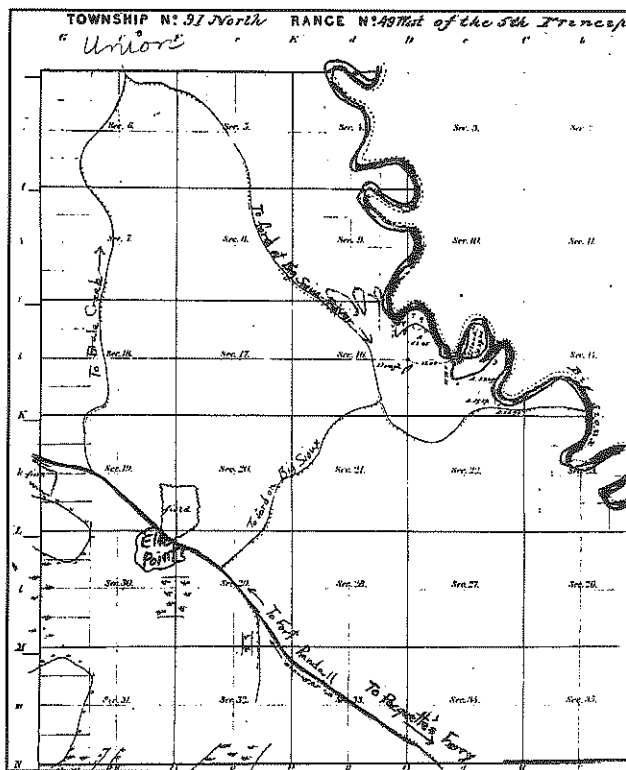
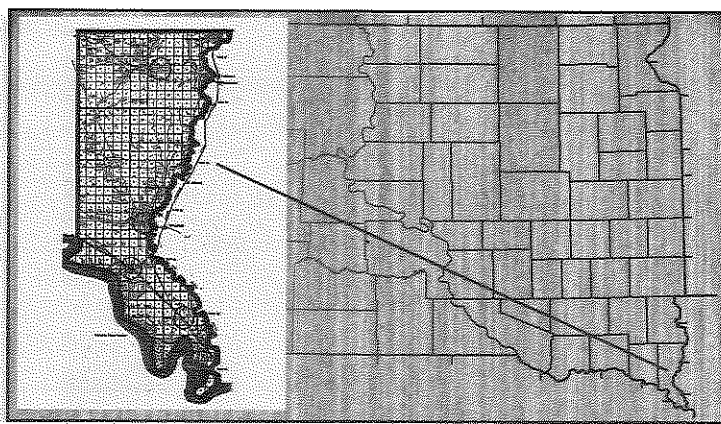


