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A Dakota Boomtown: Sioux Falls, 1877-1880

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The "Dakota boom" is a label historians have almost universally adopted to describe the period of settlement in Dakota Territory between the years 1878 and 1887. The term "boom" has been applied to this period largely because of the volume of land claimed and the rapid increase in Dakota Territory's population that occurred during those years. Most accounts of this time period have treated the Dakota boom as a rural phenomenon, and certainly its main manifestation was the rapid claiming of land by immigrant and American would-be farm owners in the plains of Dakota Territory and adjacent areas. Less well known is the impact this rapid, large-scale settling of the land had on the rise and growth of townsites aspiring to become prosperous cities. We know the rural landscape changed as sod houses and dugouts were erected, fields plowed, and trees planted. But what impact did the boom have on the urban landscape?

This essay is a case study examining the evolution of a specific Plains townsite, Sioux Falls, Dakota Territory, into a prosperous town when it experienced a rapid infusion of population as a result of the Dakota boom. I will argue that the experience of Sioux Falls was typical of the growing urban areas between 1877 and 1880. Unlike some towns on the Plains, Sioux Falls had a natural asset in its water power, and it was fortunate in acquiring early rail connections to the settled areas farther east. But in most other ways Sioux Falls was similar to dozens of townsites that experienced the same opportunities and problems brought by the torrential stream of prospective land seekers who inundated the surrounding countryside. Thus, Sioux Falls can help us
to understand better what the Dakota boom meant to the emerging urban centers of the region. This focus on looking at the growth of urban areas on the Plains is important because the prevailing stereotype in many popular books, films, and even some textbooks is to view this time period as a strictly rural phenomenon. As we will see in the data on Sioux Falls, the image of the lone farmer with his sod house should be accompanied by the image of a soon to be prosperous business leader living in a thriving cityscape.

Several historians have contributed significantly to our understanding of the process by which the Great Plains was settled, and the current study builds on them. John C. Hudson has helped us to understand better the role of railroads in creating towns on the western frontier. He has also used census data to plot the movement of people from various states and foreign countries into and out of the Plains states. William Silag, in his study of mobility in the Sioux City region, used the federal census and other public records to define better the characteristics of that region’s mobile population, a phenomena common to the frontier generally. Two classic writers on frontier urban history, Lewis Artherton and Daniel Boorstin, have focused mainly on the general elements that were important in giving frontier town sites success or failure. In contrast, this study applies the concept of microhistory, a model provided by Gilbert Fite in his study of “agricultural pioneering.”

The centerpiece of information for this study is derived from the 1880 tenth federal census. The federal census provides a “snapshot” of Sioux Falls at the time the information was collected. It contains copious information on each person listed, including gender, age, marital status, literacy, occupation, place of residence, place of birth, and parents’ place of birth. The information in the 1880 federal census has been tabulated and cross-tabulated using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This process enables the census data to provide an insight into these residents, where they came from and what they did, as well as to allow some inferences to be drawn about the nature of the community.

It must be noted, of course, that quantification data, while providing access to new historical information, has its own limitations. The process of entering the data into the SPSS program requires subjective categorization. The residents’ occupations were assigned to categories of professional, self-employed business, skilled and unskilled labor, clerks, and public officials. Not all listed occupations lent themselves obviously to any one category. For instance, into which category would one place a cook in a hotel, the foreman of a railroad crew, or a prostitute? It is also true that census takers were not always as careful or complete as a researcher might wish, and residents could not always provide information, like their parents’ place of birth. Still, if one recognizes that these and other limitations of the data information exist, quantification can be very illuminating, especially when other sources of information are scarce or absent.

Population growth alone confirms that Sioux Falls shared in the Dakota boom. From a population of about 600 in 1876, the federal census of 1880 counted 2,164 residents in Sioux Falls, which by the 1890 census had increased to slightly more than 10,000. In short, the city grew by a factor of nearly sixteen in the boom period. Statistically, the census reveals that the residents of Sioux Falls in 1880 were predominately white, male, single, young, and literate. In this regard Sioux Falls in 1880 was probably typical of most new towns at the edge of the midwestern American frontier. Beyond the time period of this study, however, Sioux Falls became atypical in the sense that it did not boom and bust but continued to grow and prosper long after many other boomtowns of the “Great Dakota Boom” had stagnated or even disappeared.

