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South Dakota—Its History, Land, and Wildlife¹

Chuck Post

South Dakota, duh KOH tuh, was named for the Dakota, or Sioux Indians who lived in this region before the white man came. In addition to the Sioux, two other tribes lived in the area before the white man. The Arikara built permanent homes and raised crops while the Cheyenne lived mostly by hunting. The wandering Sioux were hunters and warriors who moved from place to place following the great herds of bison.

In 1862 all the land that was drained by the Mississippi River system was claimed for France. South Dakota was included because the waters of the Mississippi River system flow into the Mississippi.

The French-Canadian explorers, Francois and Louis Verendrye were the first white men known to have visited the state. In 1743 the brothers buried a lead plate near the site of Ft. Pierre to prove they had been here. School children found the plate in 1913.

In 1762, France gave Spain the land and in 1800 Spain ceded it back to France. In 1803 the United States acquired South Dakota as part of the Louisiana Purchase.

In 1781, Pierre Dorion, a Frenchman, arrived in the lower James River Valley near what is now Yankton in the far southeastern part of the state. He was the first white man to permanently settle in present day South Dakota. The American explorers Lewis and Clark crossed the state on their way west in 1804, and again on their return in 1806. Their reports attracted many fur traders to the area. A French fur trader Joseph La Framboise, established a trading post in 1817 at the junction of the Missouri and Bad rivers where Fort Pierre now stands. This was the first permanent settlement in the region.

The first important Indian encounter occurred in 1823, when the Arikara attacked a trading party led by General Ashley. The federal government sent an army detachment to punish the tribe. The Sioux joined in crushing the Arikara.

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The arrival of the Yellowstone at what is now Fort Pierre, in 1831 proved that steamboats could travel up the Missouri River. This development brought new fur traders to the region. Soon the number of fur bearing animals began to decrease, and the trade had almost ended by the 1850's.

Agricultural settlement began in 1856, when pioneers from Iowa and Minnesota came to an area near the present day Sioux Falls to raise crops.

In 1861 Congress created Dakota Territory. It consisted of present day South and North Dakota, and parts of Montana and Wyoming.

In 1874 Colonel George Custer led a military expedition into the Black Hills. He was to investigate reports of gold in the mountains. The soldiers discovered gold near the present day town of Custer, and the news brought the first rush of prospectors to the area in 1875. After discovery of the Great Homestake Lode in 1876, thousands of miners flocked to the Black Hills. Deadwood, the center of placer mining operations, became a notorious wide-open mining town that echoed the names of Calamity Jane and Wild Bill Hickok.

The invasion of the Sioux Indian lands by the prospectors and other white men caused a series of Indian uprisings led by Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull. In 1876 Crazy Horse surrendered, Sitting Bull escaped into Canada, and all the Indians left the Black Hills. The Indians agreed to give up the Black Hills region, and most of the Sioux surrendered their arms and settled on reservations west of the Missouri River.

The discovery of gold and building of railroads speeded settlement during the 1870's and 1880's. In 1889 South Dakota became a state. The population at the time numbered about 300,000.

Little development took place in the first few years due to severe drought. However, the early 1900's brought rapid progress. Thousands of homesteaders poured in and by 1900 400,000 people lived in the state. By 1930 the population grew to 683,000.

The 1930's began with the worse drought and grasshopper plague ever experienced in the state. The drought, accompanied by dust storms lasted for 10 years, except for some relief in 1932 and 1935.

After 1940, high farm prices and plentiful rain brought prosperity back to South Dakota.

South Dakota is full of distance. It has miles of fertile farm land and grassy, windswept prairie that stretch as far as the eye can see. Pastures cover more than half the state, and fields of crops take up most of the rest of the land. The state ranks among the leaders in the production of corn, rye, oats, spring wheat, flax seed, hay and a variety of grass seeds. South Dakota is also a leading beef-cattle state. Farmers raise livestock on large ranches on the western plains and on smaller farms in the east. The rich soil in the eastern section supports an abundance of crops, part of which are used for livestock feed.