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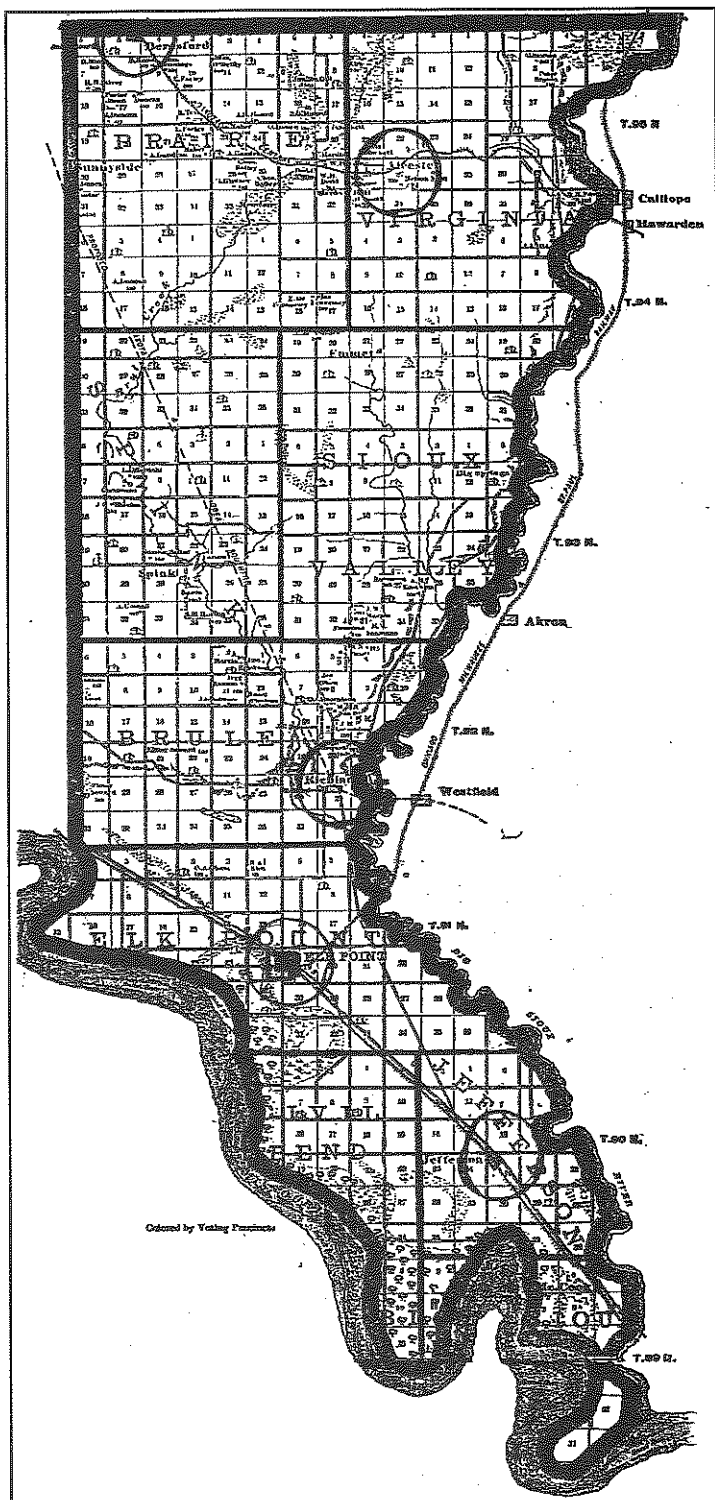
## Union County, Then and Now

In 1859, Austin Cole, 45, who with his wife and children had come from Pennsylvania Quaker country and then Iowa, lived close to the Military Road near the Pacquette Ferry on the Big Sioux River. Cole was elected to the First Dakota Territorial Legislative Assembly representing the district known as "Cole Country." A social and refined gentleman, he later moved to Bon Homme County where he was again elected to the legislature. The family returned to Iowa in 1875.

The first county seat was located at Richland, a few miles north and east of Elk Point between Brule Creek and the Big Sioux River. In 1863, the second legislature changed the county's name from Cole to Union in support of the northern cause of the Civil War, and in April 1865, voters moved the county seat from Richland to Elk Point.



An 1861 Union County survey map locates branches leading from Fort Randall Road northeast to a ford on the Big Sioux River and (above Elk Point location) directly north to Brule Creek. Another trail approaches the Big Sioux ford from Brule Creek.



Andreas Atlas of Dakota 1884. Circled, bottom to top: Jefferson, Elk Point, Richland, Alcester, and (half-circle) Beresford.

A small graveyard north of Richland marks the location of the first homestead in Dakota Territory legally filed for by newspaperman Mahlon Gore on January 1, 1863. Gore had been living for several months on his site in a small cave/house that lay close to a bluff on the Big Sioux River bottom. He was part of a group of settlers who in 1862 built a square fort of logs along Brule Creek for protection from the Minnesota Santees, whom they feared to be on the warpath. Gore did not remain long in the county.

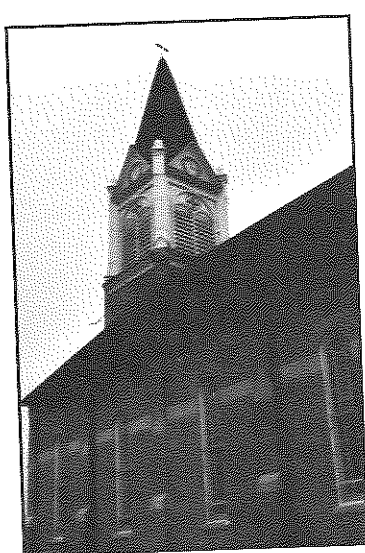
As early as 1861, a tiny river port called Texas Station lay six miles directly south of Elk Point in Civil Bend Township. A saw mill provided wood for passing steamboats and a hotel/post office/store served the public until the 1870s. A horse-powered ferry connected the station to Ponca Landing across the river in Nebraska. Another such hopeful but short-lived community called Liberty conducted its post office and business in Jimmy Curtis's riverside dwelling near the county line between Union and Clay Counties. It is possible that the two, Texas Station and Liberty, are one and the same.