**The Anticipatory Phase**

First, it must be said that the boom began in Sioux Falls slightly earlier than it did in
Dakota Territory as a whole. By December 1877 a newspaper article reprinted from the Austin (MN) Register reported that Sioux Falls "residents claim 1500 inhabitants." This was a bit optimistic, for five months later the local Pantagraph announced that Sioux Falls had "at this time" a population of over 1,000 residents, "which has increased more than one half during the past year." The Austin journalist, who had just returned from a visit to Sioux Falls in November 1877, observed that "a great many houses have been built this summer and several are now in course of erection." The note of surprise in this report probably stemmed from the fact that everything the visitor from Austin had observed had taken place before Sioux Falls had secured a rail connection to the outside world. All building materials and merchandise were still being brought in via freight wagons from the railhead of the Worthington and Sioux Falls Railroad, which had been moving closer during 1877 but by December was still about twenty miles away at Beaver Creek. This early population boom anticipated the coming of the railroad to Sioux Falls.

In March 1878 the Sioux Falls Pantagraph reported that "the rush of travel has fully begun." Every day brought large numbers of new arrivals. The hotels, the Pantagraph observed, "are crowded to their utmost capacity; the boarding houses have eager customers for all their hash; the livery stable keepers are taxed to the utmost capacity to supply newcomers with conveyances to visit the adjacent country ... [and] the lumber dealers are up to their eyes in business." The newspaper went on to describe the atmosphere of Sioux Falls: "The
noise of the saw and hammer is heard in all parts of the town from morning till night." In April the Pantagraph announced that new arrivals were increasing, averaging about forty-five per day, "coming by stage, by livery, by freighters’ wagons and on foot." Some, the newspaper explained, stayed in town "looking for business chances," but most headed right for the surrounding area "in search of farms or claims." All the businessmen in town, the writer continued, "feel the salutary effect of the enormously increased demand for merchandise and services." Naturally, the population pressure had an impact on real estate prices. In June 1878 a visitor from the Sioux City Journal reported that houses and buildings were scarce—"remarkably so"—resulting in real estate prices doubling during the previous three years. The Pantagraph confessed in June that Sioux Falls had been overwhelmed by being "the vortex of a whirlpool of immigration for months."

**THE BOOM**

The federal land office had been moved to Sioux Falls in 1873, but the pace of its business clearly accelerated in the spring of 1878. The Pantagraph reported that "crowds of home seekers" besieging the US Land Office were increasing. In April alone the office had disposed of nearly 200,000 acres of land, a 50 percent increase over the previous month. The city’s eight hotels and numerous boardinghouses, said the Pantagraph, were "crowded continually." Hundreds, the newspaper reported, were arriving every week, so that it estimated the population of the town to be "at least" 1,250 residents.
And still the rush continued. A week later the Pantagraph was complimenting the Land Office personnel for holding up so well under the pressure of business. It appeared, announced the Pantagraph, that business in May would be fifty percent greater than in April. An average of more than seventy claims a day were being filed, with a high point of 134 claims filed on the previous Monday, a disposal of 160 acres every three minutes.9 This is how the term “doing a land-office business” gained its meaning.

Local newspapers might be accused of using what historian Daniel Boorstin has termed the “language of anticipation,” but thanks to the reprinting of articles on Sioux Falls in regional newspapers, we have some outside verification of what Sioux Falls was like during this boom period. In late July 1878 a correspondent for the Sioux City Journal visited Sioux Falls and reported that “the streets are crowded with teams and the sidewalks with people as are also the eleven different hotels in the city.” The Cataract House had just added fifty rooms by building a new three-story addition, wrote the Sioux City visitor, and building, he observed, “was being carried on extensively.” Houses, additions to hotels, livery stables, and business buildings were “springing up in every direction . . .” And business was good. It was “perfectly astonishing,” wrote the Sioux City observer, to see the amount of machinery being sold to area farmers. He had learned that twenty-five harvesters had been sold and delivered in a single day the previous week.11 A reprint article from the Bodhead (WI) Independent reported that Sioux Falls had eleven dry-goods stores, fourteen groceries, six hardware stores, and an equal number of lumberyards plus several each of the usual tailors, shoemakers, harness makers, and so on. There were ten blacksmith shops, two newspapers, six doctors, seven or eight saloons, fifty or more lawyers, and five or six church denominations but only two actual churches.12