The southeast corner of the state contains the most fertile soils, and it is here farmers raise corn, soybeans and other cereal grains. Most of the eastern part of the state is flat except for river valleys and coteaus. The middle section and most of the western part of the state is referred to as the Great Plains. The land is generally flat but broken by deep river valleys and buttes. In the far west there are the rugged, granite mountains of the Black Hills. This region has towering rocks and forests of pines and spruce. The Black Hills are well known as a tourist attraction, and for rich mineral deposits and lumber.

The fertile soil is the state's greatest natural resource. The state also has rich mineral deposits, and some forest resources consisting mainly of ponderosa pine, spruce and cottonwoods.

The glacial till that covers much of the state east of the Missouri River produces loamy soils, nearly black in color. Much of the soil west of the Missouri River consists of eroded shale.

The Black Hills provides most of the state's mineral wealth. The vein of gold ore discovered at Lead in 1876 has reserves of more than 14,000,000 tons. The ore contains some silver. The Black Hills area also has beryl, feldspar, columbite-tantalite, gypsum, iron ore, limestone, lithium, clays and mica. Uranium deposits lie chiefly in the southern end of the Black Hills.

Forests cover about 2,000,000 acres, mostly in the Black Hills. The trees include ponderosa pine, aspen, spruce and cedar. Cottonwoods can be found along the rivers and creeks in the rest of the state.

The Missouri River crosses the middle of the state and drains all but the northeast corner. Its western tributaries include the Grand, Moreau, Cheyenne and White rivers. The James, Big Sioux and other smaller rivers join the Missouri in the east.

The natural lakes in the northeast part of the state were formed during the Ice Age, when drainage water was dammed up behind glacier-piled earth.

The Missouri, once a wild and muddy river, has since been tamed by four South Dakota dams--Oahe, one of the largest earthen dams in the world, near Pierre; Big Bend at Ft. Thompson; Ft. Randall at Pickstown and Gavins Point near Yankton. Huge reservoirs have now been created behind each of these dams.

The abundance of game on the prairie before the encroachment of the white man's civilization staggers the imagination. The prairie grasses never grew to a climax vegetation because the numbers of buffalo were so great.

Today, it's difficult to grasp the tremendous influence the buffalo had on the life history of many species. The prairie dog, antelope, wolf and grasshoppers flourished with the buffalo. Deer, rabbits and sharptail grouse maintained, at best, a precarious existence. Only in the Black Hills and along the heavily timbered river bottoms did the whitetail deer succeed. The mule deer, because of his preference for precipitous terrain and badland areas, was able to hold his own, but elsewhere, through the thousands of square miles of rolling prairie, the mule and whitetail deer were found in limited numbers. Deer became the dominant big game animal only after the buffalo was gone, but deer were abundant only briefly before they too were decimated by the hunters.

The buffalo herds which ranged from Texas to Montana and from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains numbered between 65 and 70 million animals at their peak.

"I have seen herd after herd stretching over a distance of eighty miles, all tending in the same direction..." wrote Deb. R. Keim, a pioneer writer, of the vast herds.

Migrating ducks and geese darkened the skies. Sharptail grouse were found extensively, until land use changes caused the prairie chickens to flourish, replacing the sharptails. Elk, deer, quail, bear, turkeys, antelope, Audubon's bighorn sheep, wolves, mountain lions--call the roll--they were all here.

Before 1800 South Dakota's antelope were estimated to exceed 700,000. No estimate we know of has been made on the other wildlife, which also flourished.

The philosophy of a hundred years ago was one of nearly complete freedom. The land was free, the game was free and thought to be inexhaustible, and nearly every man was a law unto himself. Wildlife was needed for man to subsist, and the prairies provided it in abundance.

Perhaps it was necessary for the buffalo herds to be reduced to nothingness. Certainly agriculture and ranching could not co-exist with millions of buffalo. New land use drove the prairie chickens away, but made it possible for the pheasant to flourish.

