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Yankton

Portrait of a River City

It was not love at first sight.

My first, fleeting encounter with Yankton, South Dakota, in May 2011 was a disappointment. Booking a room in advance of my trip, I had been fooled by a misleading picture on the website and had chosen a hotel that I knew was a mistake as soon as I drove into the parking lot on a damp Saturday evening. My early misgivings were confirmed by a cell-like room, whose bare brick walls were lit by a single naked bulb dangling from the ceiling, and a rug on the floor that had the consistency, and something of the odor, of a swamp. I fled and booked myself into the comparative luxury of the Best Western Kelly Inn.

The next morning I drove downtown in search of what my guidebook promised would be "a gem-like historic town . . . comfortably ensconced beside the Missouri."[1] Once again my expectations were disappointed. On Third Street, I found some fine old buildings made of sandstone and brick, and the cast-iron lamp posts caught my eye, but the stores did not appear to be flourishing and many buildings were disused. Completing this moribund impression was the view presented by Walnut Street: what might have been a fine civic vista was aimlessly terminated by a rusting, forgotten bridge whose entrance was blocked. I returned to my hotel, pausing on the way to photograph a monstrous statue of a blue cow outside the stockyard. I checked out and drove westward towards Valentine, Nebraska, never imagining that I might return to this melancholy little town. My verdict, later recorded for all the world to read in my book, *Infinite West: Travels in South Dakota*, was that the city had "a forlorn and abandoned air."[2]

1. Samantha Cook et al., *USA: The Rough Guide* (London: Rough Guides, 2000), p. 714.

2. Fraser Harrison, *Infinite West: Travels in South Dakota* (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2012), pp. 51–52, 186–87.

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Travel writing is an irresponsible art. The writer grants himself the license to visit a place for a few hours and pronounce magisterially on its vices and virtues, its charms and blemishes, without fear of punishment or reprisal. Unlikely to call on the place again, he or she feels free to dispense judgments, caring for nothing except to score an entertaining point. And so it was with me, until I was caught out. I did return to Yankton, and I learned to eat my words; if nothing else, this essay is an act of atonement.

I consider myself to be a lucky man. In the course of my life (sixty-nine years) I have been lucky more often than I have been unlucky, and although it is said that people make their own luck, I tremble at the memory of lucky moments that have come my way that seemed neither to have been deserved nor provoked. One of these moments occurred in September 2012 when I was attending the South Dakota Festival of Books in Sioux Falls. While eating lunch in a café on Phillips Avenue I fell into conversation with a man who within twenty minutes of our meeting offered me the use of his house in Yankton. Naturally, I assumed he was drunk or, perhaps, mad. American hospitality is legendary, but this invitation seemed generous to the point of lunacy. But no, my benefactor was as good as his word and later confirmed his offer by email, saying he would be pleased to make his house available to me during the spring or summer of the following year. I jumped at the chance. Hitherto, I had always been on the move during my many visits to South Dakota, and the opportunity to stay in one place and get to know it was irresistible. The fact that the place was Yankton, the "forlorn and abandoned" town of my previous visit, did not deter me.

On the strength of this invitation, I applied for a grant from the South Dakota Humanities Council, which they were generous enough to give me, and it allowed me to plan a stay in Yankton of nearly seven weeks. The council's decision was not announced until Monday, 6 May 2013. Ten days later I was on an airplane bound from my home in the United Kingdom for Minneapolis and Sioux Falls.

My connection from Minneapolis to Sioux Falls was delayed, and darkness had fallen by the time I collected my rental car and left the airport. Making for Yankton, I drove down Interstate 29 and then turned west onto South Dakota Highway 46. Now I was driving through open

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country. My headlights picked up the straight, undulating road as it unrolled ahead of me, and for the next thirty miles I did not see another vehicle nor slacken my pace except to pass through Irene and Mayfield. The accumulated anxiety of traveling fell away, and I felt my soul expanding as I sensed the great expanses of prairie on either side of the highway. Although it was dark, I had driven such roads often enough to know what lay beyond in the darkness: the farmsteads with their silos and belts of trees surrounding white frame houses and yards full of machinery, the huge fields (by English standards), the meandering creeks and occasional muddy wallows, and the dirt roads that led, miles away, to farms owned by people whose names could be seen painted on mailboxes at the side of the highway.

At the junction with United States Highway 81, I turned south and began to follow signs to Yankton. It was after midnight when I crossed the city limits, and my exhilaration gave way once more to anxiety as I began looking for the turn that would take me to my temporary home. I had located the place on the map and found the street easily enough. It ended in a cul-de-sac, and I also knew that the house was one of four built in a single unit, a "fourplex" (marvelous neologism), but it was difficult to establish the layout. There were other houses, but none of them, as far as I could discover in the darkness, bore numbers on their doors. I stopped the car, and by the light of a spasmodic moon I was reduced to a peeping tom as I skulked around, peering into windows, hoping to discover some sign that would tell me this house was waiting to welcome a foreigner. Before the police were summoned, I stumbled across the right number, which was attached to a porch rather than the door, and found the key in the place arranged with my host. I let myself in. I had arrived in Yankton.

The following morning I woke with the prospect of six and a half weeks in a strange city facing me. What did I propose to do with my time? What was my plan? What was I going to do that very day?

When I described my project to the Humanities Council, I did what most applicants for research grants do: I oversold myself. I proposed to write a portrait of Yankton, declaring my intention to investigate its commercial, political, religious, cultural, and recreational life. For each of these categories I nominated the kind of people I would speak

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to, a list that virtually encompassed the whole population. I said that I would try to get to know the city in order to capture its personality, if such a thing can be said to exist. Finally, I said I would study the connection between the city and the Missouri River, which was the cause of its existence and had been the source of its livelihood, noting that a city website claimed that "the Missouri River is still the soul of Yankton." In the box on the application form that called for a project title, I boldly wrote "Yankton—Portrait of a River City."

This emphasis on the river was to some degree disingenuous, since the Humanities Council had nominated water as its theme for 2013, but it also reflected an authentic passion of mine for cities and their rivers. As a child I had been brought up in a suburb of Liverpool that was fortunate to have the Mersey flowing along its doorstep, and ever since leaving my hometown I had hankered after large rivers, a hunger not easily satisfied in England.

My task for that first morning was therefore clear: I had to find a way of making contact with the people I had mentioned in my application. Back in Sioux Falls, my benefactor had done me another good turn by introducing me at the book festival to Bernie Hunhoff. He needs no introduction to South Dakota readers, but, for the record, Hunhoff is a Democratic state representative and the owner/publisher of *South Dakota Magazine*, which is based in Yankton, his hometown. In the hope that he might help me to meet one or two of the people on my list, I called him, and he immediately invited me for lunch.

I decided to devote the rest of the morning to setting up my domestic base and getting my bearings. Most of all, I wanted to reexamine the "historic town" that I had nonchalantly dismissed on my last visit. I was prepared to be chastened and corrected.

I left the house and drove down Highway 81, which as Broadway Avenue, the main street, bisects the city before crossing the Missouri into Nebraska. On my last visit I had described it as "a characterless strip" lined with the usual gas stations, fast-food outlets, motels, and malls. On closer inspection, I discovered that my description was true of only one section, roughly between Twenty-first and Eighth streets. During my six weeks I drove up and down this road frequently, and instead of finding it characterless I came to enjoy its vulgarity. American streets

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always provide British visitors with more amusement than Americans understand, because our own streets, by comparison, are so demurely dressed. The huge signs with their gaudy colors and flashing lights are not permitted in British cities; nor, for the same reason, have we developed the footnotes that accompany these signs, notices put up by the franchise holders themselves using plastic letters, often with erratic spacing. For example, the Broadway Inn advertised

NO SMOKING ROOMS
AVAILABLE
32 LCD TV DBLS
HOTTUB S UITE
WIFI BAR POO L

My favorite was attached to the Veterinary Medical Clinic:

SUMMER LOVIN
HAPPENS FAST
SPAY & NEUTER.

I parked my car on Third Street in an angular parking slot under the shade of a tree, enjoying the ease with which that simple task can be performed in small-town America, unlike small-town Britain. I took my camera and wandered up and down the street, but try as I might I could not dispel the impression of stagnation I had originally formed on my first visit. Even taking into account that it was a Monday morning when business was bound to be slow, the district seemed to be virtually dormant. A couple of bars had their doors open and were clearing up after the night before; a tattoo parlor was ready for business (surely a gesture of misplaced optimism); and a shoe shop advertising Red Wing shoes, which appeared to have strayed from an Edward Hopper painting, was also open, but several other premises were closed and some were unoccupied.

One of my jobs for the day was to open a bank account. Knowing nothing about the various companies available, I chose the First Dakota National Bank on the grounds that it was the oldest in the state, according to a plaque outside its building. Not that there was any sign of history about the edifice it currently occupied. There is a book to be

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Veterinary Medical Clinic, Broadway Avenue

written (not by me) about the architectural styles of bank buildings. Fearing, presumably, that anything too florid or frivolous might make their customers nervous, company executives commission buildings designed as variations on the theme of the strongbox. It is characteristic of recent times that in London, at least, our great national banks have thrown aesthetic caution to the winds and encouraged architects to conjure up buildings as soaringly extravagant and complex as the financial fabrications devised to pay for them. No such folly had swayed First Dakota National, which had entombed itself in a kind

of megalithic citadel made of contrasting purple and gray polished granite—the very model of level-headed security.

In Britain, banks have become so paranoid about money laundering that they have rendered the process of opening an account too convoluted for the applicant with his pockets full of innocent cash to succeed at on the first attempt. With this thought in mind I had loaded my briefcase with every form of identification I could raise; I had even packed a copy of my book in case my ordinary, corporeal self might seem implausible. I need not have worried. Within half an hour of walking into the place I had been accepted without any bureaucratic hindrance as a valued customer, my grant money safely deposited in the First Dakota's impregnable vault. Looking out of the window onto the street, where nothing seemed to be moving but the incline of the shadows, I asked the manager dealing with my affairs if this Monday morning was typical. "It varies," he said laconically. I then asked him if he had plenty of business on his hands. I didn't expect his reply. "Can't keep up with it," he said, and his tone was so matter-of-fact that I believed him.

Back on the street I turned a corner and found myself staring into the mouth of the rusting bridge I had seen in 2011, though it was no longer barricaded. I advanced cautiously, keeping close to the railing for fear a car might approach, but after a few yards I lost my nerve and returned to the safety of the bank. At that moment a young woman appeared, wearing shorts and walking with athletic determination. I fell in beside her and enquired as to whether the bridge was safe for pedestrians. She laughed at me, and said, "Sure. Unless you get run over by a bicycle."

In the middle of the bridge I paused to lean on the railing and stare upstream. It was an emotional moment, and I was surprised by the intensity of my feeling. Looking west across a stretch of tranquil water, I didn't yet understand what I was looking at; I was seeing landmarks I couldn't yet identify or interpret: for example, a spire and a blue water tower on the steep bluff at the edge of the city. I knew that I was looking at an artificial version of the Missouri, a watercourse that flowed by permission of the Gavins Point Dam nearly six miles upstream. I knew that the historical river was now a giant in chains, having been

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Walnut Street looking south to the Meridian Bridge and Nebraska

dammed and domesticated and channelized and dispersed into lakes and made to serve as a leisure facility (though, like Samson, its hair had sometimes grown unnoticed until it brought the pillars of the temple tumbling down, as it did during the floods of 2011.) Nonetheless, here I was, standing above the Missouri River, which was half a mile wide and flowing so calmly that its silvery surface under the clear morning sky betrayed no hint of movement. Here was the river that divided the continent, the river that ran like a great vein through the heartland, the river that had for centuries been the main route of transport, trade, and communication for the dozens of tribes that lived up and down its long course, the river that had fed and watered them, provided them with fuel and camping grounds, the river that had brought Yankton into existence as a steamboat port and was still providing it with a livelihood. But on that particular morning, when Yankton was still a

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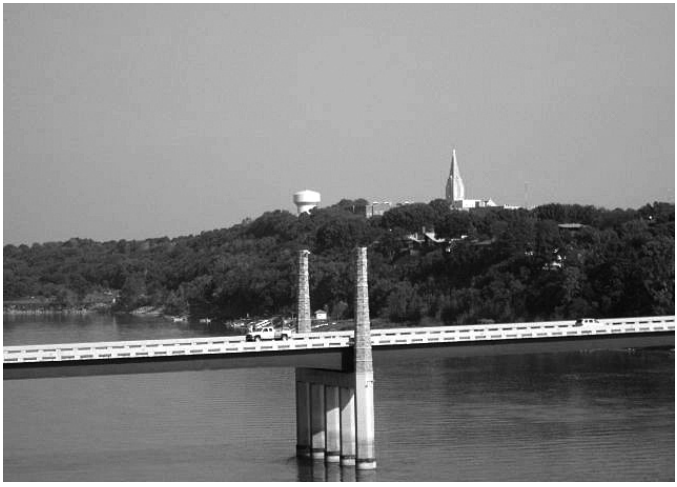
stranger to me, the Missouri signified, above all, the presence of Lewis and Cark and the men under their command as they made their laborious way upstream during the late summer of 1804. I knew they had been in the vicinity of Yankton at the end of August and had camped at a place called Calumet Bluffs; I wondered if it was visible from the bridge.

For nearly two decades I had been making contact, so to speak, with the Corps of Discovery, as I found myself in this or that place along the Missouri where they had paused to camp, or hunt, or explore. These moments of contact never failed to give me a deep satisfaction, even though they were based on nothing more sophisticated than the simple act of standing where Lewis and Clark had once stood. I am no explorer; the word "intrepid" describes what I am not; and since childhood I have had a hatred of every aspect of camping. For these reasons, I am disqualified from truly following in their footsteps, as many have done in their kayaks and canoes and campers. And, yet, I claim a bookworm's right to be a faithful follower of Lewis and Clark. I have fearlessly searched used bookstores in half a dozen states looking for material about the expedition, and I have indefatigably pursued the corps across libraries in two continents.



View of Yankton landmarks from Meridian Bridge

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Still thinking about Lewis and Clark, I leaned over the opposite railing and looked down at the water rippling around the pier closest to the Yankton side. I saw a fish, a long, dark-gray shape close to the surface, facing downstream but holding its position. Then, as my eyes focused, I noticed more fish, and finally counted as many as fifty in a long, trailing shoal, all with their mouths gaping, presumably feeding on something in the water. The inside of their throats was pale, and their open jaws formed perfect circles. I asked a man standing next to me what species they were. He thought they were some sort of carp. Then I noticed an even larger shoal, containing so many fish that I lost count, but dominated by a kind of Moby Dick of the species, an enormous white specimen, idling in the center of the group, its circular mouth yawning like a drain.

Although I could not have named it just then, I was, of course, standing on the Meridian Bridge, or rather on its lower level, because it is a two-tier construction. It had been decommissioned in 2008 and replaced by the Discovery Bridge, which stood one thousand feet upstream and carried vehicle traffic on Highway 81. In November 2011, a few months after I had glanced at its seemingly forsaken blockade, the Meridian Bridge was reopened for walkers and cyclists. Without realizing it, I had succumbed to a new addiction.

I still had time to kill before my lunch with Hunhoff, so I drove to the Convention and Visitors Bureau on East Fourth Street to collect brochures, maps, and so on. I asked one of the women attending the desk if there was a bookstore in town. "What sort of books do you like to read?" she asked. I thought for a moment and then said, rather pompously, "Good ones." It was her turn to think, and finally she said, "You'll have to go to Walmart. There isn't what you'd call an actual bookstore left any more."

Hunhoff had asked me to meet him before our lunch at Pennington House on Third Street, which was once the residence of Governor John L. Pennington (1874–1878) and is now the headquarters of *South Dakota Magazine* under the editorship of Hunhoff's daughter, Katie. He introduced me to the staff, showed me around the building, and then took me to lunch at The Landing, which gave the lie to anyone

who supposed, as I had myself until that very lunch, that there was not a decent restaurant to be found west of Sioux Falls.

I had brought with me a list drawn from my grant application of the professions and businesses and walks of life that I hoped to investigate. I began to get the measure of Hunhoff's generosity, and his local influence, as he went through the list, recommending someone from every category and encouraging me to use his name when making contact. In most cases, he even gave me the telephone number. He also suggested several people I would not have thought of myself, among them a nun from the Sacred Heart Monastery and the owner of the picturesque shoe shop on Third Street. He described these special recommendations as "great thinkers," an intriguing formulation by which I think he meant to indicate that they were indeed thoughtful but also sympathetically progressive. I was beginning to learn how a small town works.

