The Queen Bee Mill Legend: Did Pettigrew Trick the Eastern Investors?

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Successful towns and cities on the frontier of nineteenth-century America always had energetic and creative promoters. These entrepreneurs were often townsite speculators and early merchants who knew that their own fortunes were tied to the success of their community and that success depended on the ability of the community to attract new industries, businesses, and residents. The history of the Dakota frontier is filled with accounts of how these local "rustlers," as the newspapers of the time often called them, sought to ensure success for themselves and their communities. Sometimes, however, these stories became better with time, taking on a life of their own as they became part of local lore. The legend of Richard F. Pettigrew's part in the building of the Queen Bee Mill in Sioux Falls is one such case.

Pettigrew, widely remembered as a skillful territorial politician and the first United States senator from South Dakota, began his career as a founding father and leading promoter of Sioux Falls. In his reminiscences, he later recounted his role in the development of the state's largest city, in several instances describing actions that some might regard as deceptive at best and dishonest at
Ironically, Sioux Falls lore has long attributed to Pettigrew a decidedly deceptive part in the building of the giant Queen Bee flour mill in 1879-1881, a role he never acknowledged in his essays. In essence, the tale records that Pettigrew tricked a group of New York capitalists into investing in the enterprise by damming the Big Sioux River and releasing the water shortly before they arrived to view the site. Convinced that the Big Sioux had sufficient water power to run a huge flour mill, the easterners committed to the project, only to see it fail two years later. A closer look at the probable source of the legend reveals that the story of the river’s damming is true, but that it has been attached to the wrong event.

This legend has been more an oral than a written one, but it has also found its way into the history books. In his 1955 work entitled *South Dakota Manufacturing to 1900*, Herbert S. Schell, the long-time dean of South Dakota historians, tells of Pettigrew building an “earthen dam” that was broken “at a strategic moment” so the river’s flow could favorably impress New York investor George I. Seney. As his sources of information, Schell cites Robert O. Parkinson’s 1938 master’s thesis, “The Early Career of Richard Franklin Pettigrew,” and an interview with Pettigrew in the 23 July 1926 issue of the *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*. Parkinson also tells the earthen dam story and cites the Pettigrew interview as his source. More recently, Wayne Fanebust’s *Where the Big Sioux River Bends: A Newspaper Chronicle* reiterates the legend, citing the Parkinson thesis. I, too, repeat the legend in my own work, *Sioux Falls, South Dakota: A Pictorial History*, basing it on Schell’s work. Thus, a story that had been part of local lore for decades found its way into written history apparently through Parkinson’s master’s thesis. Unfortunately,

1. Pettigrew recalled his early years in South Dakota in a series of articles for *Sunshine State*, a monthly promotional magazine published in Sioux Falls during the 1920s.
Nearly a century, the legend of the Queen Bee Mill has centered on Richard F. Pettigrew, one of the earliest and most ambitious promoters of Sioux Falls. Parkinson's source, the Argus-Leader interview with Pettigrew, makes no mention of the earthen dam story.

The tale of Pettigrew and the Queen Bee Mill seems to have first appeared in print in the 20 May 1904 issue of the South Dakota State Forum. The Sioux Falls newspaper indicated that the story had already become a "popular

tradition . . . readily believed by most people.” The article, titled “Romantic Story Surrounds Old Gray Mill on the Banks of the Sioux River,” related the prevailing account of the building of the mill. If one does not read carefully, it is fairly easy to conclude that the author is making a statement of fact:

Twenty-five years ago, when the atmosphere of the wild and laneous [sic] occident had not subsided, and the spirit of the cowboy, the Indian and the “bad man” were still rampant, a representative of an eastern outfit of rich “suckers” was inveigled to Sioux Falls and told about the marvelous water power. With eager ears he listened, and when he was shown the falls, waters surpassing those of Niagara were pouring over. He bit, bought, and bargained for the erection of the mill which was to be run by water power. But alas and alack! When the mill was completed the water failed to come, because the dam built by the thrifty Sioux Falls rascal had been broken at the time the falls were shown in all their glory, and afterwards only the regular supply of water came down. Anger and tears did not bring more water, and in wrath at having been deceived, the mill was ordered closed for all time to come.³

The writer never named the “rascal” who supposedly committed this deception, but apparently everyone in Sioux Falls knew, or at least believed, that it was Richard Pettigrew.

