

Early Days in Dakota Territory by B. G. Howden

(Editor's Note) The following story, which will be run in installments in this paper for the next few weeks, was written by a man who spent his early childhood and life in this territory, on the Bald Hill Creek, to the north, and it is our belief that a good many of our readers will enjoy his accounts of the early days. This story was published in the "Dakota Farmer" in 1942 from which place we are re-printing it (in 1948)

Folks do you like tales of the early days in Dakota written now by old timers who lived the experiences they tell? Dakota is one of the few remaining parts of the Continental United States where such current writings are still possible. They are not as hair-raising as the wild western stories of fiction, but are far truer to Dakota life as it was lived.

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My father, William Howden, came west in March, 1883, arriving in Sanborn, on the main line of the Northern Pacific Railway. His brother James had settled near Sanborn a year earlier. After spending a few days at Sanborn, my father, my uncle Jim and two friends started out with a team and a narrow-tired

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wagon to seek homesteads, they traveled north and west some 40 miles.

My uncle had the name of being a good shot with a revolver, and on this trip proved it. This being in March every pot hole and slough was filled with water and ducks were plentiful — a pair within range of my uncle's revolver. Stopping the team he remarked: "Now I'll shoot the head of that drake — wouldn't want to harm the duck." Sure enough he "made good his brag", and did exactly as he said he would — no game warden around in those days.

As the men proceeded onward, it started to rain a "drizzler" as a fine mist or rain is called. Meantime a stray dog had adopted the party and followed them, and each one of the men had laid claim to the dog during the day.

After driving all day in the cold, damp, March rain, father was pretty well discouraged and then they were struggling in the valley of the Bald Hill Creek, where the ground was very rough, having been trampled by the buffalo in wet weather.

After bumping over the buffalo wallows

and tracks in the wagon, father told the other three that if they would give him the dog they could have the whole country. Never the less he went back to the filing office and filed on SW¹/₄ of Sec 32, T. 146, Range 60 to the west, on on the east bank of the Bald Hill Creek.

In April he secured a fine team of horses at Sanborn and drove out to the claim with what now a days we would consider a mighty small amount of equipment: a walking plow, a few dishes, a stove and a good supply of oats for the horses.

Building a Home.

His first job was to build a sod shanty, 10x12, then he began to turn the virgin soil. With his fine big team he broke 40 acres that summer. When early winter came, two neighbor homesteaders moved in with father, and there they spent the winter of 1883-84.

Altho father was then nearly 30 and had never smoked, he learned to use a pipe that winter. The other two men smoked and father's excuse for taking up tobacco was that the winter evenings were very, very long, and chores were few, and a man had to have some way of passing the time.

In the early spring of 1884 father came back to Ontario, Canada, where mother and we 3 children had stayed. I was only five, but I well remember father standing by my bed when I awakened on the morning of his return. He had let his whiskers grow while in Dakota and we children did not know him at first sight.

The Trip to Dakota -

After a few weeks in Canada, father bought a carload of horses and shipped them to Dakota, he and two young men going along in the car to handle and care for the horses. Mother, my brother, sister, and myself rode, more comfortably in a first class coach, arriving at Sanborn ahead of the horse car, and putting up at uncle Jim's little Shanty.

In a few days father arrived with the horses, and after getting straightened around we all started out for the new homestead, 40 miles north west. I don't remember clearly, but think two teams were driven, and the other horses led.

With a good early start we got day within a mile of our shanty, but Bald Hill Creek was

so high it could not be forded. With mother and the small children along, some shelter had to be found, and the men finally located a shack occupied by an old Scotchman and his wife. They were glad to welcome us, and though there were seven in the crowd, we got by some how for room.

Crossing the Creek

Next day the ice had broken in the Creek, and father and the two men crossed by using a new tight wagon box as a boat, leaving the family and horses with the good Scotch neighbors. The day after they took mother, brother and sister over, leaving me.

That night the weather turned cold enough to form thin ice on the Creek, stopping boating, but not so thick as to support a man, so, to get me across the Creek, father and one of the men got two long boards. Walking the length of one board on the ice — and carrying me — they then shoved the other board ahead, and, one board after another we crossed the rather wide channel safely, and I had that day the first sight of our new home.

Well I remember my first meal in the sod shack, with an old fashioned tool box for

for table, and some benches father had made instead of chairs, and to hold mother's new boiler and cooking utensils.

That first summer passed quickly for us children, with trapping gophers and exploring the surrounding country. Father made a little bed for us children, small enough to be shoved under his and mother's bed day times, to save room in the crowded shanty.