Hunhoff pointed out that Yankton was an "institutional town," meaning that it had a disproportionate number of institutions for its size: the federal prison camp, Mount Marty College, Sacred Heart Monastery, Avera Sacred Heart Hospital, and the State Human Services Center (a title I did not understand at first hearing), as well as the Gavins Point Dam. Although I had no way of realizing it as I hurried to scribble down the names that Hunhoff fired at me out of the corner of his mouth, he was unwittingly setting the agenda for the rest of my visit. There was hardly anyone on his list of recommended people whom I did not subsequently meet and interview.

Before we finished lunch Hunhoff suggested several events I might attend during my stay, the first being a free concert of country-and-western music the following evening at a bar called Rounding 3rd, starting at 9:00 P.M. I did not catch the singer's name, but Hunhoff told me she was a local girl, a coming star, brought up on a ranch in South Dakota. Her brother used to be a rodeo star, but his horse had gone wild in the chute, and his injuries put him in a wheelchair. The boy had lived through a period of depression, then pulled himself together and returned to college, which he would not have done had he continued bronco-busting. Now he was an upright citizen, working for a bank.

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His sister had written a song about him: "Billie's Song." I smiled politely and said I would do my best to be there. (Among the many limits on my traveler's audacity was a dislike of late-night bars crowded with strangers, a dislike aggravated by the fact that I could no longer drink alcohol.)[3]

Finally, Hunhoff drove me on a rapid tour of the city's places of interest. He began by taking me past the Avera Sacred Heart Hospital and up to the bluff I had seen from the bridge, where he showed me the campus of Mount Marty College, his alma mater, and the Sacred Heart Monastery, where his aunt had once been the mother superior. He showed me her grave. I asked if he had ever been attracted to the religious life. Yes, he had considered it, he said, but he "liked the women too much." He encouraged me to attend mass on Sunday. Outsiders were welcome, and I would hear beautiful music. The church was topped by the spire I had noticed from the bridge.

Returning to Third Street, Hunhoff showed me the building that had once been the courthouse where Jack McCall, the murderer of Wild Bill Hickok, had been tried and condemned to hang; a bar where strippers performed ("every town's got one"); an old warehouse bearing the name of Gurney, seed merchants famous throughout the Midwest; the park along the riverfront and the ballpark at the far end of the park, a route that brought us back to his office in Pennington House. Now that I was beginning to grasp the topography, I noticed that the Pennington House was overshadowed on its south side by an extensive complex of huge storage silos and grain bins, steel colossi flashing in the sunlight, that stood between the far end of Third Street and the river on what must have been an old railroad route. A couple of trucks parked on a concrete apron between silos completed a tableau of the city's transport history: river, rail, road.

When I returned to my temporary home I began to make telephone calls to the people Hunhoff recommended. The first on my lengthy list

3. A lifetime's extravagance with red wine had recently caused my liver to protest by overproducing an iron-bearing protein called ferritin. Only abstinence from alcohol, rather than a reduced intake, seemed to improve things in my case, so with greatest reluctance I had committed myself to a life of teetotalism. I had been in mourning ever since.

was Nathan Johnson, city editor for the *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan*. Hunhoff had spoken approvingly of him. He had a good degree but had chosen not to swell the rural brain drain—the so-called "hollowing out" of middle America; instead, he had returned to Yankton to work on the local newspaper.[4]

I should mention, as a brief digression, that part of South Dakota's appeal for me is that the moment I cross its border I become a different person, as if I had swallowed some transmutative drug. Whereas at home in Suffolk I am mostly reserved and reclusive, in South Dakota I am filled with bonhomie and will happily speak to anyone and everyone. As a result, it was no hardship for me to honor the promises made in my proposal, something that would have been quite beyond me in England. Over the succeeding weeks I did indeed speak to a great many people in many walks of life, and I came home with thirty lengthy interviews preserved on my recorder.

I placed only one restriction on my activities. I made it a rule that if I had something interesting to do or someone interesting to speak to in Yankton itself, I would give it priority over anything that would take me out of the city. Consequently, I left Yankton only six times in my seven weeks, a tribute to the city's essential richness. Three of those excursions were made to fulfill unavoidable appointments. The others took me to Tabor, a few miles to the west, in order to witness its Czech Days festival, to a farm a few miles to the north, and to Spirit Mound near Vermillion.

This rule, which for the most part I am glad I observed, prevented my going to several places that I had mentioned in my proposal as sources of contrast with Yankton. Among them was a Hutterite colony and the national wildlife refuge at Lake Andes. I had also planned to investigate the Yankton Indian Reservation, especially the town of Wagner, which was one of the few reservation communities in South Dakota where the population, according to the 2010 census, was more or less equally divided between American Indians (40.5 percent) and non-Indians (54.7 percent). I regret that I did not pursue my plan,

4. *See* Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas, *Hollowing Out The Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009).

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but, as I discovered, there was little interaction between Yankton and the reservation that is now the home of those who gave their name to the city.

The view of Yankton that I formed by talking to all these people was necessarily partial, limited, and superficial. I was in the city for just forty-seven days during the months of May, June, and July when, as luck would have it, the weather was considered perfect. Rain fell frequently, especially during my first couple of weeks, but it was kind to both farmers and visitors because it mostly fell at night. One farmer told me he had never seen his crops looking so good. Admittedly, he had only been farming for three years, but then the previous three years had been particularly difficult, with flood and drought afflicting 2011 and 2012. The days were generally sunny, with the temperatures rising to the eighties and humidity that was seldom too uncomfortable. In other words, it was a sweet period. I have experienced a midwestern winter, when my family and I lived in Northfield, Minnesota, in 1992, but as far as Yankton is concerned I have only known the season of early summer when days were hot without being punitive; when evenings were mild and balmy and sitting outside was a pleasure and the only bugs were fireflies that flitted through the dusk like miniature zeppelins, aglow with desire; when nights were cool enough for sleep.

Because of the brevity of my visit and the happy circumstances that prevailed, I am not really in a position to write the exhaustive profile of Yankton that I promised in my grant application. Perhaps it was a vain project from the start. The fact is, I am a travel writer, not a sociologist. I came with no method, except to lay myself open to experience. This essay is essentially a collection of memories, impressions that are steeped in feeling. It is also an opinionated work, because I did not return so starry-eyed that I was incapable of making judgments, though this time I hope they are more carefully considered than the one I passed with such flippancy after my first visit. In effect, it is a thank-you letter to Yankton for giving me a good time, a letter that tries to explain why this traveler, at least, found the city so congenial.

These are the impressions of an outsider, an English visitor. I have been traveling to South Dakota for more than two decades, but with every visit I become more aware of the differences between our two

cultures. Superficially, we appear to have much in common, but in ways that are more profound and less visible, much divides us. Nor is this division simply an American/English one; I am no more simply English than the citizens of Yankton are simply American. I belong to a certain generation, a certain class. I have had a certain kind of education. I have lived most of my married life in a certain part of the country. All of these circumstances have inflected, at the very least, my point of view, which I like to think is also the product of independent thinking on my part. By the same token, the citizens of Yankton are midwesterners and South Dakotans. They are mostly white and Christian. They live in an agricultural state and have inherited a rural sensibility but may well derive their income from white-collar employment and never sit on a tractor.[5] My nationality notwithstanding, I was a particular person at the time I visited Yankton, burdened and privileged with particular limitations and qualities, about which I always tried to remain self-conscious, and I was coming into contact with particular people, similarly individualized, but sharing a particular background and situation. Everything is partial and contingent.

My visit would have achieved little had I not been treated with great hospitality by everyone I met. I joked that every door was open to me, including the one to the rubber cell in the county jail where the sheriff gave me a tour. Let me give one example to stand for all the others.

On the first Sunday of my visit I walked across the Meridian Bridge in the late afternoon, and as I was returning to my car I saw a small notice in the window of The Landing that announced "a send-off for Miss Dakota, USA, free party 4:00." By then it was well after 5:00, but I went in and found a dozen or so people gathered along the bar, including several glamorous young women. It was a hot, humid afternoon, and I was still sweating from my walk. I ordered an iced tea, and when I had cooled down I asked the barman if Miss Dakota was still there. He nodded enthusiastically, pointing to one of the young women. "That's her. That's Jessica."

She made a striking sight, with a model's tall and elegant figure, sapphire blue eyes, and a Cinemascope smile composed of teeth that

5. "Yankton, South Dakota," www.city-dat.com/city/Yankton-South-Dakota.html.

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appeared to be lit from within, they were so luminously white. Lying on the bar was a pile of photographs showing her in the crown that came with her title. I picked one up, took it over to her, and introduced myself.

She could not have been more charming. Although I had interrupted her conversation, she detached herself from the group at the bar and suggested we sit at a table. She then offered to buy *me* a drink and demanded to know all about *me*. Surely this scenario was the inverse of what one might expect. Beauty queens, in my limited experience, tend to treat the public, especially middle-aged gentlemen, as their subjects, which, after all, is no more than their right as royalty. If anyone is permitted a little license in the way of vanity, it is surely the beauty queen. But no; despite my best efforts, she would not talk about herself until she had exhausted her curiosity about me and my reasons for being in Yankton. She had been born in Walnut Creek, California, but had spent her schooldays in Yankton and then gone to Mount Marty College. She was a Yankton gal. Her father was right here, she said, and she pointed him out. I asked her to sign my photograph, and she graciously wrote a long inscription, wishing me "a wonderful time in Yankton" and signing off "with love, Jessica Albers, Miss South Dakota USA 2013. Watch June 16th on NBC!" I thanked her and reeled out of the bar. I kept her picture pinned to the refrigerator for the length of my visit. I have it beside me as I write this essay.[6]

While in Yankton I wondered if I would be able to distinguish between behavior that was typical of the Midwest, typical of South Dakota, typical of East River, and, finally, typical of Yankton. I doubt this exercise is achievable by anyone, and I am certain that I lacked the necessary experience. Perhaps only a lifelong resident of the state, and an especially percipient one at that, would be able to discriminate among such nuances. But here was a case in point. Was the warm-hearted modesty Albers had shown me typical of a midwesterner, of a South Dakotan, or was her Yankton upbringing playing a part?

6. Sadly, Jessica did not get past the semifinal stage of the Miss USA contest on 16 June at Las Vegas. She will, however, always be a queen in my eyes.

HISTORY AND OTHER MATTERS

For the benefit of those not fortunate enough to know Yankton, I offer this brief sketch of its history and topography.[7]

The city is located in the southeastern corner of South Dakota and stands on the Missouri River, which divides South Dakota from Nebraska. It is the county seat of Yankton County, and its population at the 2010 federal census was 14,454. It derives its name from the Yankton Sioux who inhabited the area at the time the first non-Indians arrived; the word is a corruption of the Nakota word *i-hank-ton-wan*, meaning "the end village." In 1858, Strike-the-Ree, leader of the Yankton Sioux, signed the Yankton Treaty of Cession, by which his people agreed to withdraw to a reservation in what is now Charles Mix County, where many of their descendants still live. The cession left a large triangle of land between the Big Sioux and Missouri rivers available for settlement by others. Once the treaty had been ratified in 1859, settlers began to cross the Missouri from Iowa and Nebraska, and Yankton was the first of several towns to be founded along the east bank of the Missouri. When Dakota Territory was formed in 1861, Yankton became its capital and ever since has called itself the "Mother City of the Dakotas," though its tenure in this maternal role lasted only until 1883, when the capital moved to Bismarck, in the territory's northern section. Nor did it regain the capital when South Dakota became a state in 1889. The prize went to Pierre, and it is said that Yankton was awarded the State Hospital for the Insane (now the South Dakota Human Services Center) by way of consolation.

Nowadays Yankton likes to call itself the "River City," a tribute to the chief source of its livelihood over the years. The city originally established itself as a river port, taking advantage of the natural landing that ran the length of its riverfront. At first the steamboats brought goods and supplies for settlers and fur trappers, but when gold was discovered in the Black Hills in 1874, the boats brought both prospectors

7. Robert F. Karolevitz, a journalist, historian, and native of Yankton, has written extensively on his hometown. For a detailed history of the city, *see* his *Yankton: A Pioneer Past*, rev. ed. (Mission Hill, S.Dak: Dakota Homestead Publishers, 1997).

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and the equipment they needed. During that period Yankton enjoyed a reputation as a wild frontier town, something it fondly recalls today. However, river traffic began to wane with the arrival of the Dakota Southern Railway in 1873, and the city's status as a significant port was brought to an abrupt end in March of 1881, when the town was flooded and ice floes destroyed much of the riverfront and several riverboats. For most of its subsequent history, Yankton's fortunes have been intimately bound up with those of the agricultural community in the surrounding area, for which it has served as a market town, stockyard, and general supplier. For instance, Gurney's, a famous seed merchant, moved its operation to Yankton in 1897, and by the 1930s the company was one of the city's major institutions. Its seed house and storefront became a general shopping center, incorporating a retail greenhouse, a barber, a grocery store, a jeweler, a medicine store, and a hotel with a restaurant. These facilities were all promoted by WNAX, a radio station the company owned.

Meanwhile, the Missouri remained a threatening and unpredictable neighbor until the completion of the Pick-Sloan Plan, a scheme of large dams and reservoirs that utterly transformed the river's character. Since 1957, Yankton has enjoyed the protection of Gavins Point Dam, which lies four miles upstream from the city and impounds Lewis and Clark Lake, a tourist attraction that yearly brings more than a million visitors to the lake, though not necessarily to the city. Yankton can count itself lucky that the segment running past its doorstep is one of the last so-called natural stretches of river remaining in the Missouri's whole course.

Yankton is built on a hill that approaches the river. The riverfront itself forms a natural landing, and it is here that the first buildings were constructed in the 1850s. Today there is little sense of the river trade, but the entire length of the old levee has been turned into a park with lawns, paved walkways shaded by venerable cottonwoods, a bandstand, pavilions, and kiosks where people can sit and even barbecue. At one end of the park there is a replica of the territorial capital, a two-story white clapboard building that is available for parties and conferences, and downstream, at the far end, is the city's baseball park and a boat ramp.

Yankton's topography could not be simpler: the river flows west to east, underlining the city on a map, and ever since the days when the river port was first established, Yankton has been stepping northwards, back from the river and up the hill in an orderly fashion, street by street. Levee Street, once infamous for its bars and brothels and lawless riverside life, is closest to the riverfront. Behind it, to the north and running parallel with the river, is Second Street, then Third, Fourth, and so on, each representing a layer of the city's gradual growth. These days the business district is more or less confined to Third Street, where eight of its bars are to be found on the north side, supposedly a concession to respectable ladies, who could walk in modest quarantine on the south side.

Unlike many small cities, Yankton has not sprawled; it has retained its shape and has expanded with elegant regularity. When the city was incorporated in 1862, its site occupied some nine hundred acres and reached along the river from today's Summit Street to Ferdig Avenue and north to the river bluffs.[8] The site of the city still conforms to a neat rectangular shape but now measures about six miles long by four miles wide, with Broadway Avenue (Highway 81) bisecting it north-south more or less down the middle with its five-lane thoroughfare.

Lying to the west and east of Broadway Avenue are residential streets, many of them with names deriving from trees—Spruce, Maple, Cedar, Walnut, Pine, and Mulberry—streets that are indeed leafy. Several of them are also wide, having been laid out to allow teamsters to turn a wagon hitched behind an eight-horse team.[9] A dozen historic homes dating from the end of the nineteenth century and listed on the National Register of Historic Places are scattered along these streets.[10] Many other handsome and beautiful houses from later periods have also been preserved in the same district, and it must have been Yankton's wealth of surviving domestic architecture that prompted my guidebook to call Yankton "a gem-like historic town."

8. Linda M. Hasselstrom, *Roadside History of South Dakota* (Missoula, Mont.: Mountain Press Publishing, 1994), p. 199.

9. Ibid., p. 194.

10. Wikipedia, "National Register of Historic Places Listings in Yankton, South Dakota," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Register_of_Historic_Places_listings_in_Yankton_County,_South_Dakota.