After all, Pettigrew’s past actions helped to make the story believable. The town father himself told of traveling with another person on a train to Sioux Falls, both intent on filing a deed to the same piece of property. Pettigrew

convinced the engineer to stop the train outside of town and take him in on the locomotive, leaving his stranded competitor to wonder why they were pausing so long to take on water and enabling Pettigrew to reach the courthouse first. 

After reciting the “romantic” story about the mill’s origin, the State Forum writer continued:

The version of the story accepted by men who know is this: Twenty-five years ago, when a boom was on in Sioux Falls, the mill was built. It was filled with the finest machinery that money could purchase, and high salaried officers were at its helm, ready to guide the mill to prosperity. But the mill was about seventeen times as large as it needed to be for the wheat then being raised here, and was a quarter of a century before its time in that respect. After struggling along for six months, the mill closed down and has not turned a wheel since.

In other words, it was not insufficient water power but rather insufficient wheat supply that closed the Queen Bee.

If the romantic story about how the investors were tricked into building the Queen Bee is not true, then how did it originate? Part of the answer appears in the November 1925 issue of the promotional magazine Sunshine State. In a wide-ranging article entitled “Early Days of Sioux Falls,” Pettigrew tells about his role in founding and promoting the town, including an explanation of how the Queen Bee came to be constructed and how promoters dammed the Big Sioux River to impress out-of-town visi-

In his telling, however, the stories stem from separate incidents.

Pettigrew recalled that in the fall of 1879, the year after he had helped to bring the first railroad to Sioux Falls, he had watched settlers “from all over, as far west as the Jim River,” unload their wagonloads of wheat at the railroad’s one small warehouse. The farmers had to sell their first crop to obtain cash for debts, groceries, and winter supplies. At one point, Pettigrew counted two thousand teams

and noted that “the string of lumber wagons . . . reached clear beyond the river south of the Yankton crossing.” While watching this “great show,” Pettigrew reported, the thought occurred to him that with all that wheat and the water power of the Big Sioux together in the same place, the town of Sioux Falls should have a mill. Consequently, he traveled to Saint Paul, where he told Colonel E. F. Drake, head of the Saint Paul and Sioux City Railroad Company, that the water power of Sioux Falls “would beat Minneapolis,” and that Drake should build a mill there.7

At Pettigrew’s insistence, Drake visited Sioux Falls and authorized Pettigrew to purchase the land around the falls, which Pettigrew did, paying W. W. Brookings of Yankton forty thousand dollars for eighty acres. At Drake’s request, Pettigrew then went to New York to raise the money to build the mill.8

Later in the *Sunshine State* article, Pettigrew related the story of how more than forty years earlier, he had engineered an impressive showing of water power for out-of-territory visitors by building a temporary dam upstream from the falls. Town promoters had “received word by wire” that a special trainload of editors “from the south” were enroute to Sioux Falls to see the country and write about its resources. “It had been a dry season,” Pettigrew recalled, and “the river was very low.” He realized that the much-advertised falls of the Big Sioux would not impress the visitors and that their subsequent reports would, as he put it, “do Sioux Falls a great injury.” Something had to be done!

The small Cascade Mill, built in 1878, had a dam across the river just north of Eighth Street to power its flour-milling operation, and Pettigrew described how he “secured a load of two-inch planks, 12 inches wide, and fastened them on top of the dam, stopping the flow of water [and thereby raising] the river above the dam 12 inches.” Then, confessed the promoter, “just before our visitors arrived I went with a force of men and removed the planks. The water rushed over the falls in great volume.” The editors were delighted. For the next few weeks, Sioux Falls’s weekly newspaper, the *Dakota Pantagraph*, reprinted articles from various distant newspapers describing the beautiful falls with their great water power “almost equal to Niagara.” There were also, Pettigrew said,  

8. Ibid., p. 20.
At times of high water, the broad falls of the Big Sioux River provided spectators with an impressive sight.

grew remembered, “numerous predictions of a great city as a result of the development that must come.”