Norwegian, Swedish, French, Irish and Danish immigrants formed the bulk of the first wave of settlers in Cole County.

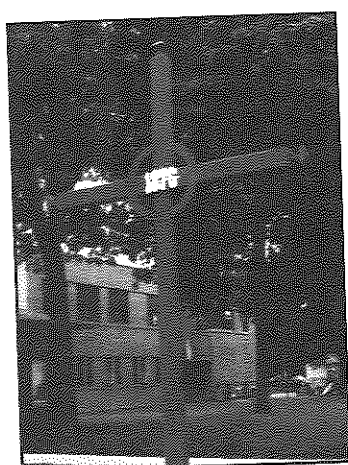
## Jefferson

Jefferson was a French community. Many who settled there in 1859 came from the Canadian provinces of Quebec and Ontario, others from Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa. A significant number of Irish, discouraged by the potato famine in Ireland along with other factors, may have been attracted to the Jefferson area by the Catholic Church which formed the nucleus of the community. The church and French heritage is still evident today in a thriving community of nearly 600.

One pioneer Irishman was Michael Ryan, 31, farmer from Ireland, who with his wife and three daughters had come from Wisconsin in 1860 and settled for a time in a home then known as Twelve Mile House on the Sioux City to Fort Randall Military Road. The substantial village of Jefferson grew about the pioneer home.



A gold cross glistens above the steeple of St. Peter's Catholic Church in Jefferson, built in 1891. The first St. Peter's, established in 1869, was first permanent Catholic Church in the Sioux Falls Diocese. Fr. Pierre Boucher is thought to be South Dakota's first resident Catholic priest.



A "Grasshopper Cross" stands alongside St. Peter's Catholic Church in Jefferson, replica of a rude cross erected in 1876 in the cemetery behind the church. A historical sign erected in 1966 by the State Historical Society and Regina Bernard in memory of her father, Pierre O. Bernard, states in part that Fr. Pierre Boucher led both Catholic and Protestant marchers on an eleven mile trek seeking Divine Intervention in the grasshopper plague. "It was the third cross erected that miraculous day. The grasshoppers left."

A severe smallpox epidemic struck the community in those early days and pioneer Irishman Daniel Murphy, who had settled west of the Jefferson community in 1867, was appointed to patrol the Government Road passing by his home. His duty was to warn travelers not to enter Elk Point if they had stopped at Jefferson and also to avoid Jefferson entirely. Woe to those who disregarded his advice!

Prior to the arrival of Catholic Father Pierre Boucher in 1867, Catholic services were held sporadically by a growing French Canadian congregation in a small log building later replaced by the first St. Peter's Catholic Church. In May 1876, responding to the plague of grasshoppers which settlers had endured for two years, Fr. Boucher led an eleven mile pilgrimage in a sort of rectangle around Jefferson, placing and praying before three wooden "grasshopper crosses." Forced by extremely muddy conditions to ride in wagons rather than walk as planned, Protestants and Catholics alike proceeded about two and one-third miles west of Jefferson to a corner of the Edward Morin land where they prayed and planted the first cross. The procession then traveled some distance south before turning east to the farm of Narcisse Montagnet where supplicants placed the second cross. The final cross was placed back in the churchyard cemetery. Within a few days the grasshopper plague lifted, a miraculous response petitioners attributed to prayer. A large commemorative replica on church grounds today interests visitors.

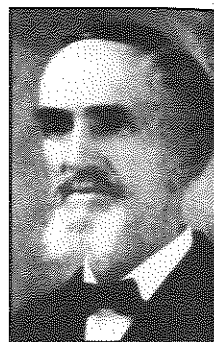
### **Eli B. Wixon and Elk Point**

After leaving the Jefferson vicinity, the Sioux City to Fort Randall Road angled toward Elk Point, like Jefferson, founded in 1859. All histories of Union County and Elk Point bear the name of Eli B. Wixon. Wixon was born in Wayne, New York, on May 6, 1833, proceeded to Sioux City in 1856 and to the Elk Point area in July 1859, where "not even a settler's cabin stood between Sioux Point and Green Point," he related. He married in 1865, had five children, and died in Elk Point on January 1, 1908.