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Broadway Avenue slices through the city and takes back its identity as Highway 81 when it is carried across the Missouri and into Nebraska by way of the new Discovery Bridge. This bridge was a finalist in the 2009 America's Transportation Awards for "representing the best in innovative management, accountability and timeliness," but it will never win any prizes for beauty.[11] Its design is almost agressively plain—a concrete plank laid across the river and supported by a series of five-legged trestles, each one embellished with a pair of sawn-off hexagonal pillars that rise above the bridge and appear to wait forlornly for a statue or a finial to complete them.

To the west, the city and river are overlooked by Mount Marty, a steep bluff that is now the site of the Avera hospital complex, the Mount Marty College campus, and the Sacred Heart Monastery, whose

11. Wikipedia, "Discovery Bridge (Yankton)," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery_Bridge_(Yankton).

Discovery Bridge over the Missouri River

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Entrance to Yankton Stockyards

church provides the town with its most conspicuous landmark, a tall, slender spire of white granite. To the east, Fourth Street turns into South Dakota Highway 50, which is lined with car and farm machinery dealerships. At the edge of the city, close to the railroad track, is the stockyard, a large facility dominated at its entrance by the larger-than-life statue of a cow standing on a brick plinth that had caught my eye on my first visit. Painted in star-spangled blue with a stars-and-stripes map of the United States draped over its back, it is represented as a patriotic cow, apparently happy to sacrifice itself to the national interest in the stockyard behind it.

After exploring Yankton by day, I was left with the problem of entertaining myself at night. What was a man to do when he was new to town and still a stranger? Go to the movies. During my first week, Baz Luhrman's movie version of *The Great Gatsby* opened in Yankton's only movie house, and I decided to go to the 7:00 P.M. showing.

I first read the novel when I was sixteen, and I have read it with unfailing pleasure almost every year since. To my great regret, I have

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a poor memory for literature, but one of the few passages I can recite with reasonable accuracy are Nick Carraway's words at the opening of Fitzgerald's novel: "In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. 'Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.'"[12] Trite though it is, this advice would have benefited me had my father dispensed it when I was younger and more vulnerable. I don't know that the novel improved me morally in any other way, but since that first, intoxicated reading at school, I have never forgotten the qualities Fitzgerald attached to Gatsby (who was a midwesterner and turned out all right in the end): his heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, his extraordinary gift for hope, his romantic readiness.

As I was leaving the house to go to the movie, I hesitated. Tonight was the night of the country-and-western concert that Hunhoff had mentioned. Why was I avoiding it? What had happened to the Gatsby in me? To my gift for hope? My romantic readiness? I deferred the movie and drove downtown to the Rounding 3rd bar.

The band was tuning up on a small stage close to the door of the main bar, and although there were ten minutes to go before the concert began, the place was already packed. I had expected to be the oldest by thirty years, but it was not so. Every generation was represented; indeed, there were more elderly and middle-aged people than young seated at the tables. At a rough count there were between 120 and 150 people; every seat at every table was taken, and our star's fans were densely gathered around the walls and at the bar. There were lots of sunburnt young men, some in cowboy hats, some in caps, and lots of young women, much more stylishly dressed, sticking together in little groups.

I ordered a drink at the bar, and as I waited for it, I was accosted by a genial drunk, a young man with reddened eyes and forearms the size of thighs. "Tell me a story," he said. "I'll give you a drink for a story. I love a good story." His friendly request immediately emptied my mind, and

12. *The Bodley Head Scott Fitzgerald:* The Great Gatsby, The Last Tycoon *and Other Stories* (London: Bodley Head, 1958), pp. 19–20.

I was forced to say I was sorry, but I didn't know any stories, good or bad. He looked amazed. "Everyone knows a story. *Everyone!*" he said, and innocently turned himself into a story for me to tell.

Our singer, whose name I discovered from a poster was Rehme Sutton, had by now joined her three-man band and was adjusting the sound equipment. She was small, pretty, and blonde, dressed in a gold-spangled vest. Suddenly a figure leapt onto the stage, calling for silence. It was none other than Bernie Hunhoff, who made a speech welcoming several people in the audience and introducing Sutton, reminding us that she was a South Dakota gal and that we should give her a great welcome. Everyone hooted and whistled and clapped.

Hunhoff jumped down, and Sutton struck her opening chords. They were deafening, and the percussion was even louder. "Here I am, baby, signed, sealed and delivered, for your love," she sang, but her voice was mangled by sheer power of amps and crude acoustics, or so it sounded to my squeamish ears; a pity, because she appeared to give an attractive performance.

After a few songs Sutton paused to talk to us, saying how glad she was to be back in God's Own Country. Much whooping and clapping! She had stayed last night with her sister-in-law in Vermillion. More whooping! She was thrilled to be doing a tour in South Dakota. Her next stop, tomorrow, was Deadwood, where she was to perform at the converted Homestake Mine Slime Plant. She introduced her band, the Second Class Citizens, who wore Stetsons, perhaps to indicate their Texas origins.

Sutton resumed singing, this time begging for "one more last chance before you say we're through." After a couple more numbers, I had heard enough and retired to the bar next door. Here I bumped into Katie Hunhoff, who introduced me to two young women. I expressed my surprise at the number of older people in the audience. She agreed and said she was surprised to see one of her uncles (Hunhoff is one of seven brothers), but then she added, with a smile, that her father had been on the phone all morning, "roping 'em in." I said I was disappointed to see there was no dancing. One of her friends replied, "We don't dance in South Dakota. We stand with our backs to the wall and our arms folded, *assessing* the music."

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Just as I was leaving, I was stopped by a young man seated at the bar who identified himself as Nathan Johnson. We arranged to have lunch. Back at home, I looked up Sutton on the Internet and found out that her brother Billie was, in fact, state senator Billie Sutton, assistant minority leader of the Democratic party, something Hunhoff had not mentioned. I was sorry I had not waited long enough to hear his sister sing "Billie's Song"; on the other hand, I now understood Hunhoff's interest, since he was, of course, the minority leader in the state house of representatives.

Here was another case to consider. What had I witnessed this evening? Rehme Sutton commanded loyalty from Yankton because she was a South Dakotan, and I was beginning to learn that simple loyalty to the state ran deep. By recruiting extra members to the audience and generally boosting the concert, Hunhoff was showing loyalty to the Sutton family, to his political colleague, to the party they both supported, and, of course, to Yankton itself, which might have been shamed had it produced a smaller audience than other places on her itinerary (the Slime Plant, for instance). But what about the Hunhoff style of politics, which seemed to involve a kind of inclusiveness embracing the whole state, regardless of party affiliation?[13] Was this attitude typical of the Midwest, of South Dakota, or of Hunhoff himself, or was it the product of a Yankton background?

I had lunch with Johnson at El Tapatio, the Mexican restaurant, and I liked him immediately. (As I discovered later, he writes a stimulating blog that puts to death the idea that the Midwest is culturally provincial.)[14] At the end of our meal he recorded an interview with me, during which I boldly said that I planned to write about Yankton and would be interested to talk to anyone who was interested in talking to me. I explained that I did not think I could do justice to Yankton's history in six weeks, and that, in any case, I was much more interested in contemporary Yankton. The article appeared the following Saturday

13. In 2012 South Dakota favored Romney over Obama by a margin of 58 percent to 40 percent. "Results," http://www.poppyware.com/bowditch/maps/elections/results.html.

14. For Johnson's blog, entitled "An Inland Voyage: News, Views and Musings from Yankton, S.D.," *see* http://nathanvjohnson.wordpress.com/.

on the front page of the *Press & Dakotan*, accompanied by a grinning mug shot.

I woke that morning and, like Byron, found myself famous. At 8:00 A.M. I turned on my computer to discover that I had already received two emails from people who wanted to meet me; many more were to follow. After breakfast I drove to the Hy-Vee supermarket to buy a few copies of the newspaper, which I placed on the conveyer belt at the checkout with my picture face upwards. "You wanna sack?" the cashier asked me. So much for my Byronic celebrity. What I didn't realize was that in a small town everyone is famous; Johnson's article was simply a way of introducing me to the group.

The newspaper has a circulation in excess of eight thousand (more than half the city's population), and its readership is no doubt much greater. If my own experience is anything to go by, the paper is thoroughly read by its readers, who appear to have excellent memories. From that morning onwards, thanks to Johnson's sympathetic article, I rarely had to introduce or explain myself.

Wherever I went, people were keen to welcome me and make their contribution to my project, for which I was grateful. However, nine times out of ten, despite my having said the opposite in the newspaper article, it was assumed that I would be writing about Yankton's past. I was repeatedly told that there was "a lot of history" in Yankton, and I was urged to look into it.

At first I was irritated by the way certain nineteenth-century events —the arrival of Lewis and Clark, the riotous riverboat captains, the territorial capital, the hanging of Jack McCall, the great flood of 1881— were invariably recited as examples of "history," an incantation that to my ear had become stale and meaningless. But, chastened by my earlier mistakes and always mindful of avoiding hasty conclusions, I wondered if I was not listening hard enough.

I was the first to acknowledge that Yankton had a long history, full of interest, but there were good reasons why I did not want to research it. For one thing, the job had already been done by Bob Karolevitz in his excellent *Yankton: A Pioneer Past*, which he had supplemented with *Yankton—The Way It Was!*, his collection of newspaper articles from

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the *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan*.[15] In addition, the city was endowed with the archives of *South Dakota Magazine* and the community library. However, my chief reason for not wanting to study the city's history was that I was far more interested in its contemporary life, which was personified in the very people who were offering to speak to me.

As a footnote I might add that if I were to research an aspect of Yankton that appears to have been neglected, it would be to follow up a clue in Karolevitz's book. In *Yankton: A Pioneer Past* he mentions the Western Portland Cement Company, which opened a factory in Yankton to exploit the chalkstone beds in the bluffs west of the city. By 1891 the factory was producing sixty thousand barrels of cement a year, and its huge smokestack had become one of the city's landmarks. Yankton had already adopted several nicknames for itself during its brief history, and the factory's success caused it to rechristen itself once again as the "Cement City." The head of the company was William Plankinton, a wealthy Englishman then living in Milwaukee. According to Karolevitz, "a small British community developed because of the cement business, and cricket was even played on the local baseball field."[16] The company folded within two decades, following Plankinton's death and the succession of his less-competent son, but it would be intriguing to know more about these British émigrés and the impact their quaint sport had on the city.

If there is an equivalent British community in Yankton today, I did not come across it. Our sole national representative appeared to be Gary Palmer, who had lived in the city for nineteen years and maintained the tradition of distinctive sports by flying his hot-air balloon. It made a beautiful sight one evening as I watched it dawdle above the city in a perfectly blue sky, like a Christmas decoration in search of a tree. My only regret was that it had been decorated with a motif based on the Stars and Stripes rather than the Union Jack.

Midwesterners are especially conscious of the shortness of their history when compared with what seems to them the endless recession of

15. Karolevitz, *Yankton—The Way It Was!: Being a Collection of Historical Columns in the* Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan (Yankton, S.Dak.: *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan*, 1998).
16. Karolevitz, *Yankton: A Pioneer Past,* p. 124.

English history, with its kings and queens, castles and knights. "We are a young country," someone said to me in an argument about gun ownership, meaning that the frontier and all it represented were still fresh in the collective memory, something that I, with the great historicity of England behind me, would not understand. Obviously, it is true that the United States is a newer country than Great Britain, but 1776 was 238 years ago—by no means yesterday—and there are plenty of nation states that have come into existence since then. It is worth remembering that Yankton, founded in 1859, can claim a longer history than, for example, the states of Italy and Germany, to name but two. (Italy became a united kingdom in 1861 and a republic in 1946; Germany was unified into the German empire under Prussian dominance in 1871, and the Weimar Republic was not created until 1918.)

There is a mutual misunderstanding at work here. As I have written elsewhere, Americans do not realize the degree to which the Wild West penetrated British culture when I was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. To my generation of children, who played cowboys and Indians in our suburban back gardens, imitating American movies and television shows, the Wild West was more real to us and imaginatively closer to hand than any equivalent from our own history. As far as I was concerned, no other scenario possessed the same charismatic glamor as the American West of the nineteenth century, especially when represented by the frontier town with its bank, general stores, saloon and dance hall, its sheriff's office and the dusty street where the hero was destined to face the last shootout with the last surviving guy in a black hat.

What I was hearing when people told me there was a lot of history in Yankton was an echo of the city's own creation myth, and, as with all myths, it invoked paradoxes. For instance, people spoke with affectionate pride about the raffish behavior of Yankton's founding fathers, and yet these same historically minded citizens would have no patience with such behavior in their own time. I am certain that a brothel catering to drunken riverboat sailors would not be tolerated on Levee Street today, not even a mock one to match the territorial capitol replica. Nevertheless, I came to understand this persistent reference to "history" as a statement of pride in the city's long pedigree and its heroic origins; it was an affirmation of pioneer values—independence, enter-

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prise, devoutness—that were still at the core of the city's aspirations.

Taking the usual definition of a generation to be a twenty-five-year span, we can say that today's older citizens are separated from the city's origins by only six generations, not a long stretch in terms of folk memory. My own grandfather, whom I remember well, was born in 1890 and was therefore surrounded as a child and young man with people who were born well before 1859. In just one step I could hold hands, as it were, with the mid-Victorian age. As a result, I was not wholly surprised when a Yankton businesswoman vehemently informed me that "bad blood" had come up the river and was still contaminating the city. She felt strongly about it and did not immediately explain that she was referring to the days of the steamboat. How this contamination showed itself, she would not say, nor would she be laughed out of her opinion. She was not the only one to feel the wind of history blowing off the river.

As things stand, Yankton does not have a museum exclusively devoted to the history of the city. However, the Dakota Territorial Museum is due to move from its present cramped premises on Summit Street to the Mead Building on the campus of the Human Services Center, where far more of its collection will be on display and, no doubt, the city's history will then be fully represented. At the moment, the museum can afford to give only a relatively small space to Lewis and Clark, which can do justice neither to the general importance of their expedition, nor to its South Dakota parts, especially the visit to Calumet Bluff a few miles upstream from Yankton. However, I was told that among other treasures presently stored in the museum's warehouse was a large exhibition about Lewis and Clark, so we can hope they are given the space they deserve when the Mead Building opens.[17]

Calumet Bluff is situated on the Nebraska side of the river and is now the site of the Lewis and Clark Visitor Center, which overlooks Gavins

17. I certainly do not mean to disparage the efforts of the museum's historical society to promote the city's heritage. Any organization that can command the loyalty of its members to the extent of getting them to dress up and portray characters risen from the city's graves as part of a cemetery walk is to be marveled at. *See* Johnson's blogpost, "The Scandalous Tale of Yankton's Adel Pettersen," 27 June 2013, http://nathanvjohnson.wordpress.com/.

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Lewis and Clark Visitor Center (left) overlooking Gavins Point Dam

Point Dam. The center is housed in an ungainly-looking building that has three huge windows projecting from its walls like television screens to give views of the lake, dam, and river. The center is staffed by Army Corps of Engineers and National Park Service personnel, who between them are responsible for the interpretive and interactive exhibits and so-called historical replicas that make up the display panels devoted to selected chapters in the history of this part of the river: the American Indian peoples who once predominated, Lewis and Clark's visit, the era of the riverboats, the building of the dam and the hydroelectric plant ("Power Up!"), and so on.

Curating such displays is probably not within the expertise of either the Corps of Engineers or the park rangers, but it has to be said that they are inadequate. "Interactive" is a generous term to describe an exhibit that displays a notice inviting visitors to stroke the pelts of fur-trade animals lying on a table. Anyone who went into the center

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knowing nothing about Lewis and Clark or the American Indians who lived in the area would come out scarcely less ignorant. Most lamentable of all is the display devoted to the Yankton river captains. It is dominated by a life-sized model of a paddle-wheel steamboat bridge, complete with steering wheel and windows, and is presumably designed to give children the sensation of guiding a steamboat through the snags and whirlpools of the old Missouri. However, the installation points the wrong way; the young captain finds himself steering his imaginary craft towards a wall, while the actual river in all its majesty lies behind him, out of sight.