How did these two stories become one legend? The factor that most probably unified them is that both took place during the summer of 1879. In fact, the Dakota Pantagraph for 25 June carried stories pertaining to both events in adjacent columns. One report announced a visit

of journalists from Minnesota and Illinois (the editors "from the south" that Pettigrew mentioned in his 1925 *Sunshine State* article) and the other detailed the closing of the deal to sell water power to the New York investors who would build the Queen Bee Mill. The melding of the stories probably developed following the failure of the Queen Bee as the local public sought to explain what had gone wrong.

Another element may have contributed to the confusion, as well. In relating "the romantic story" of the Queen Bee's construction, the author of the 1904 *South Dakota State Forum* article wrote of "a representative of an eastern outfit of rich 'suckers' [who] was inveigled to Sioux Falls and told about the marvelous water power." The use of the word "sucker" is interesting because the lead headline for the *Pantagraph* article on the journalists' 1879 visit read: "Suckers and Gophers. Visit of Illinois and Minnesota Editors to Sioux Falls Last Sunday." Today, many people recognize the term "gopher" as a reference to residents of Minnesota, the "Gopher State," but few realize that in the nineteenth century, Illinois was known as the "Sucker State" and its residents as "suckers." The term appears to have been used differently in both instances, but confusion about its meanings may have led to mistaken identity. Finally, the readiness of Sioux Falls residents to believe that Pettigrew was capable of such trickery for personal gain surely played a part in the story's concoction.

Another question arises, however: do these stories really describe two separate incidents? Why should we believe that Pettigrew dammed the Big Sioux to impress newspaper journalists and not New York investors in the

Queen Bee? To start with, Pettigrew’s account seems reasonable simply because he was not reluctant to tell of other instances in which he used a bit of deception to promote a cause, whether his own or the city’s. It seems likely that if he tricked the Queen Bee investors, he would not have hesitated to include the tale in accounts of his early exploits.

More convincing evidence is found in the weekly *Dakota Pantagraph*, which on 14 May 1879—more than a month before the journalists’ visit—announced the probable construction of a flour mill in Sioux Falls. The article also revealed that Pettigrew had been authorized to interest Colonel Drake in the project and to seek investors from among the railroad’s New York backers. According to the editor, negotiations for the purchase of land around the falls were already well along. In the following issue, 21 May, readers learned that an agent of the New York investors had come to town “and sort of clandestinely” inspected the falls and surrounding property. “He was so well satisfied with what he saw,” wrote the *Pantagraph* editor, “that he finally made his mission known and expressed the opinion that the trade would take place as outlined by us last week.” In reality, the *Pantagraph* turned out to be a bit over-confident. A month later, the editor reported that “the matter [had] seemed to lose vitality” until 18 June, when it was “enlivened very materially” by the arrival of Drake together with two men identified as “practical hydraulic engineers of large experience.”

Within two weeks of this event, Pettigrew, acting “upon the strength of a telegram from E. F. Drake, president of the St. Paul road, made Judge W. W. Brookings the first payment to bind the bargain as made when Mr. Drake was here.” Construction of what the *Pantagraph* editor

15. Ibid., 25 June 1879.
described as “the mammoth grist-mill” had been agreed to, and the paper announced that “George I. Seney, president of the Metropolitan national bank of New York, representing other capitalists there, and E. F. Drake and Horace Thompson of St. Paul” were the purchasers. Seney apparently had not personally visited Sioux Falls before concluding the deal on 30 June.16

By the end of July, investors brought in more engineers to formulate actual construction plans. On 30 July, the *Pantagraph* reported that a dam would be built from the river’s east bank to the island. To produce power for the mill, a twelve-foot-deep canal and a seven-foot-diameter tube would bring water down to the turbine. It seems logical that any questions about adequate water flow would
have been raised by the investors’ agents or the engineers on one of their many visits between May and the end of July. In fact, the engineers projected that the mill would use just 15 percent of the power produced by their improvements.\(^7\) Clearly, one damming of the falls would not have convinced these investors to spend their money.