Wixon's first house was fashioned of logs and measured 12x16 feet with dirt floor and roof. It served as hotel for travelers and trade store for Indians, and in 1860 as post office. He was first postmaster and distributed local mail from the four-mule-drawn mail wagon passing by on the Military Road en route to Fort Randall. His closest neighbors were a party of about 75 Santee Sioux from the Minnesota tribe with whom he had friendly relations.

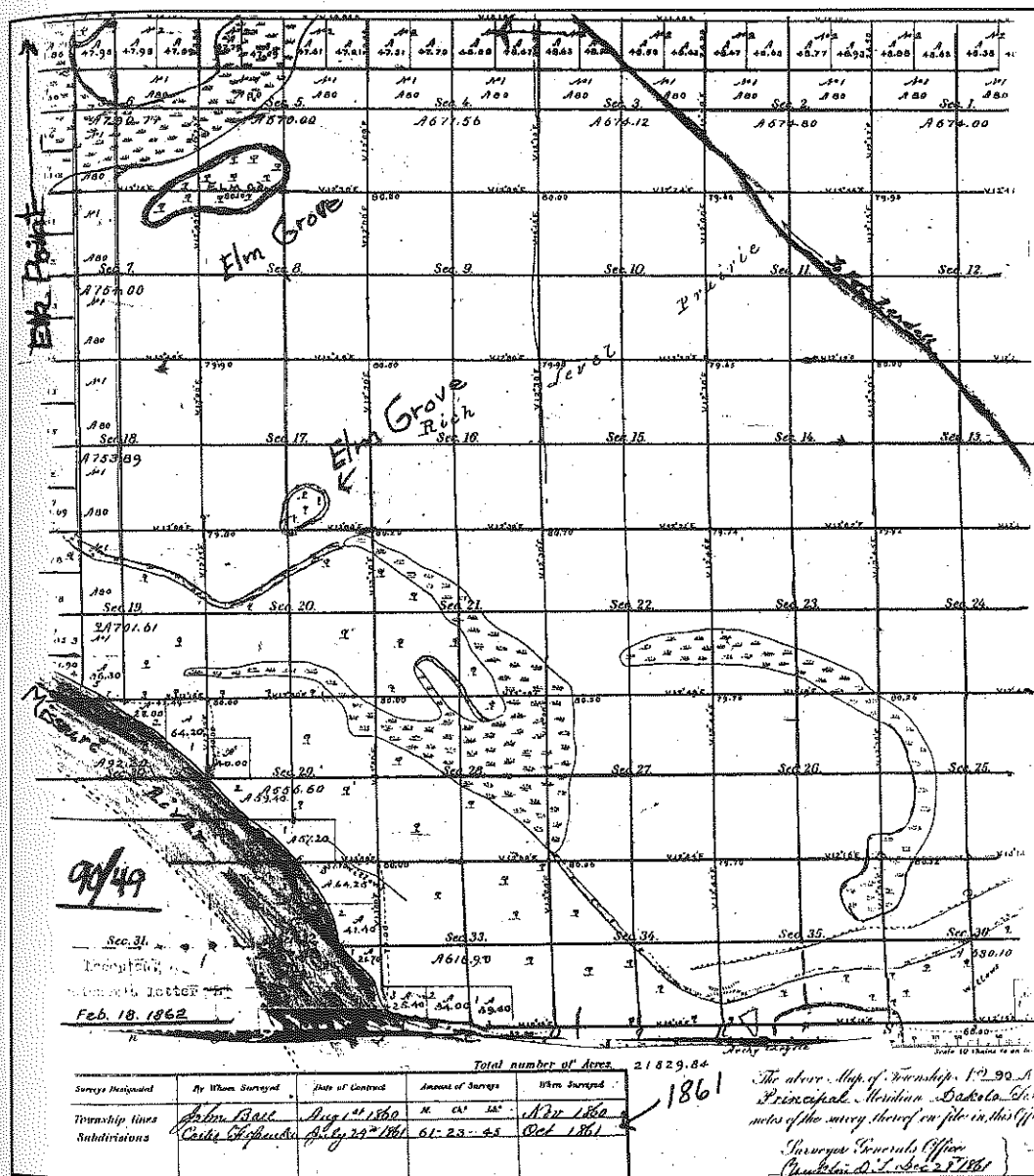
Wixon was called one day to the Indian camp to verify that their chief had died. However, the body, which was wrapped in an American flag, was warm. The tribe admitted that the chief had consumed a certain grayish powder which when smoked with kinnikinick could cause "a long sleep." Wixon wisely kept his own council, and the following afternoon the Indians departed with their now seriously dead chief for Minnesota, after a disturbing ceremony of self-mutilation.