A Bad Fire.

I remember very little of interest the summer of 1886, but I do remember very distinctly the prairie fire that came that fall. There was a range of hills some 20 miles north-west of us, and up there we had noticed a fire backing against the wind - at night we could see it like a great, red ribbon. Suddenly one afternoon the wind changed and the fire came down Bald Hill Creek like a race horse taking everything in its path.

Father had a few stacks of wheat near the house. He and some neighbors got out their walking plows and horses and ran furrows as long as they could stand the heat and until hands and feet were singed. Even then the way the fire came

it looked mighty bad for us, but luckily for the wind swung a little to the east long enough so the fire changed direction and missed our wheat stacks.

The fire jumped the Creek like a hound, and once it had crossed the potted land gained speed traveling up hill. Our neighbors on the other side of the Creek lost their sod stable, some harness and two large pigs that were fenced in. We could hear those pigs squealing although they were half a mile from our place. Our own wood pile was burned right by the shack, showing how close we came to being wiped out. During the worst of the fire, mother and we three children lay face down on the floor, to get under the smoke and have a chance to breathe.

Bones and Gophers

There were plenty of buffalo bones on the prairie when we first arrived. When the settlers had done with their breaking of the sod which was generally in July, when the roots became too tough to plow a good job they would take the team and

wagon and gather bones. If I remember correctly buffalo bones brought \$8.00 a ton, and I have seen bones piled like cord wood at different shipping points.

It was a great year for us children when the county paid a premium of three cents on each gopher tail. We made good money while it lasted, but the county had to discontinue for lack of funds. When premium paying first began tails were accepted only at the county auditor's office, but merchants soon accepted them in their places of business, turning them in to the auditor, later, for cash. I have many times bought candy with gopher tails. I know of two brothers—both dead shots—who went out with a gentle horse and a buggy, shooting gophers as a business while that premium was being paid. They used shot guns, loading their own shells with light loads, and were able to make their three dollars each per day.

The great event in the years 1887-1888 in our lives was the terrible blizzard

of Jan. 12, 1888, I have told before (see the Dakota Farmer of February 23, 1946) of my brother Dick's and my experience of three days in a schoolhouse during that storm.

Another big event, in 1889, while I was still attending country school, was the admission of Dakota Territory into the Union and its separation into two states.

Running Bronchos

Having by then spent several years in Dakota, we had quite a few bronchos purchased from droves coming through from Montana. Those large droves or bunches of bronchos always camped over night at our place, there being plenty of spring water in Bald Hill Creek, and good grass.

The largest bunch I remember being was 90 head. There were colors of every kind from blue to pinto. There were five drivers or cowboys, and they were the 'real thing'. I enjoyed seeing them "rope" their saddle horses in the morning for the day's ride. We called them "broncho men" in those days.

In later years when we had fences, the broncho men would run their bunch in a fence for the night and get away ~~from~~ the job of night herding. I remembered to the foreman of one bunch on the fine saddle he was using.

"Come over to the wagon here," he answered, "and I will show you a real saddle" and he did - the finest saddle I have ever seen, and doubtless worth several hundred dollars.

Those bunches of bronchos were driven to some town and put in corrals, as all livery barns had corrals in those days. There the farmers could pick out their choice, then would rope it and then either hitch it or ride for the first time in the animal's life. Father got a pinto five years old that had never had a halter on. When we had him broke, he was the most gentle and best saddle horse I ever rode.

My First Mount

That wasn't the first horse I had ridden. The pony we had was a bay that Father got from some Indians traveling through

from Fort Totten to the Standing Rock Reservation. It was on this old gentle pony I learned to ride. After I had ridden him a few times he became my boss. When I tried to ride him away from the buildings he would rub up against the sod stable and push me off his back. If that didn't work he would balk.

One day brother Dick and I started out on horseback to visit neighbor boys who lived five miles away. I had the old Indian pony, while Dick had a high-lived broncho we called Bill. I couldn't keep the old pony going, so we traded horses. Then, as we speeded up, "Bill" ran away with me. Now I did yell "Whoa", but to no avail. Finally I pulled on one ~~reign~~ rein and got him running in circles, so Dick, by cutting through the center, was able to stop him and I was very willing to trade back to my horse.

About this time dad decided to run a herd of both horses and cattle. Dick and I were the herders. We generally had about 150 cattle and 60 or 70 horses. They

were taken in from neighbors in the surrounding country. Our rules were that we were to take care of them from May 1st till October 15th, at \$2⁰⁰ per head per season for the horses and \$1⁵⁰ for the cattle.