These are things to consider. It may be easy to speculate on the rightness or wrongness of our predecessors; it may save our consciences for our faults in the present day if we view the foibles of our fathers--it is also fruitless. History is irrevocable--only the future is worth speculation.

Beaver were the first to be capitalized upon by the fur traders, but after the demand for furs grew and the river transportation system improved, the herds of buffalo were next.

Cargoes of Missouri River steamboats came to be made up largely of beaver pelts for gentlemen's hats and buffalo hides for fashionable carriage robes. For half a century, nearly \$100,000 a year went down the Missouri in the form of hides and furs.

After the Civil War, the railroads came, and with them, men like Buffalo Bill Cody and Billy Comstock who made their living supplying buffalo meat to railroad crews. Towns sprang up along the rail heads, named after places in the East, after railroad officials, and after topographical peculiarities.

The gandy-dancers must have dined like kings because the hunters took only the humps, tongues and hindquarters of the buffalo. It's estimated the Cody alone left 3 million pounds of meat to rot on the prairie.

The fate of the buffalo was nearly sealed when the major railroads were completed in 1872-73. Buffalo hunters were thrown out of jobs. The settlers continued to push west, moving the Indians before them. The Indians didn't push without resistance, though. The army showed a remarkable degree of incompetence in some of the Indian campaigns, and sought other means for quashing the Indian threat.

Other means were available. Certain military and railroad officials believed the Indians could be subdued if they had no food, and the buffalo hunters were employed again, this time to pursue a program of relentless slaughter throughout the Missouri Valley.

By 1881, the job was practically completed with a great kill of buffalo on the Grand River near Lemmon. During the next few years, remnants of the herd were searched out and killed.

The professional hunters were again organized as efficiently as a company of soldiers. In a large outfit, three or four hunters could kill enough animals to keep thirty or forty men busy skinning and hauling hides and meat, and running the camp. Cody alone had killed 4,280 buffalo in an 18-month period. A single firm in Glendive, Montana shipped out more than 250,000 buffalo hides, the majority of which were bought in the Dakota Territory following the Grand River kill.

The Grand River hunt virtually marked the end of the buffalo on the open range. Carcasses were left strewn over the prairie for more than ten miles near Lemmon, and later bird hunters were to wonder at the expanse of bleaching bones.

The hunt had the desired effect. Except for sporadic outbreaks, Indian resistance had been crushed efficiently. It was the first time America had seen the concept of total war carried out against a whole hostile population.

Settlers and homesteaders and "sportsmen" poured into the Dakotas, and during the period from 1865 to 1900 what had been unimaginable abundance of game became a conscience-haunting scarcity.

The unremitting pressure on the game brought the Territorial Legislature to pass the first law regulating hunting in 1875.

Elk, deer and antelope fared little better than buffalo at the hands of the hunters. Elk were so nearly exterminated in South Dakota they had to be restocked from Wyoming. Nearly every cargo of buffalo hides that went out of the Dakota Territory contained pelts of other animals.

As buffalo became scarce, deer flourished, but professional hunters turned their attentions more and more to the smaller animals.

An era was dying.

As late as in the 1880's, Ernest Thompson Seton, the famed naturalist from the East, reported seeing between 8,000 and 9,000 antelope a day in the Badlands. But these days were numbered by the avarice of the market hunter and the "real quill" sportsmen and the rancher's fence.

Nor was the slaughter to be confined to big game. Anything wild that flew, crept or ran was something to be killed, either for profit or the pleasure of blood lust.

THE BLACK HILLS JOURNAL, on December 21, 1883, said:

"Some parties brought a load of grouse to town yesterday. They disposed of them readily and at a good price."

The West River country and the Black Hills weren't the only areas of the state touched by the wanton slaughter. Game had been abundant in the East River part of South Dakota, and had been killed there as heedlessly as any other place.