On the evening of July 30, 1878, the long-awaited railroad locomotive finally steamed into Sioux Falls. The Pantagraph said it was the prospect of having the railroad that had given Sioux Falls its growth to that point, which has been the “wonder of the whole country.” The newspaper speculated that the railroad would make the region tributary to Sioux Falls, and that this is what would bring her “still further growth.” “We are wonderfully glad,” exclaimed the writer. “Who wouldn’t be?” he asked rhetorically.13

By August the Pantagraph reported that twenty-two men were hard at work building a grain elevator of 60,000-bushel capacity in hopes of being ready for the new harvest. A visiting journalist from Rochelle, Illinois, reported in the same month that two or three new stores were to open that week, each with $15,000 of dry-goods stock, and that new stores were opening up “as fast as the buildings can be got ready for them, which is from three to four a week.” “It is all business here,” he wrote, “everyone something ado . . . the lumberman selling his carload per day, the mechanic, teamster and day laborer, all find plenty to do.” What was the explanation for this explosive business activity? The Illinois visitor explained that people came to Sioux Falls “from as far away as one hundred miles to trade.”14

Being the railhead was even better than being a prospective railhead. Up to August 1, 1878, a total of 125 new buildings had been constructed in Sioux Falls, two-thirds of which were houses and the rest business buildings. Business lots (22 by 150 feet) were selling for $500 to $1,000 and residence lots (50 by 150 feet) from $40 to $100.15 It was definitely a heady atmosphere, and the term “boom” seems clearly appropriate to describe Sioux Falls as the year 1878 drew to a close. Even a visitor from Canton, a rival town for area business, was impressed by what he saw. Writing his observations on September 19, he marveled at the construction that the railroad’s arrival had stimulated. In five weeks a “mammoth elevator,” a neat freight and passenger depot, an engine house and turntable, three lumberyards, a hotel, and other buildings had been constructed. Every lumberyard, he wrote, “is daily thronged with teams loading for the coun-
try, while the streets are filled with teams, and
the sidewalks and business places thronged
with pedestrians and customers." On just one
day he had counted twenty-three immigrant
wagons passing through town. 16

Even a writer from the St. Paul Press was
impressed by what he saw while visiting Sioux
Falls in November 1878. The town, he ob-
served, was "one of the most marked instances
of sudden growth and success" he had ever
seen. It was, he reported, "a model western
town" that was destined to become "a city of
ten thousand inhabitants in ten years." His
only complaint was that everyone in Sioux
Falls smoked or chewed, and the town, he said,
"stinks with the poison odor." 17 As the year
1879 began, the Pantagraph editor looked back
on the previous year in wonderment. He listed
all the construction and investment of 1878,
which showed an approximate "doubling of
the building property of the town during the
year." And it was clear that despite the con-
stant construction, the demand for new houses
and business buildings had not been satisfied.
Indeed, in January 1879 the Pantagraph editor
claimed "there is not in Sioux Falls a vacant
building and many residences furnish homes
for two, three and even four families." The
writer attributed the increased growth of the
town to the completion of the Worthington
and Sioux Falls Railroad to Sioux Falls which,
he estimated, gave the town a trading area
four times larger than before. 18

Given this rapid influx of new settlers, one
might expect Sioux Falls to be a typical fron-
tier town where law and order was minimal
and crime an accepted reality. The Pantagraph
commented on this matter early in 1879 when
it said the court's volume of business reveals "something of the character of the people among whom it is located." In all of 1878, the editor reported, only forty criminal cases had been tried and many of them had come from parts of the county outside the city. There had been no murders, only eleven charges of larceny, ten assault and battery charges, and eleven arrested for drunkenness, along with a few less serious crimes. 19

Still, Sioux Falls did have the seamier aspects of a frontier town. The town had about a dozen saloons and at least two houses of prostitution. In the latter category H. S. Doyle, a forty-six-year-old woman born in New York, was listed in the 1880 census schedule as a prostitute, as were four other women listed as boarders in her residence. These women, ranging in age from seventeen to twenty-four, were born in New York, Minnesota, and Indiana. The second "house of ill repute" was run by M. J. Rudgden, a thirty-year-old woman, who was listed as the head of the household. Her husband, age twenty-two, was termed a bartender. An eight-year-old son with a different last name was apparently the madam's from a former marriage. All three were second-generation English. In addition, this house employed a cook and four women, ages sixteen to twenty-three, who were listed as prostitutes. Two were born in England and two had parents born in Maine.

