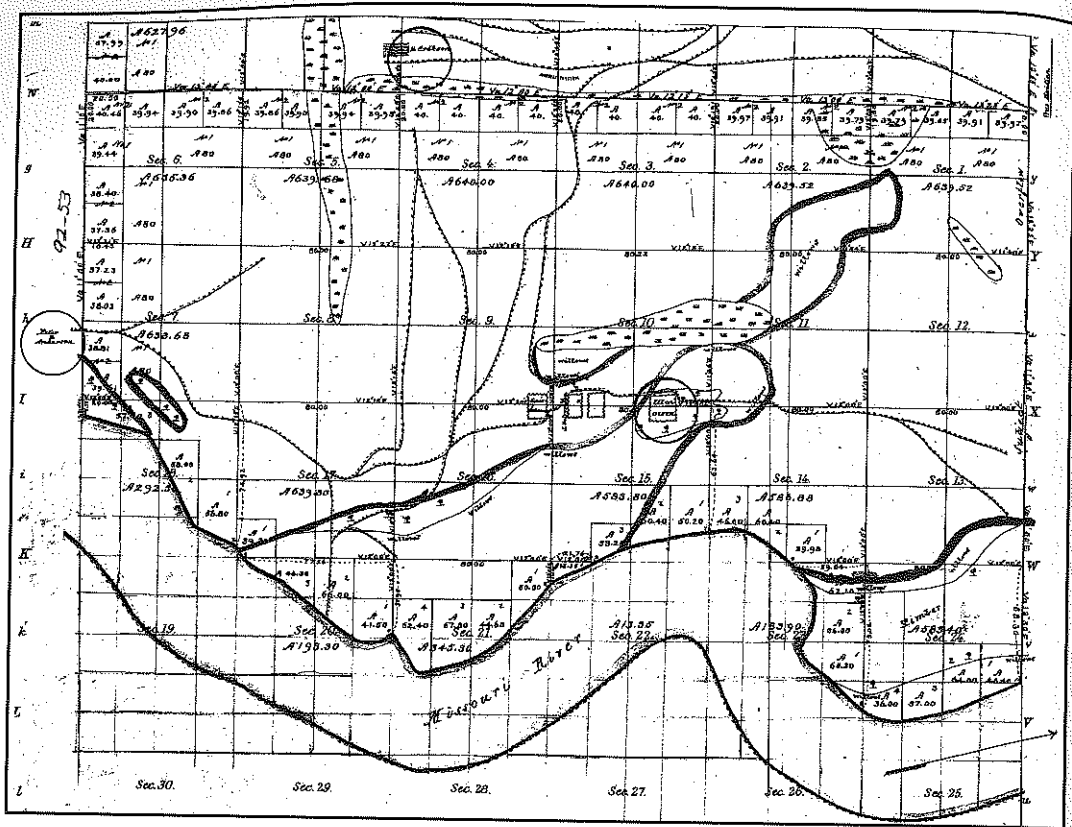# Clay County, Then and Now

Few white men had visited the fertile soil of Clay County before it was opened to settlement in 1859. One of the first was little-known Charles Le Raye, a Frenchman, whose journal recorded his presence in May 1802. That journal may have encouraged the 1804 Lewis and Clark Expedition to visit Spirit Mound where lore spoke of "little devils" inhabiting the region. The explorers encountered none but found the view from the summit impressive.

In 1822, the Columbia Fur Company established Post Vermillion at Audubon's Point along the Missouri River. The post was taken over later by the American Fur Company. William Dickson served as factor from 1832 until his death about 1840, hence the name Dickson's Post. Theophile Bruguier then became factor, followed in 1850 by Charles Larpenteur. Post (or Fort) Vermillion was a square, strongly picketed structure built without portholes which, for lack of fur trade, was abandoned in 1854 or 1855.