In 1862, Wixon built a commodious two-story hotel in time to house the quickly organized volunteer soldiers of Company B, Dakota Cavalry who were to provide protection following the Minnesota Santee Sioux Indian Uprising. Sixty-one of Company B's 90 volunteer soldiers were from the Elk Point area, including Wixon himself as Commissary Sergeant.



Eli Wixon came to Elk Point area in 1859, first settler to brave the wilderness. He became a respected citizen of the town he founded.

Trees once grew prolifically in the bottoms between the Big Sioux River and Missouri River. According to memories of old settlers quoted in *SDHC, Volume 10*, a thirty-acre grove of large cottonwoods called Little Elm Grove once flourished in Section 17, T90N, R49W. As late as 1868 and 1869, poles of Indian burial platforms still lay high in the branches, connected to the ground by ladders fashioned from trunks of small trees. Little Elm's sister grove, Big Elm Grove was remembered as a favorite Indian campground. Big Elm lay in adjoining Section 16 about two and one-half miles southeast of Elk Point. Its giant cottonwoods disappeared one by one until only one



Little ground had been broken for farming in this 1861 survey map of Union County. Note relationship of large and small "Elm Groves" (upper left) and Fort Randall Road (upper right) to Missouri River (lower left).

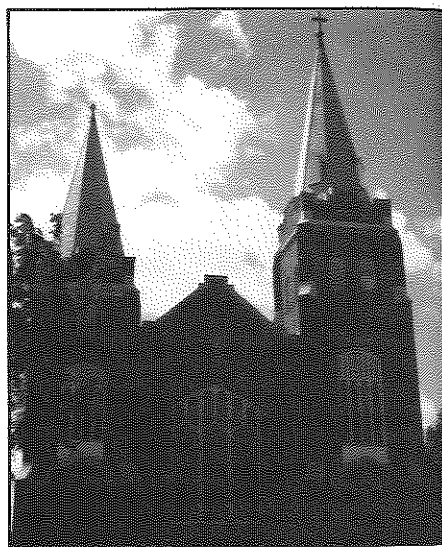
mighty tree measuring at least eight feet in diameter and 100 feet tall remained. It was known to passersby as "Lone Tree" and was said to have been used as a "message tree."

Because of Union County's proximity to the Missouri River, pioneer stories often related to steamboat wrecks. In 1857, while returning empty to Sioux City after delivering soldiers and military supplies to Fort Pierre, the *Kate Swinney* hit a snag and sank. Its Captain, officers and women sailed in the ship's yawl to the not-too-distant Sioux City. Crew members followed overland but were never seen again, supposedly victims of hostiles. Twenty-four years later (1881), F.M. Rust, who lived southeast of Little Elm Grove, uncovered several skeletons while procuring sand. Rust believed he had come upon an Indian burial ground; however, when a tooth with gold filling turned up, the sad tale of the crew of the *Kate Swinney* came to mind.

Early histories delight in describing the first wedding in Union County, short-lived as it was, which took place at Big Sioux Point. The groom, John Claude, wished to marry his "dusky bride," a relative of the St. Onge family, in a legal marriage ceremony. However, the only available Justice of Peace was from Sioux City, Iowa, and that official insisted that a Dakotan witness be present. Enos Stutsman from Yankton and several friends undertook the adventure, arriving somewhat boisterously in a wagon. Stutsman proceeded to deliver a lecture to the wedded couple that, coming from a bachelor, "contained some astounding statements and advice in which he did not appear to consider the physical endurance of the groom." This first quasi-legal wedding ceremony did not endure. The bride returned to her parental tepee two weeks later, alleging that she could no longer tolerate the odor emanating from her husband's feet. (*Yankton Press and Dakotan Centennial Edition*, 1961)

Union County's major creek, Brule Creek, home of the pioneer Brule Creek Settlement, continues to nourish rich farm land from the northern border of Union County to a point four and one-half miles northeast of Elk Point where it discharges into the Big Sioux River.