Almost as soon as Sioux Falls had secured one railroad, it began to worry about the absence of rail competition. Meetings were held to consider how other railroads could be enticed to build into Sioux Falls and compete with the Worthington and Sioux Falls line, thereby lowering freight rates and raising the price paid for farmers' grain. At a meeting late in March 1879 those present unanimously passed a resolution that Sioux Falls and Minnehaha County should "do all in their power" to secure a railroad connection from the south. 20 By September two railroad companies were headed toward Sioux Falls: the Sioux City and Pembina was building north from Canton and the Southern Minnesota was building south from Flandreau. The first of these became the Dakota Southern shortly before it finally reached Sioux Falls in December 1879. It was 1881 before the Southern Minnesota entered Sioux Falls, and soon after the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad Company acquired it.

When spring came in 1879, the rush of land seekers began anew. Early in June the Pantagraph editor exclaimed that "the immigration into Dakota this year is simply monstros." 21 It appears that Sioux Falls continued to share in this continuing stream of settlers, especially as it served as the railhead for a large surrounding area. Late in June a group of newspaper editors from Illinois and Minnesota visited Sioux Falls as part of a tour of western communities, and they came away impressed by what they had seen and experienced. People, wrote the editor from Greenville, Illinois, were "pouring in very fast." He described Sioux Falls as a "thriving bustling place" of 2,000 residents and estimated that the town would number 10,000 in another two years. 22 As it turned out, of course, this prediction was wildly optimistic, since it took a decade for Sioux Falls to number that many inhabitants.

THE 1880 CENSUS

Unfortunately, the Sioux Falls newspapers that were published from September 4, 1879, to April 19, 1881, have not survived, so we cannot obtain the journalists' description of Sioux Falls' development during this period. But in June 1880 the tenth federal census was taken in Sioux Falls, and this provides a snapshot of Sioux Falls in the midst of the Dakota boom. The census counted 2,164 inhabitants of the city, of which 1,062 were independent adults. In addition, 311 dependent adults (wives) were listed, making a grand total of 1,373 adults and nearly 800 dependent children residing in the community. It was a heavily male dominated society, with 61 percent of the adult population being men and 39 percent being female. Two-thirds of the 1,062
independent adults were single, and only five were black. A mere ten residents, less than 1 percent of the adults, indicated they could not read and write. Thus, statistically, Sioux Falls in 1880 had an adult population that was overwhelmingly male, single, white, and literate.

A HOUSING SHORTAGE

The rapid growth of population noted in the newspapers during the two previous years is confirmed by the housing arrangements noted in the census information. The census indicates that only one-third of the independent adults had houses of their own. In other words, two-thirds of the independent adult population was boarding in someone else's house, a hotel, or at their place of work. Specifically, of the 722 boarders, 76 percent (547) were single adults, 19 percent (137) were domestic servants, and 5 percent (39) had families. This means that 510 boarders were accommodated in the 338 houses in the community while about 200 more were residing in hotels and boardinghouses. Actually, only 124 of the 338 households had boarders, but twenty-two of these houses had four or more boarders. While some of these boarders were probably only passing through, it is clear that the construction of houses was unable to keep up with the rapid population growth of Sioux Falls. The situation described in the newspaper more than a year earlier still applied: “Many residences furnish homes for two, three and even four families.”

It is not evident from the census schedule that residences provided homes for several families, but clearly boarders were common in
households and some hosted several. D. F. Smith, listed as a loan broker, is a good example of the latter. The Smith household included his wife, a housekeeper, one son, two servant girls, and nine boarders. Of these boarders four adults were single, one adult was married but not accompanied by his wife, and four were members of the M. N. G. G. (husband, wife, and two children ages six months and four years). Two years later Smith was still in Sioux Falls, but according to the city directory he was then working at the Queen Bee Mill. Another more typical example would be John McKee, age thirty-three, who was born in Scotland. McKee, a harness maker, along with his wife, daughter, and son, boarded two young men, ages eighteen and nineteen, also listed as harness makers, plus an eleven-year-old girl who was attending school.

Even preachers turned their homes into boardinghouses. The census indicates that Rev. J. W. Marsh and his wife, both born in Illinois, included in their household a twenty-one-year-old daughter and seven other people. The nonfamily members included a housekeeper and her twenty-six-year-old daughter who along with two other single boarders listed their occupation as milliners. The household also contained a twenty-four-year-old servant girl from Germany, and a lawyer and his wife. This household is an interesting mixture of people of different professions and from different parts of the country and world. Four were born in Illinois, three in New York, one in Wisconsin, and one in Germany. When the first city directory appeared in 1882, Marsh had evidently moved on, since he is not included in the list of residents.