Settlement had brought a temporary burgeoning of the number of grouse and prairie chickens because of the additional food supply in the corn and grain fields. Because of this temporary increase, prairie chickens and grouse were plentiful about a decade longer than the buffalo. More intensive cultivation would eventually destroy their natural range and nesting habitat, however.

For almost a generation, the area of the Great Plains that included eastern Dakota was known as "the chicken country." During the period from 1870 to 1900, hunters had only their consciences to be their guides, and the market hunter reaped a rich harvest.

Barrels and boxes of prairie chickens consigned to game markets in Eastern cities were a common sight on depot platforms throughout the area. Millions of chickens and grouse were killed, and the settlers were indifferent to or assisted in the slaughter.

The ducks, geese, plover and brant that obscured the skies belonged in the same category.

Nature had shown an awesome regenerative power, through, and even the turning of the prairies and hills into a charnel house did not entirely wipe out the game. Changing land use--the logging of the forests, building of roads and rail lines, damming streams, breaking the native sod and overgrazing with cattle--all served to destroy the habitat of wildlife. Hunters had killed the last grizzly bear in the Black Hills about 1885, and fewer than 800 buffalo remained in the United States, and most of them in captivity. The Virginia turkey was almost gone.

And then nature decided to help man in the revel.

It set the stage with severe blizzards during the winter of 1880-81.

Nature's finishing blow to what man had begun brought home a sudden realization that wildlife and fish were not something merely to be exploited for the market or slaughtered needlessly. At least, this realization came home to the more intelligent members of the community.

By the end of the 19th century the conservation movement had begun in earnest. After the turn of the century, game laws were to become more and more stringent. And by 1909 the Department of Game, Fish and Parks was created.

Since the turn of the century, wildlife populations have had there ups and downs.

The drainage of thousands of acres of wetlands has affected waterfowl, furbearers, and other wildlife that depend on wetlands for their existence. The breaking of prairie sod has shown its influence on sharptail grouse and prairie chickens. The damming of the Missouri River has almost led to the demise of the paddlefish, and the encroachment of pine and civilization upon the Black Hills has not benefited elk and whitetail deer. But overall, South Dakota is still blessed with abundant and varied species of wildlife.

The wetlands of the northeast are very critical to North American duck production. South Dakota ranks second in duck production throughout the continental United States. The northeast lakes offer some great fishing for a variety of sport fish. Snow geese build up in huge numbers in the fall at Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge. The eastern half of the state is also home to the ringneck pheasant, Hungarian partridge, bobwhite quail, red fox, muskrat, mink, beaver, cottontail rabbits, red squirrels, and an excellent population of whitetail deer.

The Missouri River reservoir system offers some of the finest walleye fishing in the nation. And for trophy northern pike and chinook salmon, the largest reservoir on the river system, Lake Oahe, offers both. Each fall thousands of migrating Canada geese and mallard ducks stop along the river on their way south.

The western prairies are homes to the sharptail grouse, prairie chicken, mule deer and pronghorn antelope. Wild turkeys frequent the wooded river and creek bottoms and coyotes and prairie dogs can be found throughout the area. Water is at a premium in this western country, and when you find it you can bet it will be filled with largemouth bass.

The Black Hills has a variety of wildlife. The lakes and streams are trout country--browns rainbows, and brooks. Some of the large reservoirs have good walleye fishing. Whitetail and mule deer are scattered throughout the timbered area. Rocky mountain bighorn sheep are found in Custer State Park, and mountain goats frequent the craggy, granite outcroppings of the high mountains. Elk herds offer hunting recreation in the fall and Custer State Park has one of the largest buffalo herds in the nation.

South Dakota is a land full of distance and variety. From its cornfields of the east to the

mountains of the west it is a land that man has sweated and toiled to put under his control. It's a land steeped in western heritage. Cowboys still saddle horses and ride the range rounding up cattle. Rodeos are as popular as football games, and once you cross the Missouri River

heading west most everyone you see will have a Stetson on his head. South Dakota is noted for many things. Mt. Rushmore and pheasants may be numbers one and two, but it's friendly people are really the most important asset of the state.