Finally, discounting the Queen Bee legend requires an examination of the visit of the “southern” journalists whom Pettigrew admitted were the objects of his trickery. As the foregoing chronology shows, Drake and his engineers had come to Sioux Falls on Wednesday, 18 June, and on the basis of this final inspection proceeded to conclude the deal to build the Queen Bee. The following Sunday, 22 June, a trainload of journalists arrived, on what the *Pantagraph* described as “the annual excursion of the Illinois press association.” The group had left Chicago on Thursday, 19 June, crossing southern Minnesota to Watertown, Dakota Territory, before heading back to Mankato, Minnesota, where they spent Saturday night. From there, the Saint Paul and Sioux City Railroad had taken over the excursion, with the railroad’s land commissioner in charge. At Windom, a number of Minnesota editors joined the Illinois group, making the affair, as the *Pantagraph* editor put it, “a sort of a Sucker-Gopher union.”\(^8\)

Following Sunday dinner in Windom, the train ran to Sioux Falls, arriving about 5:30 P.M. Near the falls of the Big Sioux River, the excursionists disembarked and “proceeded for a view.” Had the train gone through town to the station instead, the visitors might have seen Pettigrew’s crew pulling the planks off the top of the Cascade Mill dam. Instead, reported the *Pantagraph*, the editors were greeted with “the delightful scenery furnished by the cascades, [as well as] the reception committee, the cornet band, and hundreds of citizens leading and accompany-

\(^7\) Ibid., 30 July 1879.

\(^8\) Ibid., 25 June 1879.
ing them.” Walking planks had been laid across some of the rock ledges “so that the party could get right out in mid-stream and look at the torrent as it came rushing over the series of falls above and into the abyss below.” Panta-graph readers must have been gratified to learn that the sightseers regarded the spectacle as “the most beautiful scene they had witnessed in all their journey, and many declared it the most lovely sight of their lives.” Little did the visitors know that Pettigrew and his fellow boosters had helped the Big Sioux make this good showing.

Leaving the falls, the group was treated to a band concert on Brookings Island (soon to be renamed Seney Island) before proceeding to the Cataract Hotel for a meal.
"as they had not seen excelled in the entire journey." The visiting journalists concluded their three-hour visit to Sioux Falls with some sightseeing around the town before reboarding their train and heading back to Worthington, Minnesota, where they spent the night. The weekly *Dakota Pantagraph* of 16 July reprinted excerpts from several Illinois and Minnesota newspapers uniformly praising the town and its falls.

The editors' visit, with the positive publicity it engendered, had been a promotional success for Pettigrew and other Sioux Falls "rustlers." Equally important was Pettigrew's successful effort to attract the New York investors who had decided to improve the falls's natural water power. Begun in August 1879 and completed in 1881, the Queen Bee Mill was the largest flour mill in the Upper Midwest at that time and a major coup for the young community of fewer than two thousand residents. The complex consisted of an eighty-by-one-hundred-foot stone mill six stories high, a one-hundred-thousand-bushel elevator, a four-story warehouse, and a cooperage. Altogether, the building costs totaled $300,000 to $350,000, an enormous sum for the period.

After delving into the facts behind the legend of the Queen Bee Mill, it appears clear that while a twelve-inch-high dam on the Big Sioux could enhance the flow of water over the falls for a short period, such as the brief time the journalists needed to take in the sight, it could not be sustained or re-created for the multiple visits of the Queen Bee investors and their representatives. In fact, no such "trick" was needed to convince the capitalists of the suitability of the site for industry. But the coincidence of the visit by Drake and his engineers on 18 June and that

19. Ibid., 25 June 1879.
of the journalists less than a week later made it easy in the popular mind to combine the two episodes into one good story. The colorful tale of Pettigrew and the Queen Bee Mill quickly took on a life of its own, growing into the "romantic story" that has helped to explain why the giant stone mill by the falls sat silent and empty after running for less than two years.