Perhaps it is unfair to criticize these displays, whose worst fault is to seem old-fashioned now that the curating of history, especially for children, has advanced so far since the exhibits were designed. Nonetheless, a special opportunity has been ignored. Every identifiable point of historical contact with Lewis and Clark is important, but the events that took place at Calumet Bluff were unusually momentous.[18]

On 27 August 1804, the expedition made contact for the first time with the Yankton Sioux, and three days later Lewis and Clark invited them to a conference in their camp at the foot of Calumet Bluff. To confirm the importance of the occasion, they flew the American flag from a high staff. The Yanktons were no less keen to make an impression. Parading at their head were four musicians who sang and shook rattles made of buffalo hide with small shot inside and little bunches of hair tied to them. The leader was painted white, and the others were painted in different colors. They carried war shields made of buffalo hide strong enough to resist a musket ball; these hoops were decorated with pronghorn skin and porcupine quills. The party approached the Americans in a friendly spirit, and their leaders shook hands with the captains, who, in their turn, marked the occasion by firing their bow swivel gun. The musicians were rewarded with a gift of tobacco, and to Clark's mild annoyance they continued to perform during the council.

18. My account of the following events is taken from Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), Gary E. Moulton, *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* http://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu, and James P. Ronda, *Lewis and Clark among the Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

The meeting began at midday when Lewis made a long speech that he had worked on the previous day; he spoke until 4:00 P.M. The text has been lost, but it was one of the few formal speeches he made that was probably understood by his audience, because an interpreter was on hand to translate. The captains understood full well the significance of this occasion. They were under explicit orders from President Thomas Jefferson to negotiate with the Sioux, who were the largest tribe on the Missouri and controlled trade on the river, in particular, the lucrative fur trade. Jefferson wanted the captains to establish American authority in the minds of the Sioux and to involve them in the great trading empire he envisaged for the territory he had recently added to the United States under the Louisiana Purchase. For trade to flow freely, it was essential that the various tribes up and down the Missouri made peace with each other, and this point was one of the themes of Lewis's speech.

By the same token, the Yanktons also understood the potential value of this meeting with the Americans. They, too, were eager to promote their trade connections, but to do so required arms and ammunition. They were concerned with finding a profitable place in a rapidly changing commercial world. They also needed to protect themselves from their aggressive neighbors, the Teton Sioux.

When at last Lewis finished, the captains selected five men as chiefs and gave them each a medal and some other gifts. They singled out one man, named Weuche, as the Grand Chief, though on what basis is not clear, and presented him with a red-laced coat, a cocked hat, a red feather, an American flag, and a white shirt. The chiefs announced that they would respond in the morning to the proposals Lewis had made in his speech. More gifts were distributed among the other Yanktons, who collected them together and divided them equally.

In replying to Lewis's speech, Weuche said that his people were poor and in great need of powder, ammunition, and knives. Their women and children were starving and without clothes. He assured the captains that he could arrange peaceful relations between the tribes, who would listen to him rather than outsiders. He also pointed out that the English and the Spanish had already been given him medals; what he and his people needed was something more substantial. They wanted

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immediate relief from their poverty, and he suggested that his warriors should be given permission to help themselves to the goods on the next trade boat that came from Saint Louis. The captains could not agree to these demands, but when the two groups parted they were on good terms, and the mood was hopeful and celebratory.

Stephen Ambrose's verdict on this meeting is worth reading. He writes that while Lewis was completely sincere in his diplomatic efforts, "it never occurred to him that his actions might be characterized as patronizing, dictatorial, ridiculous, and highly dangerous. . . . His idea of how to make the [Yankton Sioux] into allies was to give them worthless medals and wardrobe trappings rather than the guns and powder they needed. . . . In general, it would be impossible to say which side was more ignorant of the other."[19]

This episode was not only colorful, but it represented a moment of national historical importance. The United States Army, in the shape of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, was for the first time confronting the Sioux, the people who, one way or another, would keep it occupied throughout much of the nineteenth century until the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1891. The dark story of relations between the whites and the Indians was foretold in the tangled misunderstandings and assumptions that clouded the discussions between the captains and the Yankton chiefs at Calumet Bluff.

My point is that this historic moment belongs to Yankton; it happened on its very doorstep in a place that is readily identifiable. Furthermore, it concerned people whose direct descendants continue to live in the vicinity. And it also concerned the great river that has been the origin and livelihood of the city for much of its history. Yet, as things stand, the residents of Yankton and, more importantly, Yankton's school students, would find it difficult to learn about these fateful events from the information available at the Lewis and Clark Visitor Center.

Have I been right to assume that most South Dakotans reading this section will be familiar with the Lewis and Clark Expedition and will have at least sampled the journals? How much do today's high school

19. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, p. 163.

students know about Lewis and Clark or, for that matter, about the Sioux, and, in particular, the Yankton Sioux, who are their neighbors and whose ancestors surrendered the land on which they live? My understanding is that young people are taught western history in the eighth grade, but not thereafter unless they happen to have a teacher with a special interest in the subject. Ignorance on the part of tomorrow's citizens can only put obstacles in the way of relations between whites and American Indians, who are much more likely to be aware of their history and its bleak legacy.

Yankton has a lot of history, for sure, but like all history it is in danger of being selectively remembered.

THE FEDERAL PRISON

A man stands at the curb, waiting for an opportunity to cross Pine Street. He is dressed in a gray T-shirt and sweat pants. When a break in the traffic occurs, he walks across the road, keeping his head down, looking no one in the eye. His manner is self-effacing, as if he preferred to be invisible. Once on the other side of the street, he hurries away, disappearing into the grounds surrounding one of the large buildings that line the street. Anyone who lives in Yankton will have identified him immediately, but for a visitor it comes as a surprise to realize that he has just shared the sidewalk with a federal convict.

In my brief account of Yankton in *Infinite West*, I made fun of the fact that the hotel I was forced to reject had offered its proximity to the federal prison as one of its selling points. I was also amused to notice that the Yankton Federal Prison Camp, to give the place its full title, had been nominated by *Forbes* magazine as one of the ten cushiest prisons in the United States.[20] Not for the first time, I had missed the point.

The buildings that now provide the federal prison with its campus were originally designed and constructed as part of Yankton College, which was founded by Joseph Ward in 1881. Ward was a missionary pastor who had been sent to the territorial capital to take responsibility for the newly organized First Congregational Church. He was also

20. "In Pictures: America's 10 Cushiest Prisons," http://www.forbes.com/2009/07/13/best-prisons-cushiest-madoff-personal-finance-lockups_slide_5.html.

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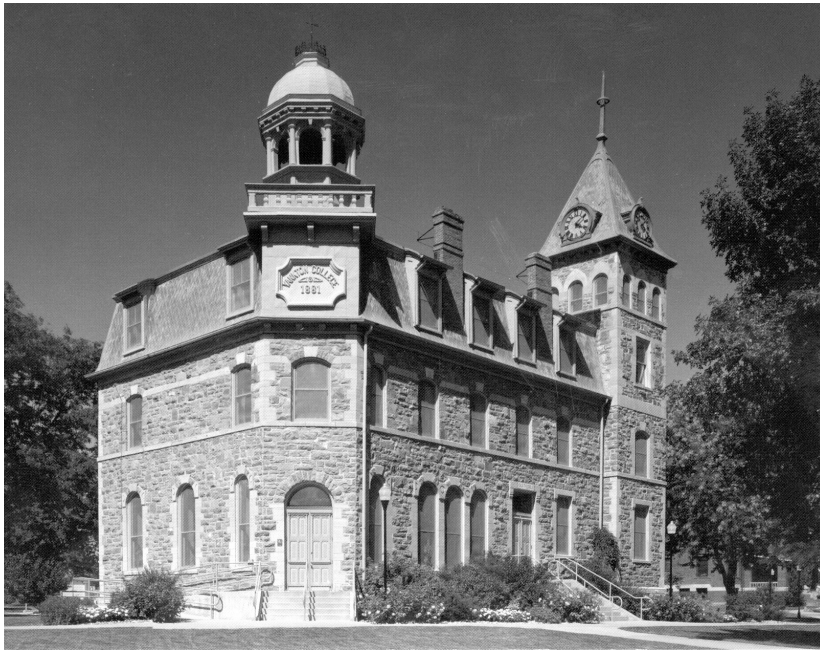
charged with a second mission, that of "see[ing] to it that the cause of Christian education be vigorously carried forward in the great Northwest."[21] With money pledged by the congregation of his church and the donation of a twenty-five-acre site on the then-bare bluff north of the city later known as College Hill, he was able to act on his instructions. The college's first five students were enrolled in 1882, and the cornerstone of its first building, Middle Hall, a three-story structure made of Sioux Falls jasper, was laid in the same year. Under the motto "Christ for the World," Yankton College became the first institution of higher learning in Dakota Territory, and it went on to supply a liberal-arts education to many young men and women from the Midwest.

Despite an illustrious educational record and the great fondness it inspired among its generations of alumni, the college fell into financial

21. Robert F. Karolevitz, *Yankton College: A Continuing Story* (Yankton, S.Dak.: Dakota Homestead Publishers, 2003), p. 11.



Middle Hall, former Yankton College (now Federal Prison Camp, Yankton)

difficulties in the 1980s. Heroic efforts on the part of faculty, students, alumni, and sympathetic citizens could not revive its fortunes, and by December 1983 insolvency forced the trustees to close its doors. Debts amounted to nearly a million dollars, and there were no resources to pay faculty salaries for that month. In addition, the condition of its premises, by now sixteen buildings occupying thirty-three acres, had deteriorated so badly that $450,000 was reckoned to be the sum needed for necessary repairs and improvements.[22] Old Middle, the original college building, by then known as The Conservatory of Music and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was in particularly bad shape. The college, once the pride of Yankton, had become a liability. The *Press & Dakotan* reported that reactions among Yankton's citizens "ranged from shock and sadness to bitterness."[23] Apart from the humiliation suffered by the community, the city was about to lose an annual payroll worth $1.4 million.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the closure of the college caused an outburst of grief among its alumni, and they continue to mourn its death to this day. The last generation of alumni to graduate from the college are in their fifties, which means there are plenty of still relatively young people keeping its memory bright in the city's collective mind.

Three years after the college closed, the Federal Bureau of Prisons made an initial overture to the city and asked for citizens' reactions to the idea of turning the entire campus into a Level 1 Security (the lowest level) prison camp with a view to housing male inmates who had committed so-called white-collar crimes such as tax evasion, fraud, money laundering, and so on, as well as drug trafficking. The implication, understood by everyone, was that this facility would be a prison without walls, an institution that would place no physical barrier between the public and the inmates, who would be restricted by nothing more concrete than the rewards of obedience and the penalties of disobedience.

22. Ibid, p. 127.

23. Quoted in Doug Green, "From 'College Town' to 'Prison Town,'" *Federal Prisons Journal* (Summer 1989): 25.

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Several issues dominated the debate that ensued: Was there any danger from "walkaways" (a wonderfully genteel, but precise term to describe escapees, who would indeed have to show no more ingenuity than simply walking away)? Would the campus need to be fenced? Could the government decide to upgrade the security level? And would the value of property in the vicinity be affected?[24] One interesting contribution to the debate came from an unexpected source. Ronald Wright, a former Yankton resident serving time for embezzlement in Duluth, wrote: "As I recall, the residents in the area of Yankton College complained about the 'rowdyism' of the college students periodically. The students were very inconsiderate of people's property at times. . . . The area residents will have no problems with 'rowdyism' from a camp facility."[25] He pointed out that the inmates would have a vested interest in behaving well, since infractions of the rules would only extend their sentences or cause them to be transferred to less congenial surroundings.

In the end, the residents chose in favor of the government's purchasing the old college site, and in April 1988 the Bureau of Prisons dispatched a check for $3.1 million. These funds allowed the college to pay its debts and retain nearly a million dollars, which was used to establish a so-called College Without Walls (a kind of riposte to the prison without walls that had replaced it). The college was able to continue fostering education by sponsoring arts programs and awarding grants and scholarships. However, its most important function was to provide a living link between the defunct institution and its alumni, of whom three thousand were alive in 2009.

In 1997, the newly devised college made a partnership with Yankton High School and took office space in the Summit Activities Center. The office doubles as a small museum—it might almost be called a shrine—that contains collections of college and student memorabilia, most of them donated by alumni, as well as historical documents, yearbooks, student records, sporting records, and so forth.

The volunteer staff lovingly curates this collection, and I was shown

24. Ibid., p. 27.
25. Ibid.

around by the office manager and registrar, Judi Olsen, who was at work on converting student record cards into an electronic database. The cards themselves were little repositories of the kind of information, often valuable and touching, that does not translate into electronic form. Dating from the 1950s, the card I was shown had additional pieces of paper glued to it; several sets of handwriting were distinguishable, including that of the student herself; a spelling mistake had been left uncorrected; an address had been crossed out and another substituted; different typewriters had been used to make insertions, some in black, some in red. More than the story of this young person's life was palpable on the card, which had been softened and foxed by frequent handling. With its addenda and corrigenda, it was the record of a certain method of collecting information, amateurish to our eye, but nonetheless comprehensively informative in a way that makes electronic data look thin, because it showed the history of its own making. Everything had been preserved, errors and all. It was a record of recordkeeping, a historical item in its own right, and I expressed the hope that it, too, would be kept and displayed.[26]

The prison itself opened in 1988, and by the time I arrived it had been there long enough for most people in Yankton to take it for granted, no longer seeing how unusual it was. It struck me, however, as a most exceptional institution, especially after I had driven down Pine Street and made the connection between the self-effacing figure on the curb and the buildings behind him.

The article in *Forbes* magazine had listed as the federal camp's chief virtue the fact that its "white-collar cons," presumably its core readership among potential cons, could take classes in accounting, business administration, and business management, but the truth was its educational program was far more extensive and tailored to a wider range of students.[27] From the earliest days the prison had maintained a relationship with Mount Marty College, which had provided professors, many of them nuns, to teach all sorts of courses. The horticultural course run

26. For an eloquent account of the value of paper records, *see* Nicholson Baker's essay "Discards" in *The Size of Thoughts* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), pp. 125–81.

27. "In Pictures: America's 10 Cushiest Prisons."

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by Joe Hoffman for more than twenty years had received national recognition. According to him, the inmate was expected "to do something he is proud of and be associated with something he has worked hard to accomplish. . . . Working with plants can provide ownership and responsibility in a setting where nothing is yours."[28] Here was another feature that made the place exceptional, and I was therefore keen to talk to the warden.

In reality, it turned out to be far easier to get out of the camp than to get in. I sought permission to interview the warden and was put in touch with Todd Cowman, the public information officer, who treated me with courteous suspicion. Behind his professional misgiving, I detected another concern: that the harmonious but finely balanced relationship the prison enjoyed with the community might be damaged by my intervention. He told me that my request would have to be scrutinized in the light of policy and submitted to a higher authority within the Bureau of Prisons. He advised me to apply in writing, attaching my professional resumé and credentials, a list of the media organizations I represented, an account of my motives, a list of the questions I proposed to put to the warden, and a guarantee that he would be given the opportunity to vet anything I proposed to publish. I wrote accordingly, explaining that I represented no one but myself and was motivated by nothing more than innocent curiosity about the way the two communities, city and prison, related to each other.

In fact, my curiosity had another origin, because I already had some experience with prisons and detention. For several years in the last decade I worked in a detention center near Cambridge, a facility enclosed by razor wire, where asylum seekers, sometimes with families that included small children, were sent in order to have their claims for refugee status processed. My job was to act as a paralegal representative, helping them present their claims to a more-or-less implacable immigration service. As a matter of policy, the immigration authorities ensured that 99.5 percent of these claims failed.

I learned a great deal from this job. Most of all, I learned about the

28. Brenda K. Johnson, "Maintaining the Grounds at the Federal Prison," *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan*, 26 Nov. 2010.

extraordinary bravery ordinary people could show in the face of political repression, and the extraordinary brutality ordinary people could show if they were given a uniform and had someone placed at their mercy. I also learned a little about the grueling effects of detention on the spirit.

My other experience of prison was closer to farce. While working as a publisher in London in the 1970s, I decided for reasons that now elude me that I would like to become an official prison visitor. I applied and was accepted at Pentonville Prison, a grim edifice built in 1842 and the jail nearest to my place of work.

