not do well. But cattle and sheep do quite well. They eat the grasses and grow fat.

Ranchers moved into western Dakota just after the gold rush of 1876. They grew beef for the Black Hills prospectors to eat. Soon big cattle outfits from Texas ran herds on the unfenced pastures of western Dakota. This was called the open range. Cowboys branded the cattle to keep track of their own animals. Cowboys would drive the cattle north from Texas to fatten them up. Then they would drive them back south to the railroads in Nebraska and Kansas. The big herds did well until the winter of 1886-1887. This hard winter killed thousands of cattle. It was the end of the open range.

Railroads now began to move into the Black Hills. The Fremont, Elkhorn & Missouri Valley Railroad came up from Nebraska. It reached Rapid City in 1886. Soon Rapid City was a thriving town full of businesses. The railroads helped mining to

grow as well. They brought supplies to the mines. Then they took gold to eastern markets. By 1890, Lead was the second largest city in South Dakota. It was the home of the Homestake Mining Company.

In 1889, South Dakota became a state. The following year, parts of the Great Sioux Reservation were opened to settlers. The Lakotas now had six smaller reservations (you read about this in Unit 5). Homesteaders began to cross the Missouri River. They took claims on the central and northwestern plains. Here they learned what the Lakotas found out on their 160-acre plots. The land was not well suited to farming. New crops such as alfalfa and winter wheat would grow here. But cattle and sheep still did the best. Small ranches dotted the plains.

Again, the United States government opened more land on the reservations. These lands had not been allotted to Lakota men or women. From 1904 to 1911, thousands of acres were opened in land **lotteries**. All were west of the Missouri River. Homesteaders poured into the state to sign up for the drawings. But their chances of winning were not good. There were far more people than there were claims. That is why the government set up the lotteries. In the first one, there were about twenty-five hundred homesteads. Over one hundred thousand people signed up for them. After a person won the right to stake a claim, he or she raced across the land to find the best spot.

More and more people began ranching. But getting cattle from western South Dakota to eastern markets was not easy. Some ranchers drove their cattle to Pierre and Chamberlain. There they crossed the Missouri River. They used **ferries** or **pontoon bridges**. Then they loaded their cattle onto trains. Not until 1907 would railroad bridges span the Missouri River. One was at Pierre and one at Mobridge. At

long last, railroads crossed the entire state, from east to west. Dozens of new towns were born—Murdo, Kadoka, Wall, Faith, Dupree, Lemmon, and more.

Vocabulary:

ferries (n.), boats that carry things across a body of water

lotteries (n.), activities in which numbered tickets are sold and drawings decide the winner

moisture (n.), liquid; water

pontoon bridges (n.), floating bridges

Lesson 4

Good Roads and High Prices

The year was 1905. A bold man drove his new Cadillac from Fort Pierre to the Black Hills. His name was Peter Norbeck (learn more about him in Unit 7). He was one of the first people in South Dakota to believe in the automobile. Not everyone was impressed. "The automobile is a plaything for idle minds and hands," wrote one newspaper editor. It was a "**contrivance** for killing people," he said.

Going across country like Norbeck did was an adventure. Cars often broke down or got stuck in ruts or mud. They scared the horses and livestock. They churned up dust and splattered mud. People even wore special clothes for automobile trips—a long coat, hat, and goggles. But cars were a new kind of transportation. They were different from trains. People could travel by themselves. They could go where they wanted. They were also faster and more comfortable than horses. Soon many people were using them. Others were building them. The Fawick Flyer was built right here in South Dakota—in Sioux Falls. It was the first car with four doors.

Roads were a problem, though. Most were rutted wagon trails. They were unmarked, and no one took care of them. There were no highways and no paved roads. Soon people wanted better places to drive. Joseph W. Parmley of Ipswich started working for better roads. He and others joined what was called the Good Roads movement. They talked to farmers and lawmakers about the importance of roads. They said that good roads would be good for business. In 1913, South Dakota **issued** its first license plates. By then, fourteen thousand automobiles were bumping their way across the state on unpaved trails. A few years later, the state began to build its first highways.

Meanwhile, the countries of Europe had begun the First World War. It is called this now because by the end of it almost the whole world was fighting. The United States stayed out of it until 1917, but then it, too, joined the fighting. Thirty-two thousand South Dakotans fought in this war. They were from all over the state and from all backgrounds. Dakotas, Lakotas, and Nakotas, and European immigrants joined the armed forces.

Most of them went to Europe. Weapons had changed since the army fought the American Indians. Bombs were now dropped from airplanes. Tanks and submarines killed from a long way away. Poison gases were used as weapons. People called it "The Great War" or "The War to End All Wars." It made Europe into a wasteland. But the warring countries still had to feed their soldiers and their people. They bought food from the United States.

Food was now in high **demand**. Farmers and ranchers got good prices for what they grew. South Dakota farmers saw that they could make more money if they grew more food. They borrowed money from banks to buy more land. Then the war ended. Other countries quit buying so much food from the United States. Prices for crops went down, and farmers and ranchers made less money. They still had to pay taxes on the extra land they had bought. Times became hard. Many farmers and ranchers could not repay the banks. Many quit farming.

Yet the war also brought **positive** changes. All American Indian men who had served during the war became full citizens of the United States. Women earned the right to vote in 1920 (learn more about this in Units 7 and 8). Shortly thereafter, all Nakota, Lakota, and Dakota people also gained full citizenship. The 1920s began with hope and a new sense of freedom.

Vocabulary:

contrivance (n.), an invention

demand (n.), the state of being wanted for use

issued (v.), put forth; sent out

positive (adj.), hopeful or to the good