THE BUILDING TRADES

Those in the building trades constituted an important element of the town’s population. The railroad made lumber cheaper and more available, but it also made it easier for more people to arrive in Sioux Falls. As a result, residential construction was unable to keep up with demand; the sound of saw and hammer must have been unrelenting. Given this situation it is not surprising to find that nearly half of the city’s population was in skilled or unskilled labor occupations. In the skilled category, which constituted almost a quarter of the independent adult population, 42 percent were listed in the building trades as carpenters, masons, painters, or plasterers. Indeed, nearly a quarter (23 percent, or 60 of 276) of all skilled workers were listed as carpenters. It is interesting to note that most of the carpenters resided in their own homes rather than boarding with someone else. I. L. Philley, age twenty-four, born in New York and listed as carpenter, was married to Ada, born in Wisconsin, and they had a one-year-old daughter born in Dakota Territory. Benjamin H. Stone, age forty-three, and his wife Sarah, like Philley also born in New York, had four sons ranging in age from two to fourteen. The two older boys had been born in Wisconsin while the four-year-old was born in New York and the two-year-old had been born in Dakota Territory. A number of the carpenters were foreigners, particularly from Norway, where many had specialized in carpentry as servants on large farms before emigrating to America. An example is Andrew Erickson, age thirty-eight, and his wife, both born in Norway. Erickson is a bit atypical since he had no children, but their household did include a twenty-three-year-old servant girl, also born in Norway. Paul Rutte, twenty-seven, and John Halverson, thirty, both single and born in Norway, were boarding in hotels. Peter Oleson and Christian Oleson, on the other hand, were married, had children, and lived in their own homes. The two Olesons had been in the United States for some time since Peter had a three-year-old son born in Minnesota and a two-year-old daughter born in Nebraska. Christian had a daughter nine years old and a son two years old who had been born in Illinois and a one-year-old born in Dakota Territory. Of all these Norwegian carpenter examples, only Peter Oleson was still residing in Sioux Falls two years later when the first city directory was published.
If we break down the status of those boarding and those providing board, we should not be surprised to find that those who were self-employed or in a profession provided nearly 40 percent of the boarding places. More than half of the boarders (not including the servants) came from the skilled and unskilled labor occupations. The latter were probably the most mobile segment of the community; many undoubtedly were farmers seeking some cash to carry them through to a first crop.

DOMESTIC SERVANTS

It should not be a surprise to find that the 1880 federal census listed 137 domestic servants. In nineteenth-century America young women had few options for occupations outside the home. Those who received a better education could teach school, but for most young women old enough to leave home, domestic service was what they did until they were married. Almost a quarter of the households in Sioux Falls had one or more servants, and it is likely that these were households with several children and the means to employ a servant. Not that servants were paid much. Board and room constituted most, if not all, of the domestic servants' remuneration. Only four of the 137 persons who listed their occupation as servant were married, and 95 percent of all servants were women. Interestingly, about half of the domestic servants were American-born and half foreign-born.

While it was typical to have single servant girls listed in a residence, it was also common to have several “servants” listed in hotels and boardinghouses, since in all cases they resided at their place of employment. Harry Corson, for instance, the forty-two-year-old proprietor of the Cataract Hotel, lived on the premises with his wife and daughter, his brother Henry and his wife, together with a cook born in Tennessee and ten servants. These servants, only two of whom were men, ranged in age from seventeen to twenty-six and hailed from Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Norway.

Ethnicity naturally brought servants and their employers together in some instances, such as in Knute Thompson's Thompson House hotel. Thompson, his wife, Rachel, and their three sons ages one, four, and six years old (the older two born in Wisconsin and the youngest in Dakota Territory) employed three servant girls ages seventeen, twenty-three, and thirty, all having Norwegian names even though one of them was born in Wisconsin rather than Norway. Thompson continued to run the Thompson House until near the end of the decade, when he moved entirely into the farm implement business. Ethnicity did not always determine the employment of servants. Father John K. Brogan, an Irish-born Catholic priest, employed a housekeeper born in Norway and a servant girl born in Sweden.