Elk Point, population around 1900, is an active community proud of its heritage which includes having been visited by Lewis and Clark both on August 22, 1804, and two years later on September 3, 1806. Other major pioneer communities in Union County include Beresford, population about 2,100, established in 1882 and incorporated on July 12, 1884; and Alcester, near 900, established in 1883. Beresford was named for Irishman Lord Charles Beresford, former Admiral in the British Navy and prosperous railroad investor. The historic village of North Sioux City lies on the South Dakota side of the Big Sioux River, and Dakota Dunes is a relatively recent modern community. Junction City, a community just east of Interstate 29 six miles east of Vermillion, was never a city at all but rates notice on the South Dakota highway map.



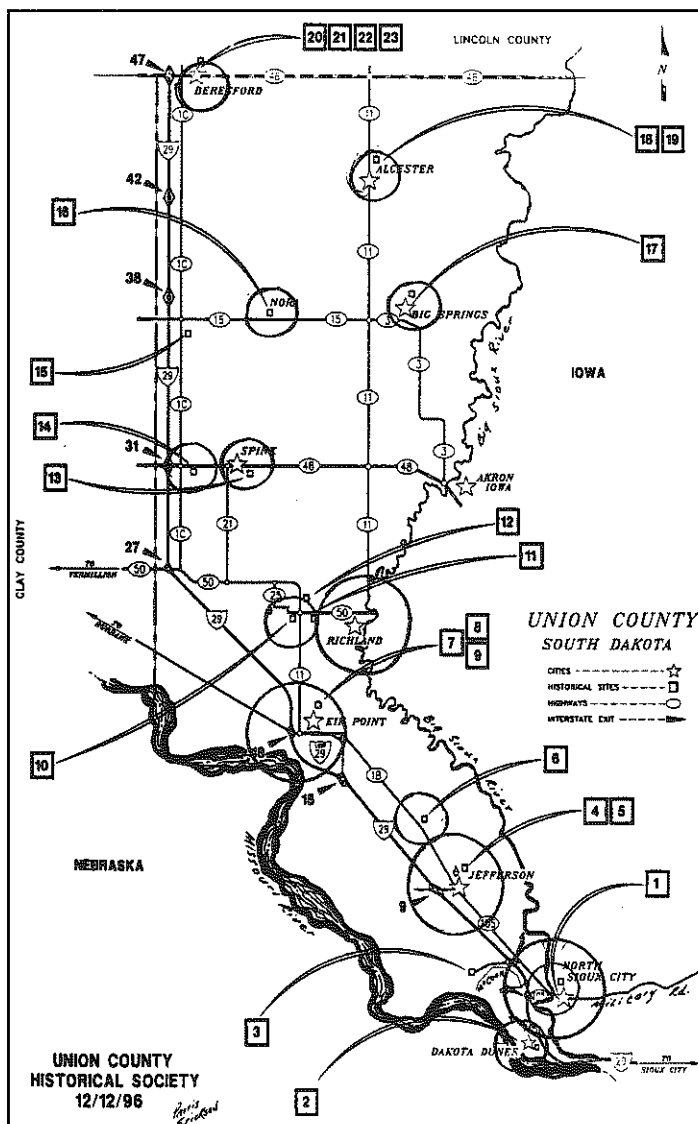
St. Paul Lutheran Church, located five miles north and one and one-fourth miles west of Elk Point, was built in 1922. The first Lutheran congregation in Dakota Territory, it organized on August 12, 1863, built its first church of logs in 1868 followed by a large frame church in 1877.