The prison chaplain, a hearty, well-meaning man, was responsible for the visitor scheme, and he explained its archaic principle to me: the visitor was intended to personify a model of middle-class respectability to which the proletarian prisoner could aspire. The visitor's function was to spring the prisoners out of their life of crime by setting an example so enviable that they would instantly embrace honesty and lawfulness. This proposition was made still more ludicrous in my case because at the time, despite appearances, I was far from being a model of respectability. My marriage was in difficulties, I was drinking too much, and my debts were engulfing me. Nonetheless, I visited several men, usually a different one each time, and as far as I am aware I did no serious harm beyond confirming their prejudices against the middle classes. I have two abiding memories of these visits. One is of the unbearable stench pervading the entire building, which the tiny windows built into each cell could do nothing to dispel. The other was of the stench of unhappiness. The prison reeked of it as pungently as of the stench of urine and bodies and stale air. If such a stench can be analyzed into its constituent parts, it consisted of one part boredom, one part hopelessness, and one part plain misery.

In due course, Cowman called me from the prison to say that permission had been granted for me to interview the warden, Scott Willis, and he instructed me to present myself at 1:30 P.M. An hour before my appointment, he called to make sure I understood my instructions.

I made my appearance promptly and was signed in. Cowman collected me and escorted me across the prison grounds to Ward Hall, which in its college days had been the administrative center. Surround-

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ed by venerable structures, many of them bearing the names of alumni and benefactors, we could have been walking through the college miraculously restored to its old life, but enjoying a new prosperity. The paths were swept, the flower beds weeded, the hedges clipped, the lawns mowed, and the whole campus was in a state of immaculate orderliness. Ward Hall, where the warden now occupied the old college president's office, had an equally affluent feel: every board of its polished floor shone; everything that could be buffed up was glittering; every painted surface was spotless and flawless. The only incongruous note was struck by those standing in for the students. Strangely mature and monotonously dressed by college standards, they were also eerily deferential.

I doubt that any other warden in the country occupies headquarters of the same elegant splendor as Warden Willis. We waited for a few minutes in his secretary's room, in itself a palatial space, before being ushered into his suite—an office and a sitting room, both decorated and furnished with the same quiet emphasis on quality that characterized the whole building and spoke eloquently of federal dollars.

Willis, a dapper figure in his mid-fifties wearing a pink tie, proved to be relaxed and forthcoming, a contrast to Cowman, who sat with us during the meeting, tensely prepared to supply a forgotten statistic or correct a nuance that might have gone astray. Willis was newly appointed to what was his first wardenship, and I put it to him that he could hardly have secured a more congenial position. He did not disagree. I asked him to describe his responsibilities. He explained that the prison population in his charge fluctuated between 850 to 865 inmates and that 81 percent of the current population were drug offenders. The median sentence being served was one hundred months, while the maximum time left for any inmate to serve was ten years. The average age was thirty-nine years, which meant that those incarcerated were easier to manage, more mature in every sense, and could not qualify to serve camp time unless they had a record of being non-aggressive, non-assaultive, compliant, and willing to accept direction. Some had worked their way through the system by good behavior and had reached the point of being eligible for the camp. Some inmates serving shorter sentences had been sent directly to the camp by the courts.

Willis insisted that nothing was more important in his eyes than the safety of the public, and he was ever conscious that the camp stood in the middle of a residential area, with an elementary school nearby, as well as families with children. He made it a point to have "a heart-to-heart talk" with new inmates on their arrival, making it clear that what he called "prison language" was not acceptable in the camp, and that there was to be no contact of any sort with the public at large.

The Community Relations Board met once a month and included the chief of police, the mayor, the city manager, and members of the public, many of them alumni of the old college. Willis's impression was that the alumni wanted to be connected with the prison. He thought that the camp was not just tolerated by the city but was a source of pride. No one had said to him, "Why in the world is this place here?"

There was nothing he could do if an inmate chose to "walk," but escapees knew they would get caught—"they always got caught"—and they knew they would never do "camp time" again. The warden encouraged the inmates to take jobs or educate themselves. He acknowledged the long history that tied the prison to Mount Marty College and understood the importance of the education program that had been established. He knew that the inmates were proud of their achievements. One of the first events he had attended after taking up his post was a reading at the college by prisoners in the writing program, and he had been impressed by what he heard. In his opinion, the important thing was that between them the camp and the college had put in place educational programs that gave the inmates what he called "real livable wage opportunities."

Of the inmates, 64 percent were white and nearly 31 percent black; there were American Indians, but not a disproportionate number. Gang culture did not play a part in the life of the prison. Many of the inmates came from backgrounds where gang ties were common, but these ties exerted no influence in the camp. It would be different if the same men were in a high-security prison. There was always a potential for drugs to be present, but as things stood they did not represent a significant issue.

I asked Willis about the policy of transferring wardens within a few years of their appointment, and he said it was important to avoid rou-

tine. What was needed was a different set of eyes on the place. You wanted to prevent the staff from becoming regimented and the inmates from falling into routines. It was always good to have new management come in and put a little twist on familiar procedures. He finished our conversation by paying tribute to his staff: "This isn't easy work. It takes a special person to work with Corrections."

Cowman walked me to the exit. Even for the innocent and unconvicted, to leave a place of detention is always exhilarating. The sun was still shining, my car was waiting for me in the shade of a maple tree, and I was looking forward to a cup of tea and a biscuit at home—simple but priceless pleasures. Nonetheless, I could not revel in my freedom for long. The material difference between a detained person and a free one is absolute, but the moral difference between myself and the drug offender sharing the curb with me did not seem so great.

Willis had said nothing that would have disturbed, far less alarmed, the citizens of Yankton. Perhaps my questions did not probe deeply enough, but my sense was that he was giving me a candid account of the camp. After all, what did he have to hide? He was running a prison whose inmates had been handpicked for their docility, who had no incentive to escape but, on the contrary, had good reason for staying where they were.

Apart from the obvious deprivations that come with losing liberty, the worst of prison seems to be the boredom and the sense of desolation that result from being forced to do nothing with time, that is, the possession of life, except kill it. But here at Yankton, the camp's unique circumstances made it essential that the inmates put their time to constructive use. They were kept occupied with interesting work that either made use of skills they already possessed or encouraged them to learn new ones; they were offered educational programs at all levels; and, despite being confined, they occupied an environment that was full of sensory stimuli. So far from being trapped within grey walls and deprived of sunshine, the inmates were given the responsibility of beautifying their prison by caring for its gardens and maintaining its fabric. (The perimeter of the campus is enclosed by a set of low railings that would not prevent a child's escape, and I was told that it

had been erected by the prisoners themselves, who were offended that local dogs were fouling their perfectly mowed lawns).

If the warden is to be believed, the regime he and his staff exercised was humane and enlightened. As Willis himself acknowledged, not every inmate rejoiced at being sent to Yankton. It was regarded as a remote outpost by prisoners from out of state, especially those whose families had to travel long distances to visit them. But he quoted with satisfaction the example of an inmate who had surprised himself during his time at Yankton: "Boss, I've lost twenty pounds, I'm eating better, I'm getting exercise, I've run three miles on the track. I've read a book for the first time in years—a leisure book." This kind of talk is what he liked to hear from his "guys."

On the face of it, the camp was a success. The old college buildings had been rescued and refurbished to a high standard, the grounds and other facilities were beautifully maintained, and the prison appeared to be a showpiece of conservation in the middle of a desirable residential neighborhood. The prison had also benefited the city by providing a pool of free labor and skill, which had been put to work on a number of community schemes.[29]

How city residents felt about playing host to this apparent success could only be discovered by taking a poll. For what it was worth, my impression was that people were resigned in a more or less benign spirit to the presence of the prison in its midst. Yankton could certainly take pride in the fact that its hospitality to the federal prison was helping to reduce the level of recidivism among the prison population—a moral boon as well as a significant saving in tax dollars.

Jim Reese is the distinguished director of the prison's writing program, and he has edited a collection of creative writing and visual art-

29. I would not like to leave the impression that the success of the federal camp in civic terms was an endorsement of the policy of automatically detaining drug offenders, a policy which the Obama administration, to its credit, appears to be revoking. In the words of the White House drug-use fact sheet dated 17 April 2012, "Innovative new criminal justice reforms can stop the revolving door of drug use, crime, incarceration, and rearrest" (U.S. Office of Drug Control Policy, "White House Fact Sheet on Drug Control Policy," http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2012/04/201204174016.html#ixzz2dHyqrZ00).

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work by Yankton inmates under the title *4 P.M. Count*. In his introduction he notes that, in line with the national pattern, the South Dakota prison population is expanding rapidly: by 500 percent since 1980, from about six hundred inmates then to more than thirty-six hundred in 2012. "If the state does not contain that growth," he writes, "it is estimated the prison population will exceed 4,500 inmates by 2022, at a cost of more than $224 million to taxpayers." One way of reversing this pernicious trend is to provide inmates with education. After referring to half a dozen studies of recidivism that reinforce this point, Reese quotes from a recent United States Department of Justice report: "Prison-based education is the single most effective tool for lowering recidivism . . . [and] is far more effective than boot camps, shock incarceration or vocational training."[30]

Not long after meeting the warden, I spoke to another of the prison's educators, Charlie Gross, who is a professor at Mount Marty College and teaches a business-studies course for the inmates. We met at his home on Pine Street, a house his grandfather built in the California style of the 1920s, which rendered it an oddity, or so he told me. Its oddest feature was that it lacked air conditioning, and we sat in a kind of twilight, scarcely able to see each other across the room because he had drawn all the muslin blinds in order to keep out the sun.

Now in his sixties, Gross used to be a banker but after thirty-five years had decided to retire and become a teacher, preferring to do something that was "fun," a word that for him described teaching prisoners. The challenge lay in the fact that, often as not, his pupils were better qualified than he was. For example, among the students in his current class was a man with a Ph.D. in planning, the ex-CEO of an oil company, a veteran of the commodity trading business, an investment company executive, and a banker like himself, who, however, unlike him, had retired involuntarily.

30. Jim Reese, "Transformative Justice," *4PM Count*, http://jimreese.org/portfolio/4pm-count/. In 2012, Reese was awarded a Distinguished Public Service Award in recognition of his exemplary dedication and contributions to the Education Department at the Yankton Federal Prison Camp. Since 2008, Reese has been one of six artists-in-residence throughout the country who are part of the National Endowment for the Arts' interagency initiative with Department of Justice's Federal Bureau of Prisons.

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In his experience, the prison students, both those who were already educated and those eager for education, were far more "engaged" than college students, and for that reason he loved teaching in the prison. It was great to "dialogue" with students.

When Mount Marty College first arranged to teach business at the prison, the contract was to provide two-year associate's degrees, but a few years ago some inmates approached Gross and pointed out that they would be in residence long enough to work for four-year bachelor's degrees. Would it be possible for the college to supply the necessary courses? This request was significant on their part, because although the first two years of study would be funded by the prison, the second two years had to be financed by the inmates themselves. The college agreed to the plan, and the result was that in 2012 six bachelor's degrees were conferred on prison inmates. Eight more students were currently engaged in four-year degree courses. Gross was justifiably proud of these students and their achievements; it can only be hoped that between them they have improved the statistics for recidivism.

The Federal Prison Camp lies at the heart of Yankton, but no matter how successful it is in penal and civic terms, it can never be the city's heart as perhaps Yankton College was in its day. The prison is bound to constitute an isolated and autonomous area within the city, a little sovereign patch of federal territory.

There is continual interchange between the two entities—a community committee, educational courses run by faculty from outside, city schemes involving inmate labor, staff who are locally recruited, and so on—but the fact remains that the camp is a prison and its inmates are convicted criminals whose connection with the city must be rigorously monitored and restricted. The inmates may be a conspicuous presence, and by prison standards they may play an unusual part in the life of the city, but they will always remain ghost citizens: present, but without real substance (for example, they pay no local taxes). The prison's detachment from the town is reinforced by the policy of keeping wardens in post for short terms. Each one may bring "new eyes" to the place, as Willis observed, but the quick turnover also ensures that he or she is always a relative newcomer to the city and, therefore, a stranger.

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It is an unavoidable fact that prisons, however humanely run, are repositories of misery. Some, perhaps the majority, of Yankton's inmates may emerge from their stay with a sense of achievement, a sense that the time they served was not wasted, but all of them will have undergone periods of great unhappiness during the process. Many of the autobiographical pieces in *4 P.M. Count* show that even those prisoners the system regards as the lowest security risk have had traumatic childhoods or events in their past that require exorcising before they can achieve any peace of mind, which has to be sought in the challenging context of detention.

It might be argued that a prison is supposed to be a miserable place or, at the least, a disagreeable one; part of its function is to be punitive, and there would be no punishment if the place provided an enjoyable experience. Despite its exemplary educational record, the prison is not a college, and its inmates can never become college students there. A woman alumnus of Yankton College told me that what had made the old college so attractive and valuable was that the students were drawn from around the locality. They came from the same sort of backgrounds, the same sort of farms, small towns and churches, and they shared the same kind of values—"good morals," as she put it. The warden's guys, no matter how well qualified they may be when they graduate from the Federal Prison Camp, were not drawn from the locality in the first place and would not be returning for alumni celebrations. (Does the prison have an alumni organization?)

AN ATHEIST GOES TO CHURCH

Two great mutual mysteries divide the British and American cultures: God and guns. We British simply do not understand the American devotion to guns, which we read as a form of madness. In Britain, guns are thought to be the property of the upper classes, who use them to shoot birds; of poachers, who use them to shoot rabbits; and of criminals, who use them to shoot each other. The passion with which gun ownership is defended in America is therefore strange to us, since we have no tradition of using firearms for self-protection and only a limited tradition, confined to the countryside, of hunting for sport.

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South Dakota, with its recent pioneering history, largely rural population, and strong tradition of hunting, is among the states with the least restrictive laws relating to gun ownership. In March 2013, South Dakota made news around the world by becoming the first state to enact a law explicitly authorizing certain school employees to carry guns on the job. However, the law was not passed without a tough struggle from its many opponents, which demonstrates the danger of stereotyping. In Yankton, I never saw a gun of any sort, except on the hip of a police officer. One of my neighbors told me that she kept her father's old pistol in her bedroom, but I got the impression that an intruder would not have much to fear from her marksmanship. On the other hand, she became heated when I queried the wisdom of unfettered gun ownership, and our conversation soon became a dialogue of the deaf as we exchanged cultural misunderstandings.

The same kind of misunderstandings prevail when we contemplate each other's religious life. Americans do not appreciate the degree to which Britain has become a secular (godless) society; in the same way, the British do not appreciate the depth to which Christianity infuses the thinking of the average American—not the evangelical fundamentalist we are so fond of demonizing, but the ordinary, level-headed citizen, certainly the ordinary midwesterner.

Statistics about religious belief are difficult to quantify because of the different results produced by the phrasing of questions. One thing statistics do register is that belief, church attendance, and religious affiliations in Britain have dropped during the decade 2000 to 2010. Christianity commands by far the greatest number of adherents, but the census figures show a significant decline. In 2001, 71.7 percent of the population put Christianity as their current religion; ten years later, the figure had dropped to 59.4 percent. During the same period the percentage of people saying that they had no religion rose from 14.6 percent to 24.7 percent. These figures are corroborated by polls asking how many people believe in God. In 2011, one survey found that only 34 percent of citizens of the United Kingdom claimed to believe in a god, while another poll found that 37 percent believed there was a god, 33 percent believed there was "some sort of spirit or life force," and 25

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percent answered that they didn't believe in "any sort of spirit, God or life force."[31]

By contrast, statistics for the United States suggest a significantly different religious profile. Of Americans, 73 to 76 percent described themselves in 2012 as Christians, and in 2008 a quarter of Christians belonged to the Catholic church. In 2010, a Gallup poll found that 80 percent of Americans believed in a god, 12 percent believed in a universal spirit, 6 percent believed in neither, 1 percent chose "other," and 1 percent had no opinion. These figures were down only slightly from the 1940s, when Gallup first asked the same set of questions. In a 2012 Gallup poll concerning church attendance, 41.6 percent of Americans said that they attended a church or synagogue once a week or almost every week. South Dakota ranked fourteenth on the list of states, with 47 percent.[32]

The difference is clear, but the greater difference is perhaps that religion no longer plays a decisive part in British public life. The voice of religion, mainly Christianity, is heard in public debate, especially on ethical issues, but it is only one voice among many and does not command automatic respect by virtue of its allegedly divine inspiration. It would be impossible for an American politician to run for senior office, certainly for the presidency, without expressing some kind of allegiance to Christianity. In the United Kingdom, however, things are different. Prime Minister David Cameron has declared that he is a Christian but not a regular churchgoer, and he never uses his Christianity to endorse his political policies. The leader of the Labour Party, and potentially the next prime minister, is Jewish by descent but has openly declared that he is an atheist. The leader of the Liberal Party, and deputy prime minister in the present coalition government, has also declared that he is an atheist.[33]

31. Wikipedia, "Religion in the United Kingdom," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_the_United_Kingdom.