In the Saddle

Seven days a week — sunshine or rain — we had to be on the job, corralled them at night and let them out at seven each morning. Nearly all the horses were bronchos and were branded. When brought to our place some were halter broke, others driven loose. We boys were supposed to them from straying or going home and we had to have saddle horses fast enough to turn them. There was one out law leader in our bunch that we chased as far as 10 miles before getting her, and her bunch of five, turned back. We got tired of this and complained to the owner. One day he came, got the broncs into the corral and caught this leader, and here is what he did; put a halter on her with about 50 feet of rope, then tied a large fence post on the end. She spent most of the day backing up and snorting,

but about sundown she "went into high". She hit the wagon road to Cooperstown and ran all the way, which was 12 miles.

Brother Dick let out after her, but that one horse he didn't boss. After getting to within the post he drove her home and we got her in the barn and left her there overnight. Next morning it was hard to tell what kind of an animal she was - the road had been dusty, and she was covered with dust mixed with sweat and foam, besides being as gaunt as a greyhound, but she lived through it.

Drifting Cattle

I, being the younger of the two boys, it was my job to handle the cattle. We always had at least two dogs, but they got so foot sore they would hardly leave the house. It always seemed in those days that we could always depend on a 34 bay rain when the sun "crossed the line" as we called it - the equinoctial storm. The cattle would drift with the wind, and it was almost impossible to drive them against it. We sometimes worked hours

To gain a mile with the cattle, while the horses would run maybe a half mile against the wind then turn and drift back. Give them another start and they would repeat the act. Many times I have sat in the saddle in one certain position for hours, dared not turn my head or the rain would run down the back of my neck.

Indian Scare

This brings me up to the year 1891, when the Indians went on the war path for the last time. There was quite a lot of excitement at times, and different folks would tell what they would do if attacked. One day some neighbor boys came over to our place to visit and of course "they were afraid of the Indians". Brother Dick did some scheming, and put me wise, so while he fix up his rig I kept the boys in the barn. When Dick had rigged himself with an Indian mask some turkey feathers on his head, a butcher knife in one hand, and an old revolver in the other, he hid behind the house. My sister gave me a sign and I got the boys to follow me to the house,

Just as we came up Dick let out a war whoop and appeared at the corner of the house, I saw, but you couldn't see the other boys for dust! Some ran into the house, but one poor lad went out across the prairie - I had to get out a saddle horse to catch up with him, and even after explaining, had a hard time coaxing him back to the house.

Threshing Days

Father threshed for many years in Dakota. I well remember in the fall of '89, when he stayed for three weeks on one farm and only got in $1\frac{1}{2}$ days' threshing in that time. It rained nearly all fall. Dad had a steam rig of course, fired with straw. He had an old Scotchman who fired our engine. Many mornings he would get up at four and fire up, and about time steam was up it would rain again.

After several mornings of this the Scotchman became thoroughly disgusted, and next time it happened he just let the whistle open and walked away, letting her blow until all the steam was gone. Only about half the threshing was done in

the fall, though I remember seeing bundles hauled to the rig on sleighs in December. Some threshing was done in the spring of 1892, but much of the grain spoiled.

I am sure that Dakota produced the most bushels of grain per acre in 1891 that it ever has. In the early fall before the rains began father threshed wheat fields yielding as high as 40 bushels per acre. He had a 36 inch separator fed by hand. Never-the-less he turned out many days as high as 3,000 bushels. He put in 40 days that fall and had the same crew of men when he quit as when he started.

We had a frame house by this time, and dad let the men sleep upstairs in the house, instead of in the barn as was the custom when the weather was warm enough. I wonder where the good old bunch of Irishmen has scattered to — Charley Foley, Bill Haggarty, Tom McGuire, Jerry Murphy, Charley O'Neal, John Laughlin, and Pat Donahoe. The last was as good a tap dancer as I ever saw, Tom McGuire a fine reader, and John Laughlin a good singer.

Tough Days

Tough Days

I should have told earlier about the time Father and two neighbors went 17 miles to get wood from the Sheyenne River. They used oxen and were gone two days. The first day they reached the river, cut and loaded their wood, preparing to return home the next day. But on the way a blizzard struck. Meantime, at home mother, the children and a neighbor who was doing the chores while father was away had very little fuel. Dad had a large sod stable with poles and hay for a roof, and the neighbor chopped out every pole and post that could be spared from the stable, to burn for fuel. I still remember how glad we were to see the men coming in with the loads of wood, and wearing buffalo overcoats and with grain sacks tied over their heads to keep from freezing after fighting the blizzard. I have heard of incidents in those days where folks ~~had~~ were compelled to burn their furniture to keep from freezing.