Clay County, named for American statesman Henry Clay, was organized in Yankton, Dakota Territory, on April 10, 1862, by the first session of the Territorial Legislature, which then consisted of nine councilmen and thirteen representatives. It is the smallest county in the territory, encompassing only 406 square miles. In December 1862, the twenty-three members of the second Legislative Session selected Vermillion as county seat. Newly appointed Sheriff A.A. Partridge and Superintendent of Schools J.G. Glaze were instructed (among other duties) to grant and limit licenses for selling intoxicating liquors to quantities of less than one pint!

First among earliest settlers on land that in 1862 became Clay County may have been Alec C. Young, fur trader, who in 1855 built a dwelling in the Burbank vicinity known as "Alec C's Point." In 1859, Young left with his native wife to become a federal employee on the Yankton Reservation. In 1857 or 1858, Frost, Todd and Company built a trading post at the mouth of the Vermillion River with intensions of claiming the location as a town site. About that time A.C. Van Meter crossed over from Nebraska (too soon to settle as the Indians had not yet ceded their lands) and built a rope ferry and cabin at the same site. He was employed later by the federal government to carry mail from Sioux City to Fort Randall, presumably traveling on the Military Road.

Norwegian pioneers settled in clusters in the "Bottoms" along the Missouri River in this early Clay County survey map of Norway Township. Note surnames Erickson, Olsen, Anderson (all circled).

Immediately following opening of the land to settlers in 1859, many Norwegians and other Scandinavians took up lands in the Vermillion Valley along the Missouri River. Halvor Swenson built a sort of hotel known as "Eight Mile House" along the Military Road near where Old Lincoln Stage Station would be established in 1864. (Note location in Norway Township on Andreas 1884 map.) Charles N. Taylor, member of the Foster New York Colony which had been waiting in Nebraska for Dakota lands to open may have been the first settler in the Lincoln community. When the railroad cut through Clay County on its way from Sioux City to Yankton in 1873, the Lincoln site moved several miles north to form the nucleus of Meckling, but retained its post office until 1900. The little railroad village of Meckling was platted on May 14, 1873.

Vermillion

The Military Road passed directly through the center of Old Vermillion en route to the Vermillion River which it must cross. The village then lay below a bluff near the confluence of the Vermillion and Missouri Rivers. A state historical sign once located near Vermillion provided a brief but comprehensive history of the town. (sic)

"August 24, 1804, Lewis & Clark camped near the White Stone (Vermillion) River and next day visited Spirit Mound 8 miles north. The military road, Sioux City-Ft.
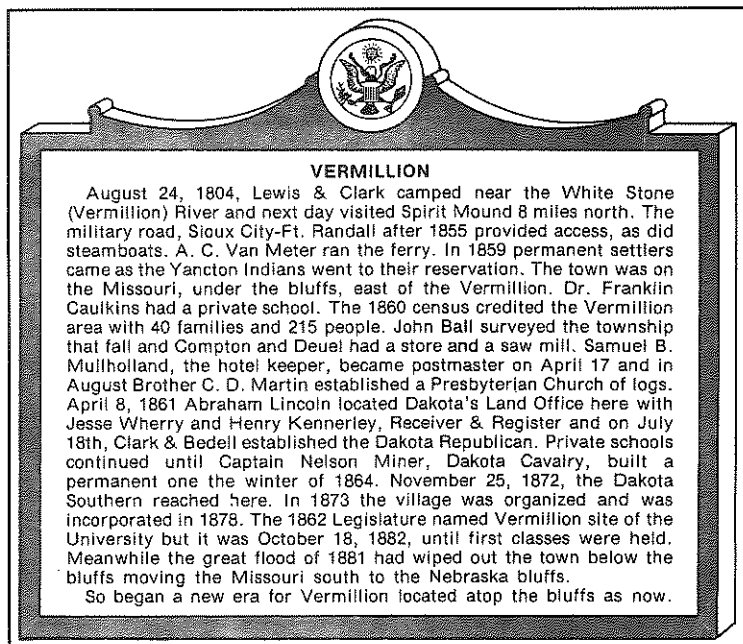
Randall after 1855 provided access, as did steamboats. A.C. Van Meter ran the ferry. In 1859 permanent settlers came as the Yancton Indians went to their reservation. The town was on the Missouri, under the bluffs, east of the Vermillion. Dr. Franklin Caulkins had a private school. The 1860 census credited the Vermillion area with 40 families and 215 people. John Ball surveyed the township that fall and Compton and Deuel had a store and a saw mill. Samuel B. Mullholland, the hotel keeper, became postmaster on April 17 and in August Brother C.D. Martin established a Presbyterian Church of logs. April 8, 1861 Abraham Lincoln located Dakota's Land Office here with Jesse Wherry and Henry Kennerley, Receiver & Register and on July 18th, Clark & Bedell established the Dakota Republican. Private schools continued until Captain Nelson Miner, Dakota Cavalry, built a permanent one the winter of 1864. November 25, 1872, the Dakota Southern reached here. In 1873 the village was organized and was incorporated in 1878. The 1862 Legislature named Vermilion site of the University but it was October 18, 1882, until first classes were held. Meanwhile the great flood of 1881 had wiped out the town below the bluffs moving the Missouri south to the Nebraska bluffs.