32. Wikipedia, "Religion in the United States: Attendance," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_the_United_States#Attendance.

33. "Ed Miliband: I Don't Believe in God," *The Telegraph*, 29 Sept. 2010, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/ed-miliband/8032163/Ed-Miliband-I-dont-believe-in-God.html.

In parliamentary style, I must declare my own interest in the matter. I am a typical product of my time and society, for I am an atheist, the child and grandchild of atheists. My parents and my paternal grandparents, whom I saw frequently, were not so much atheistic in any combative or engaged sense but were simply irreligious, with a mildly anticlerical prejudice. God, Christ, the gospels, the church, prayer, heaven, hell—none of these figured seriously in their thinking. A touchingly uxorious man, my grandfather cherished an unelaborated hope after his wife died that they would "meet" again, but this emotion was sheer sentimentality born of grief. It did not prompt him to open a church door and seek a route to the afterlife. After he was cremated the crematorium disposed of his ashes, and by their own request neither he nor his beloved wife had graves.

Actually, I prefer the term "humanist" to describe myself. "Atheism" tends to suggest simple disbelief in a supreme being, the negative of theism, whereas I like to think that humanism implies allegiance to a set of positive values that are the products of human reasoning. Many of these values are shared by Christians, with the critical difference that the humanist says they are not divinely prescribed or inspired and obedience to them is not rewarded with a heavenly afterlife.

So much for my own background. I had not come to Yankton to argue, far less proselytize, if atheists can be said to spread their gospel. I had come to observe and to understand, and to that end I decided to go to church.

The Yankton Visitors Guide, produced by the Yankton Convention and Visitors Bureau, devotes two pages to "Worship," one of them occupied by an inspirational picture of the sun setting over a stretch of water, presumably the Missouri. Listed on the other page are the churches available to the visitor, who is presented with a selection of no less than twenty-five places of worship representing at least fifteen denominations, including several Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, and Methodist churches.[34] The would-be worshipper who requires an even richer selection can consult the areaConnect website, where thirty-four "churches and religion resources" are listed; they do not,

34. *Visitors Guide 2013–2014* (Yankton: Yankton Media Inc., 2013), pp. 28–29.

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however, include a mosque, synagogue, or temple.[35] By comparison, the town of Newmarket in my home county of Suffolk, which has a population roughly the size of Yankton's, can offer the visitor the meager choice of just six churches.)

On my first Sunday I decided to go to the Bishop Marty Memorial Chapel on the campus of Mount Marty College. Hunhoff had encouraged me to go, which was reason in itself, but I had another, more personal motive. Earlier in the week I had looked into the chapel and, innocently opening a door, found myself in the monastery, where I was accosted by an elderly white-haired nun pushing a stroller. She asked me what I was doing, and when I told her I was a writer, she said, none too hospitably, "We've had a few of those." On my way home from this robust encounter I glanced in the mirror of my car, as was my habit, because a small excrescence, the size of an overgrown freckle, had recently developed on my right cheek, just below my eye socket. One of the many unwelcome gifts of old age, this lump had begun to harden and cause anxiety, and I had sworn that when I returned home I would consult a dermatologist. To my astonishment, I could not locate the familiar blemish. I stopped the car and looked more closely. Yes, it was gone, or at least it had diminished so far as to be almost invisible. The rationalist in me sought for an explanation: something in Yankton's air, its water, my change of diet since arriving here? But how to explain its sudden disappearance, which seemed to have occurred between arriving at and leaving the monastery? The atheist in me refused to acknowledge anything but a natural answer, but the grateful patient in me was happy to accept that I had been blessed by a miracle. (Wait until it happens to you, O skeptical one!)

The church where this phenomenon occurred was built in 1950 in the Gothic style out of grey and white limestone that glittered brightly in the sunlight. Its spire, Yankton's most prominent landmark, was topped with a bronze cross, approximately twelve and one-half feet high. The Sunday service was due to begin at 10:00 A.M., and I arrived five minutes beforehand. Finding an inconspicuous seat at the back, I counted a congregation of about 120 people. The interior of the church

35. "Yankton Churches," http://yankton.areaconnect.com/churches.htm.

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Bishop Marty Memorial Chapel

was the plainest Catholic church I had seen, with little iconography apart from the stations of the cross represented in statuary along the sides. Rather than decoration, the emphasis was on light, which was amplified by the pale stone of the roof and the ogee arches of the arcades on either side of the nave. By the time the priest and his acolytes processed up the aisle, the church had filled almost to capacity, and there must have been more than two hundred people. (This church was one of three Catholic churches available in Yankton.) Everyone was informally dressed; indeed, I was the only man wearing a jacket, and none of the women had covered their hair.

During his address the priest spoke in a calm, measured voice and encouraged us to leave nature as beautiful and bountiful as we found it. We were stewards and were here only for a short time—a very short time, he stressed. The care of creation was the central issue of our time. The pope had said as much, and so had his predecessor. Everything that existed was the result of God's holy providence, and from womb to tomb we must act as God does and make the stewardship of the earth our moral responsibility. The Vatican had installed solar panels

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on some of its roofs. We must adopt a holistic approach. The spirit of Jesus would guide us.

After communion the congregation trooped out, and I had my hand shaken by the priest. "Be nice to each other," he told us as we left the church.

Nature was on everyone's mind, mostly because of the tornadoes that had struck Oklahoma. On the Monday of that week, twenty-three people had died in Moore, Oklahoma, and an estimated $2 billion worth of damage had been inflicted on the town. During the next few weeks I heard several supportive prayers on behalf of the folks in Oklahoma. I also heard many more prayers in which God was thanked for the rain that was making this summer so welcome to farmers, in contrast to the drought of the previous year and the floods of the year before. It was difficult, especially for a nonbeliever, to overlook the contradiction that seemed inherent in this prayerful gratitude. Why, one wondered, should a benevolent God behave so capriciously when it came to delivering the weather? Why drought one year, floods the next? At the very least, this issue seemed to pose a theological problem worth addressing. In any event, stewardship did not appear to be the issue when it came to tornadoes. In what sense were they beautiful and bountiful? How were we morally responsible for flooding? Or was the priest suggesting that these erratic expressions of the climate were the result of human intervention in the shape of global warming? If so, I suspect he was preaching a message that would not have been well received by many of his flock.

The following Sunday I attended a much different kind of church and service at the Calvary Baptist Church. It was suggested by my neighbor, a woman new to Yankton, who took her faith seriously and wanted to "shop around," as she put it, for the church that would best suit her. The Baptists had recently taken up residence in a former Walmart store, an enormous single-story edifice made of pink stone on the west side of Broadway Street. The old glass doors of the Walmart entrance had been retained, though now they opened beneath the logo of a cross set within a purple triangle.

The lobby was crowded with people. My neighbor made her way to the Connection Center and was directed to the Women's Welcome

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Desk, where she was presented with a "welcome packet" containing some little presents, pamphlets and a Bible. I opened a door labeled Fellowship Room and found myself looking into another enormous space, empty but capable of holding a presidential campaign rally.

We could have paused in the lobby's café but decided to go directly to the auditorium, the so-called Worship Center. The website had promised "comfortable upholstered chairs," which proved to be no idle boast, for the seats were closer in luxury to movie theater seats. We picked a row close to the back of the huge hall, as if preparing for a covert exit. All ages were represented in the gathering congregation, and dress was casual. I tried to estimate the numbers. The ranks of seats were too numerous to get a clear view, but I'm sure the congregation exceeded five hundred, and there was probably room for again as many people.

Instead of an altar and chancel, we faced a wall dominated by two huge screens and, hanging between them, three plain crosses. In front was a pile of dirt with a spade thrust into it.

Calvary Baptist Church

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The pastor made a few announcements and then started the service by addressing Jesus: "We welcome you with praise. Almighty God of love, be welcome in this place. We are grateful for the blood of Jesus. We give thanks and praise to Jesus and Christ who washes us with his blood." At this point a family entered late, among them a small boy incongruously dressed in a Superman cloak.

The pastor pointed to the shovel behind him. "The shovel's in the ground, the seed's planted, now it's time to grow." The theme of his "message" was spiritual growing, for which, he told us, we required two things—regular biblical instruction and admonishment. We had to be open and humble. People thought they needed no more than one hour with God in a week. The church was empty on Wednesday nights when he held worship sessions. What was the competition? Television's *American Idol*?

Holding his arms in a crucifix gesture, his voice thick with emotion, the pastor shouted, "Jesus is saying, repent and get it right, because if you don't this will become a carnal church. You're going to die if you don't give yourself to Jesus." He closed his eyes and bowed his head, lowering his voice. "Here's the challenge. Are you ready to grow? To be vulnerable? Willing to say to Jesus—yes, I want to handle things maturely in Jesus. Plant your roots deep in me, Lord. Give me winsomeness."

The service lasted an hour and twenty minutes, and when it was over we staggered with relief into the lobby and then into the sunshine, which shimmered on the acres of paved parking.

My neighbor announced that this church would not be her place of worship in the future. She was searching for a church that would allow her to develop a direct and personal relationship with God, something that was an article of faith with the Baptists. However, this pastor's style had not appealed to her. She felt he had interposed himself too aggressively between her and God. He had drawn too much attention to himself and the role he proposed to play in her spiritual improvement. If she was going to make herself humble and vulnerable, it would be to God, not him.

For my part, I was puzzled. The pastor had chastised his congregation in no uncertain terms, but he had drawn a large crowd, by far

the largest of all the churches I would visit, and I could only conclude that his style appealed to a guilty, masochistic streak in the Midwest character. His congregation had sat through his tongue-lashing with stolid submissiveness, and at the end of the service they had emerged with no apparent sign of having suffered; on the contrary, they looked cheerful and relaxed. Perhaps "admonishment" is what they came for, rather like the birching that accompanies Swedish massage.

The following Sunday morning I went, alone, to the Christ Episcopal Church on Douglas Avenue. This church prides itself on being the "Mother Church of the Dakotas," having been the first denomination to hold services in Yankton and Dakota Territory in 1860. The present building, a red-brick construction with a stout, battlemented tower, has been in continuous use since 1882. The interior looked familiar with its ogee arches, high roof, and decorative beams and could have belonged to a Victorian church in England, but the altar, font, pulpit, and rood screen struck a more midwestern note, for they were all made of wood and beautifully worked.

I was welcomed at the door. Partly out of shyness and partly out of an embarrassed sense of fraudulence, I took what I hoped was an unobtrusive seat in the back pew; after all, I had come not to worship but to observe.

A woman with a small girl sat in the pew in front of me. The girl turned around to look at me and, with the deadpan look of a born killer, stuck out her tongue. By now a congregation of twenty-nine people, including two families, had gathered, an unhappy contrast to the throng that had mustered at the Baptist church.

The clergyman, the Reverend James Pearson, known to all, presumably by his own wish, as "Father Jim," walked down the aisle, smiling and nodding. He must have been in his forties, but he had an engagingly youthful manner.

At the beginning of his "homily," Father Jim said, "Please take your ease," and we sat down. His theme was healing, and as he preached he walked about but was always modest and quiet; no histrionics, no soaring to oratorical climaxes. Addressing us as "beloved creatures," he told us that healing was always a possibility. We could look for healing from God, and we were called to the ministry of healing of others as well as

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Christ Episcopal Church

ourselves. He then encouraged us to greet each other, always an uncomfortable moment for the undercover atheist. After the Eucharist, Father Jim dismissed us with a localized blessing: "The peace of God remain with you on this lovely rainy day."

On the way out I was stopped by a couple of people who invited me to go downstairs to the basement for coffee. I talked to a pleasant woman, and she explained the differences between the Baptists and the Episcopalians: "We prefer to think of the Commandments as the Ten Suggestions." Looking around the room, she said, "These are my friends; this is my social life." I spoke to Father Jim, who said, "Why not come to Ben's bar on Tuesday and join our 'Fermenting Faith' group? We convert the carbohydrates of conversation into faith and friendship." I had no idea what he was talking about but agreed to meet him.

The size of the congregation at the Calvary Baptist Church ruled

out the kind of personal attention that I received in the Christ Episcopal Church, but the difference between the two seemed to be one of both quality and policy. I had no doubt that the church was indeed the social life for many of these Episcopalians, and this impression was confirmed by the church's website, which took the form of a community notice board and newsletter.[36] Here was an all-embracing world that seemed to befriend rather than chastise, that offered hospitality rather than admonishment.

Father Jim and I met one afternoon at Ben's Brewery on Third Street and sat outside, sheltered from the sun in a little covered area that gave us a view of the sidewalk. He chose his beer with care from the large selection on offer. Alas, my own choice of nonalcoholic beer did not call for the same connoisseurship.

He told me about a book he and his wife had been reading—*Christianity after Religion*—by an American writer, Diana Butler Bass, which had impressed them both.[37] Her insights coincided with his own local experience. These days people attended church in order to belong to a group rather than to worship. Attendance for mainline denominations had leveled out, if not declined, but over the last twenty-five years Father Jim had noticed a kind of new wakening that was not so much religious as spiritual. People were comfortable talking about their spirituality, but they were less so when it came to formal religion. The group that met here on Tuesdays was typical of many Christian groups. They were just a collection of people trying to understand the wondrous thing that we call God, or Allah, or whatever. They regarded the Bible as a collection of stories about experiences of faith; the stories still resonated today, but he and his group looked on them as symbolic and mythical. Moses was no greater figure, religiously speaking, than any of us who think about faith. Jesus represented the humanity they all aspired to. He was the model of the compassionate life.

Father Jim had gone from being a liberal evangelical to someone who said, "Let's join the conversation." In his opinion, God helped us not to impose our beliefs on others or close our minds. Without wish-

36. "Christ Episcopal Church," http://www.christepiscopalchurchyankton.com/.

37. Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012).

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ing to be judgmental, he could not agree with those denominations for which the Bible became God. He had been at the church for thirteen years and recognized that it was part of the social fabric; it fulfilled a common need to belong, which was, if anything, more important than its religious function. People who came to his church were seekers; they held out the possibility of God. They had a spiritual side to them, but it took many forms. I interrupted him to offer another beer. "You know, I think I will," he said.

He disapproved of the draconian laws the state legislature handed down on issues like marijuana and gay rights. The leadership of the church was influenced by fundamentalists, but he understood these issues to be a civil problem, not a moral one, and for that reason he was accused of being "a sloppy Christian." All he wanted was to have a conversation about these things, to find the common humanity. When religion shut down these conversations it was no wonder the churches were bypassed.

At 5:00, the group from his church began to gather at the bar, many of them wearing polo shirts bearing a "Fermenting Faith" logo. Within ten minutes the space around the bar was crowded out, and several people were forced to stand. Father Jim called for silence and asked me to describe the state of religion, or lack of it, in the United Kingdom. I did my best and was listened to respectfully. For some reason this attention led me to talk about British patriotism compared with its American expression; then the national health system, always a subject of scornful incredulity in the United States; and then the differences between our constitutions. My ignorance on the last topic was shameful, but no one noticed because by then the meeting had fragmented into half a dozen discussions, all noisy. Father Jim, his third beer in hand, was on his feet and taking part in two arguments at once. I was shouting as if drunk. My cell phone rang, and, unable to hear the voice at the other end, I was forced to bellow, "I'm sorry I can't hear you. I'm with a group of Christians in a bar." To this day I don't know who called me.

During one of my perorations I had said that we British preferred politicians who used their reason rather than their religion to make policy, and when at last I came to leave the bar, I was cornered by a man

who had said nothing throughout the session. He told me that he, too, had wrestled with the dilemma of consulting God or common sense when it came to making decisions and, after much prayer, had concluded that they were one and the same thing because, after all, God was in everything.