That same winter father made an 80 mile round trip to Mayville to get

his wheat ground into flour.

Antelope

In the winter of 1893 there was about two feet of snow on the level, and in January we had a 2-day blizzard. On the third day, following the storm, a neighbor told of seeing antelope some two miles west. I was then 12 years old and had never seen antelope, so I saddled my horse and rode over. I sighted them, and as there was a hay stack between the herd and me I rode up behind the stack and sat and watched the animals. After a while I decided to see them run, came around the stack and headed for the herd. I was surprised to find that my horse could out-run the antelope in the snow, so I singled out one animal and kept it on the run for about a mile, till it was winded.

I slid off the horse and got the antelope by the neck, and we had some tussle. I was small for my age and had neither gun, rope, nor knife, and to make a bad matter worse, my horse went home and left me. But I stuck to my prize and

walked home. Next day my sister and I went out and got another; we had a rope and took this antelope home alive, I bought ~~two~~ two more from my uncle and kept the three in captivity for two years.

Wild Geese

Now for a few words about wild geese — I have seen them by the thousands, when the space of a hundred acres looked like it was covered with snow. When still too small to handle a gun, I walked out into the fields to see the geese feeding and hear them "talking," when I was 13 dad let me take his 10 gauge shotgun, and I got three geese the first time I tried, and did I feel big carrying those home.

There were some lakes 8 miles north of our place, and in the evenings I have seen geese heading for those lakes in continuous strings as far as the eye could see. Hunters could go to the lakes in the early morning, hide behind banks and shoot as many geese as they wished.

Those Old Flues

Again I wander back to those herding days. We had separate corrals for the horses and cattle. The horse corral was a picket fence - the kind used for snow fence now. We had three old engine flues for bars to the gate, the ends tied to the gate posts with old rope. Horses are great ones to rub and chew on rope for wood, and they got so they would get the bars down and break out nights.

Dick and I slept in the hay mow and when we would hear the old flues rattle and hit the ground, it meant to get downstairs, grab bridle and saddle and ride in the dark after the horses. In the fall of the year when the grain was in shock, we took many a spill over a shock that could not ~~be~~ be seen in the dark.

Twenty years later, Dick and I happened to sleep together in a hotel room and in the middle of the night heard a noise. Dick asked me what the noise reminded me of. I answered, "Those old flues."

Big Scale Farming

A few words about farming on a large scale. In 1898, father began buying more land, breaking it, and sowing flax the first year. One spring I started breaking on May 10th and did nothing else until July 9th. When seeding was done father put on another plow and we broke 200 acres that summer. Father and Dick, together, owned 1,400 acres of land at one time, and as Dick was in the merchantile business, dad and I farmed all the land. We generally kept three monthly men and as many as 20 in threshing time. We ran four binders. The biggest field of wheat I ever cut around was 260 acres. At another time a hired man and I cut around 160 acres of flax with two 7-foot binders. It was a long way to the center of that field.

It seems hard to believe that we now have a surplus of wheat, for I am sure there were as many bushels raised on my father's farm in those days as there are in some townships now. Of course there are many more farms in the state now

Flood Troubles

We sometimes had floods in those days. The winter of 1896-97 was a bad one. Snow started on October 26th, and during the winter 3 feet of snow lay on the level, with the ground unfrozen under the snow. In the spring Bald Hill Creek was the highest I ever saw it — the whole bottom land was covered with water.

Several neighbors living across the Creek had gone to Cooperstown for supplies. When they got back to our place two wooden bridges had been washed out, and they had to wait several days for the water to recede. The men folks would go down to the water's edge every day to see how much it had gone down. One party placed a rock at the water's edge for a marker — as soon as they had gone back to the house another party moved the rock up the hill a few feet.

The men dared each other every day to see who would be the first to swim his team across the creek. The first to start across had forgotten to chain down his wagon box. When he reached the

main channel the box floated off the wheels letting the king bolt and front bolster stay with the wagon box. The horses went across with the front wheels, while the driver drifted down stream.

When he had drifted some distance the bolster dropped off and went to the bottom.

By having a blacksmith shop outfit, a long rod was made with a hook on the end and, using another new wagon box as a boat, the men fished out the bolster. The rest of the teamsters learned to chain their loads down and went across the creek with less trouble.

The End