So began a new era for Vermillion located atop the bluffs as now."

Among first settlers were brothers George and Parker Brown, who built a log hotel. It later became known as Miner Hotel. James McHenry was first merchant in town and in 1859, Dr. Franklin Caulkins served the community as first medical doctor.

Caulkins was related to both Captain J.B.S. Todd and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln. He had come from Fort Randall, where he taught both white children and mixed-blood offspring of fur traders and native wives. He may have spent time at Greenwood, where he was said

VERMILLION

August 24, 1804, Lewis & Clark camped near the White Stone (Vermillion) River and next day visited Spirit Mound 8 miles north. The military road, Sioux City-Ft. Randall after 1855 provided access, as did steamboats. A. C. Van Meter ran the ferry. In 1859 permanent settlers came as the Yancton Indians went to their reservation. The town was on the Missouri, under the bluffs, east of the Vermillion. Dr. Franklin Caulkins had a private school. The 1860 census credited the Vermillion area with 40 families and 215 people. John Ball surveyed the township that fall and Compton and Deuel had a store and a saw mill. Samuel B. Mullholland, the hotel keeper, became postmaster on April 17 and in August Brother C. D. Martin established a Presbyterian Church of logs. April 8, 1861 Abraham Lincoln located Dakota's Land Office here with Jesse Wherry and Henry Kennerley, Receiver & Register and on July 18th, Clark & Bedell established the Dakota Republican. Private schools continued until Captain Nelson Miner, Dakota Cavalry, built a permanent one the winter of 1864. November 25, 1872, the Dakota Southern reached here. In 1873 the village was organized and was incorporated in 1878. The 1862 Legislature named Vermillion site of the University but it was October 18, 1882, until first classes were held. Meanwhile the great flood of 1881 had wiped out the town below the bluffs moving the Missouri south to the Nebraska bluffs.

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A South Dakota historic sign presents a concise history of Vermillion.

to have had differences with the Indian Agent. In Vermillion Caulkins supplemented his medical income by teaching private students in quarters over McHenry's store.