Back at home I tried to assess my afternoon. Clearly, more fermentation than faith had been involved, but I could not imagine such a meeting taking place among members of an equivalent Anglican church in England. Indeed, it was tempting to conclude that there was something characteristic of Yankton about a group that met in a bar to discuss its religious misgivings, but then I reminded myself that the people who attended the Calvary Baptist Church, in far greater numbers, also lived in Yankton. (Nor was it the only Baptist church in the city.) My guess was that if Baptists permitted themselves doubts, they would have to look outside their church for a group to confide them in, and it probably would not convene at Ben's Brewery.

No, what Father Jim and his group had expressed was, presumably, characteristic of the Episcopal church, which represented the kind of Christianity that an atheist would find congenial—open-minded, humorous, and self-doubting; in a word, the very opposite of fundamentalism. However, the cruel truth was that a church that recommended itself to an atheist because of its enlightened liberalism was not going to draw in the crowds; the Christ Episcopal Church would not be tendering for the current Walmart building if it fell vacant.

On my final Sunday in Yankton I went to the Trinity Lutheran Church at the southern end of Broadway, close to the Burger King and opposite the Tastee Treet Drive Inn. An extra wing had recently been attached to this already large building, an addition of space if not beauty. Once inside, I opened the door on a chapel that could easily have seated 750 people, but it was empty, and I wondered if I had mistaken the time of the service. I made enquiries and was directed to the other end of the complex. Walking down a broad corridor, I began to grasp the scale of the place: there were restrooms, a canteen, offices for the various pastors, an elevator to the floors above and the basement below, a friendship room, assembly rooms, and, finally, the second chapel, also a large space. This church had substantial resources at its dispos-

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al. The walls of the chapel were made of bare, cream-colored granite. White lights were suspended from the lofty ceiling. An enormous, plain wooden cross occupied the wall facing the congregation, with huge television screens on either side. The wooden pews, though designed for comfort, were also plain but beautifully crafted. Everything had a clean, well-lit, austere look.

By the time the congregation had finally assembled, it numbered around seventy people, including a handful of families with small children. Waiting for the service to get underway, I counted the seats and reckoned the place could easily hold one thousand people.

The pastor was vigorous and elated, but he did not carry the congregation with him; they remained undemonstrative, singing and responding obediently, but preserving their midwestern restraint. The second reading was from Paul's letter to the Galatians, which included a choleric denunciation of the desires of the flesh, among them adultery, fornication, lasciviousness, drunkenness, envy and reveling. Those who did such things would not be inheriting the kingdom of God. Some of the guilty, and therefore disinherited, were surely among the congregation, but there was no sign of it on their phlegmatic faces.

When the service concluded, most of the congregation stayed in their seats to hear an elderly couple play a duet medley of tunes by John Philip Sousa, composer of "The Stars and Stripes Forever," on the piano. (July Fourth was the following week.) They played with gusto, beaming at the audience which, for the first time, allowed itself to show a little emotion. When the couple took their bow, they were heartily applauded.

Out in the street the sun was shining, and Broadway was noisily congested with bikers, growling on their Harley-Davidsons as they processed towards the Ice House bar, a Sunday ritual nearly as well respected as churchgoing.

What, then, had I learned from my brief religious education in Yankton? While reserving the right to take a satirical tone now and again, I had learned not to mock. Mockery comes easily to the rationalist when confronted with what he sees as superstition and self-delusion, but it is an unhelpful reaction. For one thing, it obstructs understanding and blinds the mocker to the complexity of what is believed. Of course,

it also insults the sincerity of the believer. During my nearly seven weeks in Yankton I met several people whose religious feelings were so intense and anguished that the question of credulity was irrelevant. Christianity was the language in which they had been brought up and educated, and in adulthood its theology gave them the means to articulate their struggles with the ordeals that life had thrown at them. Who could begrudge the victim of a truly brutal marriage the desire to be loved by God, as she had not been loved by father, mother, or husband? Not this atheist.

I also learned once again the limited value of generalizations. While it was obviously true that a great many people in Yankton went to church on a Sunday, it would be rash to generalize from the four varieties of religious experience that I had witnessed, especially since there were twenty-one others I had left unsampled.

Had I needed a warning against stereotyping, I would have received it when I returned to the Sacred Heart Monastery to talk to Sister Ann Kessler, one of Hunhoff's "great thinkers." Aged eighty-five and suffering no impairment of her memory or powers of articulation, she presented a formidable figure, augmented by her being taller than I by a couple of inches. She spoke indefatigably for an hour and a half and, even then, she was eager to take me to the monastery's library to show me her history of the Benedictine order, now out of print. If I had a stereotypical nun in mind, it was rebuked by Sister Ann, who was not only a distinguished scholar[38] but also a one-time candidate for election to the state legislature, as a Democrat, no less. She had come within 2 percent of being voted the first nun to serve as a state representative and would have succeeded, she claimed, had she not suffered a car accident during her campaign. As it was, the outcome was close enough to require a recount.

Nor were her opinions predictable. Talking about contraception, she referred to herself as "a liberal church person as well as a liberal Democrat." On the subject of abortion, she said that she was opposed to "rampant" abortion—"abortion for abortion's sake"—but she was

38. Some of her accomplishments are described at "S. Ann Kessler, O.S.B. 1945," http://www.aberdeen.k12.sd.us/foundation/halloffame/2012/AKessler.pdf.

also opposed to the strict interpretation imposed by state law; for example, banning abortions in the case of tubal pregnancies or pregnancies in which the child was going to be born dead. "If Jesus Christ came to our state he'd say you've got these interpretations all wrong. The first law is love. The first question to ask is what is the most loving thing to do."

THE CITY AND ITS BRIDGE

"I am haunted by waters. It may be that I'm too dry in myself, too English, or it may be that I'm susceptible to beauty, but I do not feel at ease on this earth unless there's a river nearby." —Olivia Laing[39]

While in Yankton I got into the habit of walking across the Meridian Bridge, to and fro, every evening. Always prone to insomnia, especially in strange places, I found it difficult to get to sleep. My solution, which was more or less effective, was to tire the body if not the brain by walking the bridge at the end of my day, usually around 10:00 P.M. I walked it at other times, but these late-night crossings became a compulsion.

In the 1920s, a motorist could drive south from Winnipeg in Manitoba, to Laredo in Texas, and onwards to Mexico City, using the so-called International Meridian Highway. This highway ran for thirty-one hundred miles almost without interruption, even if the quality of the road surface was sometimes challenging. Only one major obstacle confronted the transcontinental driver, and that was crossing the Missouri River at Yankton, which lacked a bridge. In winter, the motorist could brave driving on the ice or use a wooden pontoon bridge laid across the ice; in summer, he could risk the same pontoon bridge, now on floats, or take the slow-moving and no less risky ferry. Whatever method of crossing he used, he probably cursed Yankton.

This state of affairs changed when the Meridian Bridge was dedicated in 1924 and traffic began to flow from South Dakota to Nebraska without hindrance from the Missouri. The bridge was ambitiously designed with two decks, the upper for motor traffic and the lower for a railroad. The bridge also contained a remarkable lift span that allowed

39. Laing, *To The River: A Journey Beneath the Surface* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2011), p. 3.

a section of the lower deck to be raised so that oversized river traffic could pass beneath.

I cannot say that it was the beauty of the bridge that drew me to it, though there was much beauty to be found on these nocturnal pilgrimages. According to the engineers responsible for the construction of the bridge, its design was "strictly utilitarian in its form and appointments, without extravagant decorations and embellishments."[40] The bridge's historians, Kathy Grow and Lois Varvel, loyally disagree. In their opinion its "appointments" demonstrated a care for detail and even beauty, citing the intricate wrought-iron railings that stretched the entire length of the top deck. They also mention the "charming" eyebrow detail that decorated the tollhouse roof. However, by the time I came to make my noctambulations (the *mot juste*), both these embellishments had long since been removed.

Sounding a more self-assured note, the engineers also stated that their bridge was "a thoroughly modern, substantial and permanent improvement and is the equal of any bridge in this country of its character and proportions."[41] It was not their fault that the bridge they built was in one sense not modern at all, but backward-looking, because by the time it opened in 1924 the age of railway expansion had come to an end. Yankton was unable to persuade a rail company to invest in a line that would cross the Missouri via their new bridge, and the lower deck lay idle until July 1953, when it was finally adapted for motor traffic.

The most notable feature of the bridge's design, namely the mechanism that raised the lift span and its counterweights, was also removed, in 1984, leaving only the lift towers and their wheels. They form a pair of triumphal arches, set one after the other above the South Dakota end of the upper deck, commemorating the bridge's great legacy with their skeletal steeples and providing a monumental entrance to Yankton for those who cross from the barbarous Nebraska shore.

The form of the bridge could not be simpler, though its scale made it a large construction for its day. It consists of a double-decker beam

40. Kathy K. Grow and Lois H. Varvel, *The Bridge We Built: The Story of Yankton's Meridian Bridge* (Yankton: Vintage Point Press, 2001), p. 48.

41. Ibid.

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Meridian Bridge with lift towers

made of seven spans or sections and laid across eight piers. Each span is in the shape of a box, eighteen feet wide, its structure kept rigid on either side with a riveted truss of steel crosses and triangles, and its roof strengthened with beams and braces. The upper deck is approached on both sides by long, gradually sloping concrete ramps that extend the roadway, including the bridge itself, to nearly a mile and a quarter.

Nowadays, if you walk from one end to the other on the upper deck, and return on the lower deck, you will complete a bracing circuit of nearly two miles. Your expedition will take you across the state line, which falls close to the Yankton side, and into open country at the Nebraska end. On a sunny day, when the light picks out the trusses and beams in all their sharp angularity and throws their latticed, crisscrossing shadows on the surface of the old road, the lower deck opens up in front of you like the mouth of a huge and elaborate trap set to entangle some mammoth beast in its metal net. The ramps of the upper deck,

with their smooth surfaces and undulating curves, give it a modern, sculptural look that contrasts with the more primitive, industrialist look of the lower deck.

What was it I enjoyed so much about walking across the Meridian Bridge? As a stroll, it was long enough to count as exercise that got the heart beating, the blood circulating, the lungs working. But though I am a speedy walker, I curtailed these healthy effects by pausing too often to lean on the rail, leaving my mind to embark on its own rambles.

Every bridge is at once functional and symbolic; it connects, separates, and creates a neutral interim; it mediates between one place and another.[42] To cross a bridge, any bridge, is to set sail on a little expedition, which, like all expeditions, liberates you, if only for a while, from the mundane. There is something reliably exhilarating about launching yourself into space and escaping the world on one side of the bridge (Yankton/civilization) before entering the world on the other (Nebraska/wilderness). You become a vagabond, belonging to neither side. Being on a bridge brings you close to the birds without actually taking to the air; it opens up a view of what has been left behind and what is to come. A bridge is an interlude in no-man's land, an irresponsible space between everyday demands, a pocket of freedom, a free fall that allows you to cheat gravity and float above existence. Propelled into mid-air, you turn into a fabulous creature that commands earth, air, and water. Poised between the retreating landfall of one bank and the approaching coast of the other, you are captain of your ship and, for a brief illusory moment, captain of your fate.

Some part of these pleasant sensations, and their kaleidoscope of metaphors, always beguiled me on my walks, as they probably would have done on any bridge, but the Meridian Bridge possessed another quality—it was a perfect aid to meditation. No monk making the circuit of his abbey's cloisters could have had a route more conducive to reflection. Unlike most bridges that span large rivers, this one was free of traffic. The journey it provided was circular; the bridge was a

42. *Pons* is the common Latin root for both bridge and priest. The pontiff, a bishop or more usually the Pope himself, is a bridge builder, helping us to make the transition from this world to the next.

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kind of continual destination that left the mind free to make its own connections while enjoying intimate contemplation of the river. The Meridian Bridge was not so high that the water became an abstract, but was close enough for its movement and contents to be to be visible: the current splitting around the piers, the carp opening their white mouths, the breeze scattering wavelets across the pleated water. Most inspirational of all, the bridge provided a clear view of the Missouri's passage past Yankton: a graceful curve to the west, with sandbank islands and blond beaches on the Nebraska side, and, to the east, a more or less straight run downriver.

What is it about rivers, especially large rivers, that compels our attention and arouses such intense feelings? I am devoted to large rivers, but I am a dilettante. I do not want to swim or fish in them, ski or drive speedboats on them, or, far less, row or kayak on them. I have no desire to track them to their source, study their ecology, or photograph their wildlife. I simply want to lean on a railing and stare at them—at the flowing water.

Staring at water makes everyone a philosopher. And what do we philosophize about? Time. "Water is the image of time," wrote the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, referring to Venice.[43] In my case, looking down at the Missouri, I thought about the time and vitality left to me as a sixty-eight-year-old, and the time—a whole river of it, with any luck—left to my small grandchildren. I thought about the long wake of time trailing behind by mother, which is now invisible to her because, after ninety-seven years, time has washed away her memory as if it were a sandbank. As travelers do, I thought about home; I thought about those I loved; I thought about my failings and ambitions and the time left to correct and fulfill them.

One of the appeals of these walks was the mood it induced in me. Above all, I was soothed. For the troubled soul, a bridge provides a sense of poise; it stands immovably above the great thrust of the river. It allows you to remain still and composed and changeless for a moment, while the water, like time, flows past you, certain of its direction and

43. Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark: An Essay on Venice* (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 43.

destiny. Everyone who looks down on smoothly flowing waters must see in them a tributary of Lethe, the river of the Greek underworld, whose waters bestowed forgetfulness and oblivion as "the taker-away of pain/And the giver-back of beauty."[44] As I have already said, the weather during my visit was warm, sometimes hot, and by the evening the temperature was always agreeable. Anxieties that had been troubling me during the day were left behind on the bank when I launched myself into the air. Suspended over the swirling black water, I acquired a sense of balance; I could lean on the rail and look up or down river, confident that I was—for that instant at least—in a state of grace.

Brodsky also said that "water equals time and provides beauty with its double."[45] Yankton, even though it had its feet in the water, was not Venice. Nor was it Saint Petersburg or even Liverpool, where I was brought up with the Mersey as my neighbor. Nor, at first sight, could the Meridian Bridge be called beautiful; it was more engineering than architecture. Its design revealed the sensibility of those who commissioned and paid for it—local entrepreneurs, bankers, professionals, store owners, farmers from Nebraska—who simply wanted a bridge that would do its job and bring business to the city. It was not their job to beautify the landscape. But the bridge also reflected another side of their character. They were never fainthearted, these pioneers and their descendants. What they built showed courage and daring, and if the bridge lacked aesthetic finesse, it possessed a certain practical dignity that seemed characteristic of its creators.

On the other hand, I was learning to see beauty in industrial structures, even if it was sometimes inadvertent. There was beauty to be found on a sunny day in the geometric patterns cast by the struts and trusses and railings and girders on the tarmac of the lower deck. There was beauty in the long, curving viaducts standing on their trestles that lifted the second roadway to the upper deck. And, seen from a distance, the Meridian acquired a beauty simply by virtue of its reflection in the water, a shimmering reconstruction that turned the great solidity of the original into a specter—Brodsky's double.

44. "Lethe" by Edna St. Vincent Millay.
45. Brodsky, *Watermark*, p. 134.

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It was at night, however, that the bridge and the river became truly beautiful. From the bridge the sun appeared to set upstream, behind the city's steep bluff. As the evening sky began to flare with color, the granite spire of the Bishop Marty Memorial Chapel would gradually surrender its gleaming whiteness and turn into a silhouette, a black thorn piercing the bloom of sunset. When it finally disappeared in the night's darkness, it left only a crimson light at its very tip to mark its place in the void. Meanwhile, the solid form of the city waterfront dissolved into darkness, leaving the pattern of streets, buildings, sidewalks, the park and its pavilions pricked out in a constellation of street lamps. The globes of light lining the riverbank were reflected on the river's surface in quivering blades of silver and gold. Only the bridge itself retained its substance. Its entire length, from South Dakota to Nebraska, was illuminated by lamps that gathered black halos of insects. On these summer nights the bridge on both levels was the haunt of strolling families, young women jogging, couples holding hands, kids hanging out, and middle-aged philosophers counting their lucky stars. Yankton loved its bridge.

The water below my feet was, of course, not only a medium of contemplation, but an actual river—the once mighty Missouri. The stretch between Gavins Point Dam and Ponca State Park, which includes Yankton's riverfront, is now part of the Missouri National Recreational River and is called the "59-mile District." A second segment, the "39-mile District," is located upstream between Fort Randall Dam and Running Water. Though the Missouri here must suffer the ignominy of serving as a recreational facility, it does at least enjoy the appearance of being a river and has not been diminished to a canal or distended into a lake.