THE IMMIGRANTS

The founders of Sioux Falls were all Yankees, either born in the northeastern states or one generation removed. By 1880, however, foreign immigrants also constituted an important element of the community. According to the federal census figures, 63 percent of the independent adults in Sioux Falls were American-born, but about half of the independent adults had parents who were both born abroad. In short, it appears that about half of the independent adults were either first- or second-generation immigrants. The American-born were a larger percentage of every occupation group except that of unskilled laborer, and those born in the northeastern part of the United States dominated the business community. But the foreign-born were represented in 20 percent or more of every occupational category. Foreign-born residents, comprising 37 percent of the independent adults, came from a variety of countries, with nearly 4 percent from England, 5 percent from Germany, 5 percent from Sweden, 6 percent from Ireland, and slightly more than 10 percent from Norway. The remaining percentage was either
of unknown origin or came from other countries.

That Norwegians constituted the largest foreign-born group is explained by the fact that a resumption of large-scale Norwegian immigration coincided with the onset of the Dakota boom. While most Norwegian immigrants sought to become landowning farmers, many temporarily or permanently sought opportunities in the frontier urban centers. Norwegians in Sioux Falls, unlike the other foreign-born ethnic groups, were employed across the entire spectrum of occupations, including the professional, self-employed, and public official categories. A. T. Fleetwood, fifty-two and born in Norway, had been serving as postmaster in Sioux Falls for more than a year when the 1880 census was taken and continued in that position for several more years. Two Norwegians, thirty-four-year-old U. Hyerdahl and twenty-nine-year-old Hans Easton, are listed as druggists, and twenty-three-year-old P. A. Havrevold was reading law in a local attorney's office while boarding at the Commercial House hotel.

Norwegians were well represented as business proprietors in 1880 according to the census schedule. Eleven merchants born in Norway ran grocery, dry goods, furniture, drug, and hardware and feed stores or blacksmith and tailor shops or hotels. Most of these Norwegian businessmen had spent some time in the Midwest before coming to Sioux Falls. Edward Larson, a forty-three-year-old tinsmith and dealer in hardware, is a good example. He and his wife were both born in Norway, as were their three oldest children ages eleven to eighteen. But their eight-year-old daughter was born in Rushford, Minnesota, and their three-year-old son was born in Sioux Falls. Birthplace is reflected in the children's names. The three born in Norway are named Christina, Oscar, and Hilda while the three born in the United States are named Maggie, Albert, and George. Larson eventually developed his retail hardware business into a regional wholesale hardware distributorship.

A YOUNG POPULATION

The census reveals that Sioux Falls had a young population. Nearly 80 percent of the independent adults were younger than forty years of age. Only 8 percent of the independent adults were fifty years old or older, while almost 40 percent were in their twenties. The self-employed adults were the oldest group, though the largest portion of them was younger than fifty. The youngest group in town was the servants, 83 percent (114) of whom were seventeen to twenty-nine years of age. The age distribution of both American- and foreign-born adults was very similar except that there were more American-born in the youngest and oldest age categories.

The age of the population had an obvious impact on the number of children in the community, and this factor caused Sioux Falls to wrestle with the issue of providing adequate education very early in its history. There were nearly 800 dependent children in the community in 1880, which means that children constituted 37 percent of the town's population. One hundred seventy-nine families had a total of 361 school-age children, or an average of about two school-age children per family. The average number of school-age children among the foreign-born population was 2.4 children per family compared to the 1.7 school-age children in the American-born families. Among the foreign-born families with school-age children, the Irish had the highest average number, 2.7, while the Norwegians had the lowest average number, 1.7 school-age children per family. In all, 53 percent of school-age children in Sioux Falls were from American-born families while 47 percent were from foreign-born families. It is clear that the Sioux Falls schools in 1880 were teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) even more than they are today.