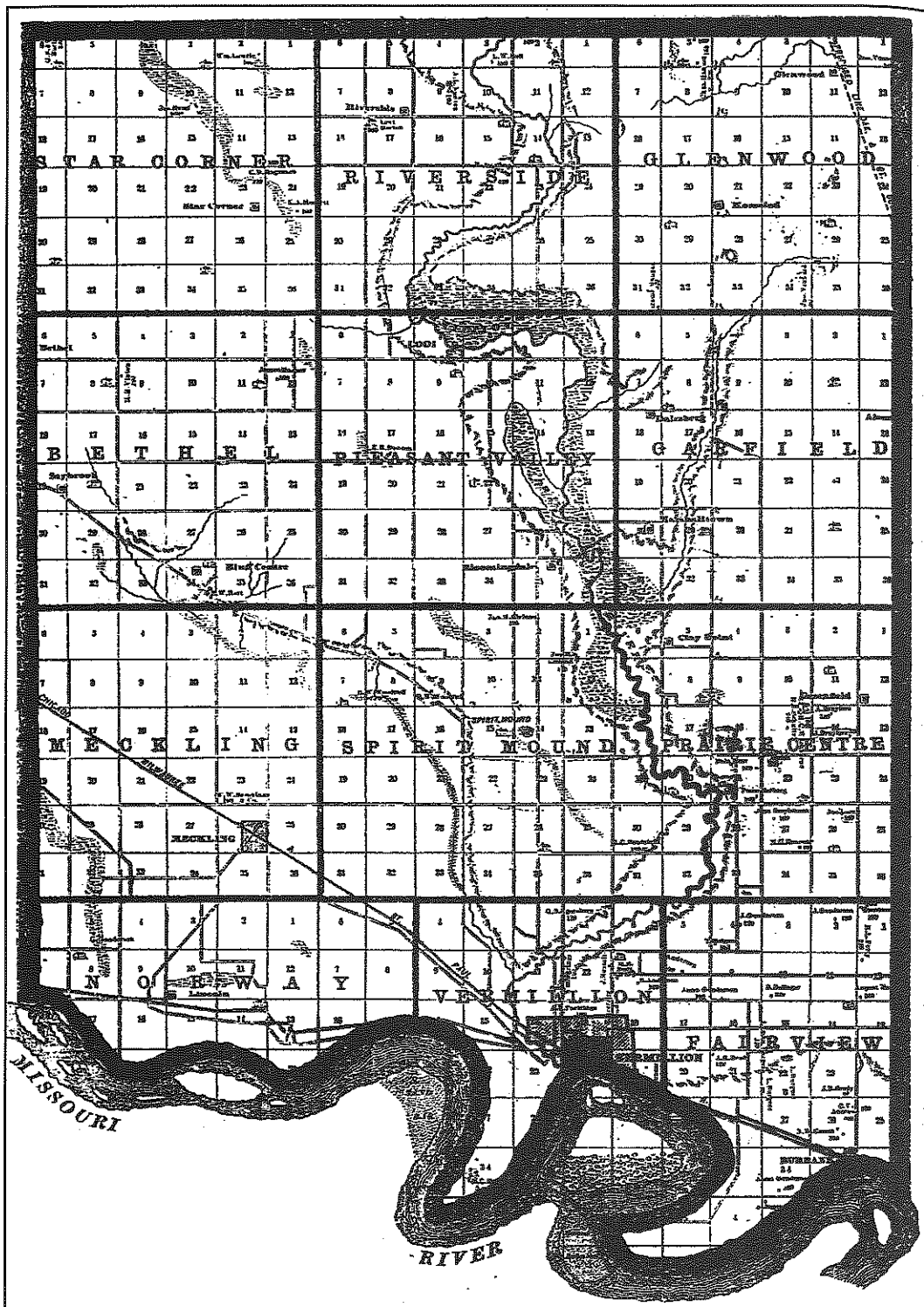
Pioneer communities Richland, Big Springs, Nora, and Spink also remain little more than dots on a map. Spink retains a set of buildings and a proud heritage, and Richland is remembered for having been first county seat, and for its pioneer Methodist Episcopal Church visited in 1861 by traveling Methodist Episcopal Missionary S.W. Ingham.

Historical sites of Union County:  
(Map drawn December 12, 1996,  
for Union County Historical  
Society by Parris Erickson is  
edited to sites most relevant to  
this history.)

1. Pacquette's Ferry
2. Dakota Dunes
4. St. Peter's Catholic Church,  
Jefferson
5. Grasshopper Crosses
6. Fourteen-Mile House
10. St. Paul Lutheran Church
13. Spink
- \*14. St. Mary's Church/  
Gary Owen Settlement
16. Nora Settlement
17. Big Springs Baptist Church
20. Beresford Depot

\*Gary Owen Settlement came  
from Limerick, Ireland, built  
St. Mary's Church in 1925,  
congregation dissolved in 1993.





Andreas Atlas of Dakota 1884. Note locations of Burbank (lower right), Vermillion, and Meckling, now on railroad. Lincoln Station appears far lower left on low road in Norway Township.