Considerable political wrangling among representatives of the three dominant towns in the territory resulted in Yankton being awarded site of territorial capital, Bon Homme site of state penitentiary and Vermillion site of territorial university.
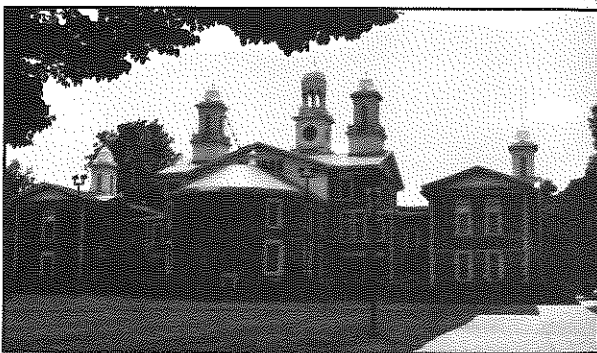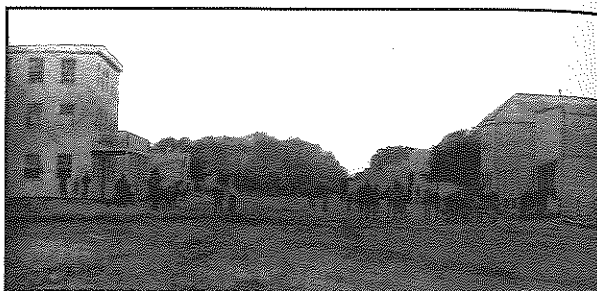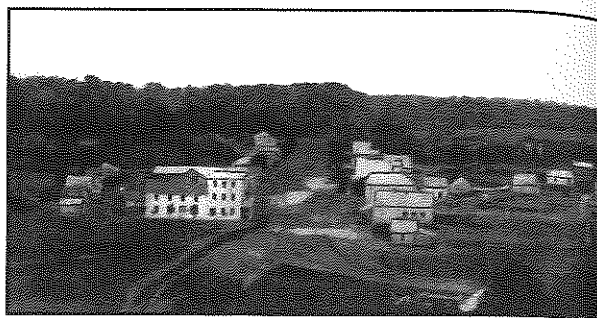
It would be April 1882, before construction began on the West Wing of University Hall, later called Administration Building, and later still, Old Main. In October classes began in the county courthouse and ran for 24 weeks. Finally on September 18, 1883, the twenty-acre campus was deemed ready for use.

Although primary schools had been holding sessions of varying lengths in several locations in Vermillion, the first permanent public school building in Dakota Territory was erected in the winter of 1863-1864, along a wagon road in a ravine leading to the bench above town. Nelson Miner, Captain of Company A, Dakota Calvary, which was wintering in Vermillion, directed his men to assist in building the school, and he himself hired one of his soldiers, Amos Shaw, as teacher. It was not until 1872 that a new four-room school house took its place.

In 1875, a disastrous fire practically destroyed Vermillion, burning thirty businesses, county records, $3,000 in cash intended for schools, and considerable personal property. However, serious as the fire was, it could not compare to devastation caused by the infamous Flood of 1881. A blizzard in October 1880 had left ten feet of snow on the level, putting a stop to all communication and transportation. On March 27, 1881, ice and water swept clean the lowlands between Vermillion and Gayville located in Yankton County. One hundred-thirty-two buildings were destroyed, and within a two-mile radius of Meckling, 1,250 cattle and 125 horses were lost.

An estimate by the United States Census Bureau in June 2009, places the current population of Vermillion at 10,495, a gain of 139 since the last decennial count.

Resilience defined the early settlers of Clay County. Wakonda, population under 400, is located in northwest Star Township. The town survived serious fires in 1906 and 1917, and to-
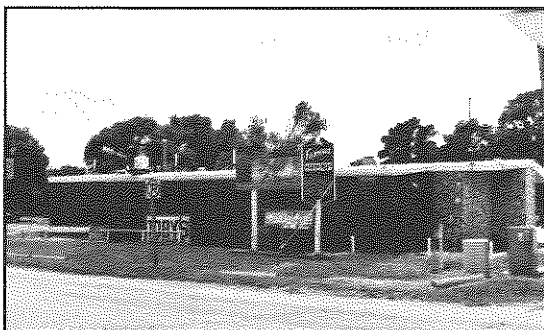

Top: Early Vermillion businesses gathered near the confluence of the Vermillion and Missouri Rivers.

Middle: By 1869 several businesses appeared on the highlands above the town.