While the census indicates that there were 361 school-age children in the community, it also indicates that only 259 (or 72 percent) were actually attending school. These figures
FIG. 5. This view of Sioux Falls appeared in the December 7, 1892, issue of the Sioux Falls Pantagraph. It show the town’s rapid growth by the number and size of buildings in the downtown area and its expanding residential neighborhoods. Courtesy of the Center for Western Studies, Augustana College.

accord with a newspaper report on school enrollment in September 1879, which stated that the term had begun with 220 pupils. Several more students were expected to attend who were “yet employed in various ways by their parents.” There were twenty-eight students in grades 7, 8, and high school, while the remainder was in grades 1 through 6. Central School, located on the current site of the Washington Pavilion, was constructed in 1878. It housed most of the school population, but by the fall of 1879 a school was already operating on the east side of the river. Within the next two years, the city was forced to construct more schools as the school-age population continued to increase and residential areas extended farther from the downtown area.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

The federal census also gives us some idea of the role of women in the Sioux Falls community. As indicated above, women constituted only about 40 percent of the adults in the community. Out of the total of 1,373 adults listed in the census, 838 were men, 311 were dependent wives, and 224 were independent women. The 224 independent women constituted only 16 percent of the adult population and more than half of them (130) were employed as domestic servants. The remaining 94 independent women were represented in every occupation category except that of farmer. In the professional category all the women were teachers. The self-employed
women were mainly dressmakers and milliners but also included one hotel keeper and two madams of houses of prostitution. A small number of women clerked in stores, but all that we would term secretaries were men. Those women categorized as being in skilled occupations were cooks, bakers, or prostitutes,\(^\text{35}\) while some women were in unskilled occupations like hotel maid. Clearly, Sioux Falls reflected the mores of late-nineteenth-century America in terms of the roles open to women outside the home.

**CONCLUSION**

It is clear that Sioux Falls shared fully in the early years of the Dakota boom and probably reflected the characteristics of many other frontier communities in the Northern Plains that experienced rapid growth. The last years of the 1870s were good years in the nation and in Dakota Territory. The economic depression, drought, and grasshoppers that had all but stopped immigration to Dakota and adjacent areas in the early and mid-1870s had ended. The economy was strong and expansive, and in Dakota Territory the rain came each year and the grasshoppers did not. Railroad access to southeastern Dakota and the Homestead Act worked together to bring the people. They came from New York, Pennsylvania, New England, and the states of the Old Northwest such as Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, from the newer midwestern states of Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa, and from Scandinavia and western Europe. People came faster than houses could be built to accommodate them, and business buildings were thrown up as quickly as lumber and labor could be procured. Sioux Falls, a young, white, and predominately male community in 1880, was not yet a stable community. Many of those people listed as residents in 1880 were gone when the first city directory was compiled two years later, having moved on to other Dakota towns or to take up land to farm.\(^\text{36}\) But the people kept coming to Sioux Falls during the 1880s, even when toward the end of the decade the rain again became undependable, and the 1890 federal census revealed that the town had become a city of 10,177 residents. Was Sioux Falls a typical frontier town? In most respects the answer is yes. Its leadership group was mainly from the older American states, it was predominately male, single, overwhelmingly white, and it contained a large immigrant population. And, yes, it did have bordellos and plenty of saloons.

**NOTES**


2. Sioux Falls Pantagraph, December 12, 1877.
3. Ibid., May 9, 1878.
4. Ibid., December 12, 1877.
5. Ibid., March 20, 1878.
6. Ibid., April 4, 1878.
7. Ibid., June 19, 1878.
8. Ibid., May 9, 1878.
9. Ibid., May 16, 1878.
11. Sioux Falls Pantagraph, July 24, 1878.
12. Ibid., July 31, 1878.
13. Ibid.
15. Chicago Commercial Advertiser, August 12, 1878.
17. Ibid., November 27, 1878.
18. Ibid., January 1, 1879.
19. Ibid., January 8, 1879.
20. Ibid., March 26, 1879.
22. Sioux Falls Pantagraph, June 4, 1879.
23. Ibid., July 26, 1879.
24. All the statistical data contained in the remainder of this paper are derived from the hand-written schedules of the Tenth Federal Census for Sioux Falls, Dakota Territory, US Bureau of the Census, microfilm copy.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 73.
29. Ibid., 91; *Sioux Falls City Directory* (Sioux Falls: Chas. Pettibone and Co. Publishers, 1889), 197.
30. It must be noted that for 138 entries the census did not include parents’ place of birth.
31. The high point of Norwegian immigration came in 1882 when nearly 29,000 Norwegians entered the US, and Norway experienced a net population loss.
32. *Sioux Falls Pantagraph*, February 6, 1879; *General City Directory of Sioux Falls* (1882-83), 34.
34. *Sioux Falls Pantagraph*, September 3, 1879.
35. The census listed the occupation of eight women as “prostitute.”
36. *General City Directory of Sioux Falls* (1882-83), passim.