Bottom: Here seen from the rear, Old Main on University of South Dakota Campus in Vermillion, opened in 1883 as first building of public higher education in Dakota Territory. It continues to inspire respect.

day remains a spirited community with plans to celebrate its 125th birthday in 2010. Clay County claims one third of the flourishing town of Irene, which shares its boundaries with Yankton and Turner Counties. The current population of Irene is estimated at near 400. Meckling provides its few close knit residents with few amenities except for a popular "eatery" and gathering place for travelers, university people, and neighboring farmers.
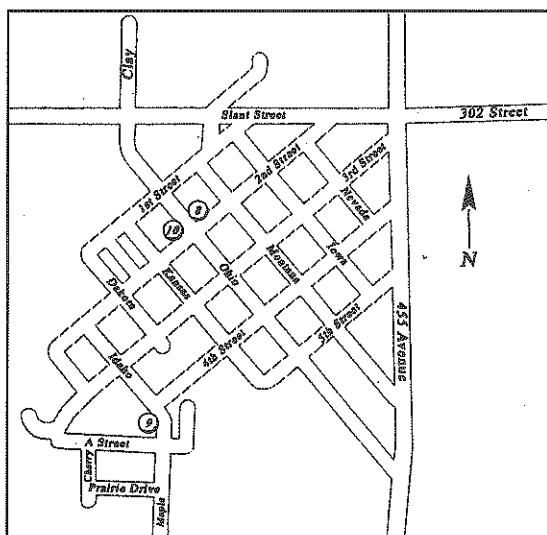
Other Clay County sites which once were active communities but are now remembered as little more than dots on highway maps include Alsen, Dalesburg, Hub City, Westreville, Greenfield, Lodi, Bloomingdale, and Colfax Corner. Directly north of Vermillion on University Road at its intersection with 306 Street is the Hub City memorial and community. One and one-half miles farther north stands the Dalesburg church complex. Westreville is/was several miles northwest of Vermillion on 308 Street about one mile north of the junction of Frog Creek Road and Bluff Road. Colfax Corner is on Frog Creek Road also but north at 302 Street, and Bloomingdale appears on 308 Street at its intersection with Highway 19. Greenfield is/was on Greenfield Road at 311

Meckling was born when the railroad connected Vermillion to Yankton in 1873. Toby's Lounge as seen from Highway 50 has long pleased customers as gathering place and eatery featuring "Famous Chicken."

The Austin-Whittemore House, built in Vermillion in 1882, serves as museum for Clay County Historical Society. Horace J. Austin came to Dakota Territory in 1859 or 1860, was member of First Dakota Cavalry until Civil War's end, became a surveyor on his return and laid out part of Vermillion. He and his wife's adopted daughter married a Whittemore whose family donated the home to the historical society in 1960.

Wakonda, in northwest Star Township survived serious fires in 1906 and 1917. A local resident suggests that its streets lie diagonally because businesses were rebuilt along the railroad tracks after a serious fire. The town, population estimated at slightly less than 400, celebrates its 125th birthday in 2010.

Street, while Alsen is/was at 407 Avenue just north of 306 Street. Lodi's location on maps is at the intersection of 304 Street and 461 Avenue.

Engravings on a granite monument at the Hub City intersection describe a community active in the 1930s. The first paragraph of the ghost town's history begins as follows: (sic) "On Midsummer Day, June 24, 1925, William Inberg and Arvid Johnson opened the newly built gas station and repair-business Hub City Garage. The name Hub City was suggested on opening day because the site is equidistant from the surrounding towns. In 1926, Inberg acquired Johnson's share and with his wife Pearl, Inberg operated the business until its closing in 1971." A later paragraph notes that Hub City once had not only the Inberg gas station-repair business but also an ice house, grocery feed store, café, barbershop, baseball diamond, Clay County Highway shed, church, parsonage and several homes.The sign concludes by reiterating the importance of baseball to the community. "Hub City played some of the top teams in the three-state area. The biggest game of the season was always played on Midsummer Day, with five to six hundred fans in attendance. The last game was played in 1948...."