Employed by the National Park Service, the man responsible for these two districts is Chris Wilkinson, who enjoys the grand title of chief of interpretation and education. I spoke to him in his office on East Second Street. Wilkinson was eager to provide me with the essential facts. Not everyone realizes that the section of river on which Yankton stands is part of the National Wild and Scenic River system. Only one-third of the Missouri is still a river; the rest is held in large reservoirs and lakes or has been straightened for barge traffic and transpor-

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Meridian Bridge, lower deck

tation. The river has lost 129 miles of its length due to straightening and channelization. If you were to start at the mouth of Missouri where it flows into the Mississippi, you would have to go 752 river miles upriver before you reached the natural, free-flowing section under Wilkinson's purview. The 59-mile District still retains vital remnants of the pre-development river: a wide, meandering channel, shifting sandbars, and natural backwaters. It also contains some of the last forested floodplain and wetland habitats along the Missouri. These features, together with backwater marshes and cottonwood forest, add up to a landscape that Lewis and Clark would have recognized. The river is a natural treasure, Wilkinson said proudly. Even though the dam controls its flow, the channel continues to change, even from week to week. If you catch a fish here, you can skin it and eat it, but if you catch one in the waters

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near Omaha, you can't. Well, you could try, but you'd take the chance of getting real sick.

Wilkinson's red hair hinted at his Scottish origins, his accent betrayed his upbringing in North Carolina, and the fact that he was engaged to marry a Hungarian woman indicated how well traveled he was, especially in Northern Europe, but for all that he had developed a loyalty to South Dakota and, in particular, this stretch of the Missouri River. Loyalty was a quality I had learned to associate with Yankton. Wilkinson had previously worked at six different locations for the National Park Service, and he was one of the few people on the face of the earth, as he put it, to request a transfer back to South Dakota, though he admitted that his fondness for the state was enhanced by its hospitable tax system.

Despite Wilkinson's pride in the "natural, free-flowing" river on Yankton's doorstep, the fact was that, apart from occasional breakouts such as the flood of 2011, the Missouri was compelled to behave as if it were confined to a kind of exercise yard. It may have been free to flow through an unreformed landscape, but it did so under strict supervision.

Carol Smith explained one aspect of this monitoring as we sat outside The Landing on a sunny afternoon, with the Missouri visible through the cottonwoods of Riverside Park. I had met her at Father Jim's Faith and Fermentation gathering, and she had offered to enlighten me about the river's ecosystem. An émigré from Texas, Smith worked for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and served as liaison officer with the Corps of Engineers. She was particularly concerned with the Missouri River Recovery Program, which had been started in order to protect species that had become endangered when the Pick-Sloan dams changed the ecology of the river, something that had not been fully considered at the time of their construction.

Four species, in particular, had suffered: the least tern, the pallid sturgeon, the piping plover, and the bald eagle. Of these, the bald eagle had already made a recovery and had been "delisted" in 2003. (Wilkinson had told me that one could now see one hundred bald eagles near Fort Randall Dam, whereas in the mid-1960s there had been fewer than one hundred nesting pairs in the entire United States.) However, the other

three species remained in a parlous state, and the recovery program was taking steps to manipulate the river to improve their well-being.

The terns and plovers liked to make their nests on clean, open sandbars. Before the Missouri's flow had been controlled by dams and its course redirected by straightening and channelization, the sandbars were a dynamic feature of the river, moving around, growing and eroding according to the velocity of the river, the amount of rainfall, the season, and so forth. This environment ensured that there was always plenty of suitable sand, unencumbered by vegetation, for the birds to build their nests and look after their chicks. In an effort to reproduce this natural phenomenon, which was severely reduced by the effects of damming, the Corps of Engineers decided to build artificial sandbars and islands. The birds responded well and made use of them, but they proved to be controversial. Certain landowners and farmers were of the opinion that the artificial sandbars affected the flow of the river, causing erosion on the riverbank and resulting in the loss of land and property.

In any case, the man-made sandbars eroded too quickly and attracted vegetation, which inhibited the birds' nesting. The Corps looked for new ways to manage the sandbars and hit on the idea of using "pulses" of water. Before the dams were built, the river used to deliver a natural pulse of water in the spring when the winter snow melted, which drove the birds higher up on the sandbars where their nests were in less danger of eroding away. Once the dams were in place, this natural surge disappeared, so it was decided to generate artificial pulses. As soon as the birds began to scout about for nesting places, the Corps arranged to release water in a series of pulses that would force them to make use of the higher parts of the sandbars. This plan, too, proved controversial, because it was feared that these water surges would drag extra sediment down the river, but at least the numbers of terns and plovers began to improve. The public had mixed feelings about these conservation programs. When it came to birds, said Smith, "They love 'em and hate 'em, but they certainly don't want to lose 'em."

Here was a common paradox of conservation: the river could not achieve a "natural" state unless it was subjected to a painstaking program of artificial management. In this context, the language of the

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Water release from Gavins Point Dam

Missouri River Recovery Program's mission statement was interesting: "Although the river will never return to the wild, untamed form encountered by Lewis and Clark, its ecosystem can be revitalized for the benefit of the basin's inhabitants."[46] "Wild" and "untamed" are part of a vocabulary utilized by a culture that believes in mankind's God-given right to use the natural world according to its needs and wishes. However, "wild" is a concept that makes sense only if it is seen as the opposite of civilized (for example, jungle vs. city), and in recent years civilization, insofar as it imposed on nature, might be considered another form of barbarism or wildness because its effects are often destructive and irreparable. Who tames the tamers? is a question the piping plover might well ask.

The first vehicles drove over the Meridian Bridge on Saturday, 11 October 1924. The event was the signal for eight days of celebrations that finished with a fireworks display on Sunday, 19 October. (Yankton knows how to celebrate—another of the town's characteristics.) On

46. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Omaha District and Kansas City District, "Missouri River Recovery Program", p. 3, moriverrecovery.usace.army.mil.

the first Sunday of this prolonged fiesta, the Reverend H. H. Lindeman preached a remarkable sermon to his congregation at the Congregational church. His subject was predictable, but his theme seems less so, at least at the distance of ninety years, and certainly to a non-American. He titled the sermon "The Yankton Bridge as a Moral Achievement," and his words are worth quoting, both for their quaintness and their substance:

> In the process of creation man appeared and God gave him dominion over all the earth. Human history is in part a record of his conquest of the Promised Land.
>
> We may believe that God is pleased with the ocean liner and the submarine, for they are instruments of man's domain at last over the mighty deep. The Father of men cannot be unmoved by the invention of the flying machine whereby his children have subdued that element which till now was the undisputed realm of the birds.
>
> We suspect He listens with satisfaction at the radio, by which his earthly family are eliminating space and drawing themselves together into a compact home circle.
>
> By the same sign may not we of this community believe that our father takes interest and pleasure in the work of our citizens' hand whereby the dread and dauntless Missouri is at last overcome and the chasm closed which has forever separated us from our neighbors.

Having saluted the moral integrity of the community and its leaders who had built the bridge, Reverend Lindeman brought his sermon to a rousing conclusion: "Who shall doubt our power, under God, to build the economic, social, intellectual, moral, esthetic, spiritual community of our finer dreams—Yankton, 'the Ultimate City,' after the pattern of that 'city that hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.'"[47]

The age of religious certainty may yet prevail in parts of South Dakota. Faith in the divinely granted right to exploit nature as human need dictates, which is as old as America itself, may still go unchallenged here and there. However, the experience of farmers during the Dust Bowl years and the experience of those currently attempting to "revitalize" the ecostructure of the Missouri must surely cause some

47. Grow and Varvel, *The Bridge We Built*, pp. 89–91.

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doubts. The chasm represented by the "dread and dauntless" Missouri has now been closed by a newer, wider bridge, perhaps enhancing the dream of Yankton as the Ultimate City for those who believe in such things. Was the decommissioned Meridian Bridge now merely the relic, as it were, of an historic Moral Achievement, or did it serve a new civic purpose, with equal moral urgency?

Sitting once again outside The Landing, I discussed the future of Yankton's riverfront with Nancy Wenande, Yankton's mayor. The sun was hot in a cloudless sky, and we were obliged to keep moving around our table like the hands of a clock in pursuit of the protective shade of our umbrella. Throughout the afternoon, clouds of white cottonwood seeds blew in a blizzard of warm flakes across the street from the trees along the riverbank, filling the gutters with drifts, garnishing our drinks, and crowning the mayor's head with a bride's diadem.

Yankton waterfront at Riverside Park

Wenande recalled that when the bridge was first closed to traffic some people in the city had wanted to demolish it, while others had suggested that only a part of it should be kept, like a pier. Some saw it as a rusty old piece of junk. Because they had lived with it all their lives, they took it for granted, not recognizing how unique and "awesome" it was. Now it was the centerpiece of Yankton's riverfront development.

(After our conversation I read that Bernie Hunhoff, in his percipient way, had told the city commission in a meeting that the benefits of preserving the bridge would be so great that an enormous effort should be undertaken to resolve any obstacles. "I can't say how many towns I've seen where they were struggling to find an identity—something that sets them apart from all the other nice towns throughout America," he was quoted as saying. The bridge and the projected trails connecting it to Gavins Point Dam would be that "something."[48])

The question was what to do next with the riverfront. How to attract the million and a half visitors who camped at the lake to make the short journey to downtown Yankton? How to get people from Second Street to Third Street and turn the downtown area into a district that felt open and alive, that made people want to walk around and move from store to store?

When the bridge had been redesigned for pedestrians, the area surrounding the ramp to the upper section had been deliberately grassed over to leave a blank canvas, and a committee was working on an architect's design that used water features.[49] Maybe this project would be a start. What was needed were more hotels, cafés, places to sit and enjoy the view. Some people wanted Yankton to remain a retirement community, but they failed to realize that the place would shrivel up and die if it refused to change. Yankton could be the gem of South Dakota.

The mayor's conception of Yankton's future was consistent with what I heard from three of the city's entrepreneurs, who, in their different ways, were all convinced that the riverfront offered Yankton an

48. "Bridge Concerns Aired," *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan*, 15 Sept. 2009.

49. "Meridian Bridge Plaza and Other Downtown Improvements: Concepts for Yankton," http://www.cityofyankton.org/yankton/topics/conceptplans.php. Actually, this design was submitted earlier by Martin H. Shukert, but it had been shelved and was now being reconsidered.

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incomparable chance not only to make money, but to remake the city's identity. I talked to Ben Hanten in the upper room of Ben's Brewery on Third Street, a building that had once been a gambling hall and a "three-stall" brothel and still retained its parquet floors and tin ceiling. Hanten was keen to see the revival of downtown Yankton, and in his opinion the old buildings in the area close to the river were "assets that any other city would die for," but they needed to be exploited. Paul Lowrie voiced the same thought. He had invested heavily in Yankton's future by rescuing the old Gurney Seed building from demolition and by opening The Landing (possibly South Dakota's most sophisticated bar/restaurant), which he planned to expand even though, as yet, it was relying on support from his other businesses. In similar spirit, Curt Bernard and his wife had saved the old Fantle's Department Store on Third Street and converted it into the Riverfront Event Center, whose third floor was now a hotel. As with the Meridian Bridge, Bernard said, it was crucial to see historic buildings as opportunities, not scrap to be ditched. Old buildings were valuable in their own right, but they were also an essential part of Yankton's historic character, a priceless possession that would give any further development its distinctive character.

For what it was worth, I agreed. My experience as a travel writer told me that Yankton was sitting on a "golden opportunity" to turn its entire riverfront into a lucrative "destination." These clichés curdled on my tongue as I expressed them to the mayor, and I felt a twinge of doubt—Did Yankton really want to sell itself to the tourist dollar?—but I hurried on, because I had a contribution to make to the city's diamond-encrusted future. I told the mayor that I envisioned as the centerpiece of this new Atlantic City a replica paddle-wheel steamer, a beautiful boat recalling Yankton's romantic past, designed not for sailing but for entertainment and pleasure, which should be permanently moored at the riverfront. Among the facilities aboard my stationary gin palace would be a bar, a restaurant, a dance floor, little stores, a café, decks to walk on, and so forth; perhaps even a small and tasteful casino, if the law permitted. It would be a destination in itself, where people could enjoy all the delights of being on the river, with none of the discomforts of shipwreck that had bedeviled the steamboats of the nineteenth century.

I don't know what the mayor made of my idea, but for the rest of that day I remained intoxicated with my vision of Yankton's riverfront revival. I could see the celebrations thrown to mark the opening of the new plaza. I could see the crowds, the bands, the bunting, the flags, the moms and dads and kids, the parades and floats, the music and dancing, the bars and boutiques, the bistros and barbecues, the drinking and gambling, the hats flung into the air, the fireworks, the bridge draped with the Stars and Stripes and glowing with a thousand lamps. And there, tied up to its own dock, was the most spectacular and glamorous of these new facilities: my replica steamboat, its paddles gently churning to give a sense of adventure, its ropes rigged with fairy lights, a jazz band playing on its upper deck. And what was it called? Why, *The Yankton Belle*, of course!

CONCLUSIONS

If I have given the impression that Yankton is snoozing in a state of hibernation, waiting for the entrepreneur's kiss to bring her to life, it is quite wrong. When I spoke to Dennis Menke, owner of Boston Shoes to Boots, the picturesque shoe store on Third Street, he surprised me by saying that, as far as he knew, on a per-capita basis Yankton was one of the greatest manufacturing communities in the United States. The city was home to factories making huge radiators, extruded aluminum, aerospace parts, conveyors, telephone cell towers, electronic chips, and diodes, among many others.

I had already been surprised when arriving at his house for our conversation. With his store in mind, I was astonished to discover that this humble shoemaker lived in a magnificent palazzo on Riverside Drive overlooking the Missouri. He told me that although his shop still fulfilled its traditional function, in keeping with its exterior, its chief trade was far more specialized. This new function was apparent the moment one walked through the door, because the shelves were loaded with work boots of all shapes and sizes. Menke had adapted his business by supplying footwear suited to the particular needs of the men and women who worked in the city's many manufacturing plants, giving them safety and comfort. In one sense this change was reassuring for Yankton, because his range of boots and other footwear demonstrated

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Boston Shoes to Boots store

that the city was thriving in a way that contradicted the moribund appearance of downtown. On the other hand, it was disappointing that in order to succeed he had been forced to look beyond the customers who used to patronize Third Street and its stores.

Menke's building was the oldest wood-frame construction downtown, containing material taken from Yankton's original nineteenth-century stockade. The business was ninety-eight years old, and he had worked for fifty years in those premises, starting as a shoeshine boy for his grandfather. In years gone by its position had been crucial, but nowadays it was no longer an important factor; indeed, he and others could trade anywhere. It struck me that while the nostalgic appearance of his storefront, with its repair notice and old illuminated signs, may have belied the true nature of his business, Third Street would be much the poorer if he closed his door.

Listening to people like Dennis Menke, my three entrepreneurs, and all the others who spoke to me about their concerns for Yankton, I was always conscious of hearing a distant but unmistakable echo of the pioneering spirit in their voices. These homesteading communities

that grew into small cities scattered across the territories were remote outposts of enterprise and independence where self-sufficiency was not simply a virtue, but a necessity, a quality indispensable to survival. No one else would make their city; no one would save them from failure; no one would come to their rescue. No doubt, this attitude of self-reliance in part explained the prevailing political culture, but in Yankton's case, at least, conservatism had been ameliorated by a tradition of tolerance and compassion. F. Scott Fitzgerald has perhaps been unfairly mocked for the inaccuracy of his famous epigram about there being no second acts in American lives, but the fact is that Yankton has enjoyed second and third and fourth acts (paddle steamers, fountains, cement, bridges), and there seems to be no reason why it should not enjoy several more. I had caught something of this spirit of renewal myself. As I grew older I had become used to the idea that every chance was my last, and that death was the journey for which I was now packing. But Yankton had changed that. I had been infused with optimism, a word I heard repeatedly from people when they talked about their city. "Yankton is an optimistic city," someone told me. "Yankton is full of optimism, full of hope," someone else said. "Yankton has heart," was another comment I heard more than once, and by the end of my visit I believed it. I was to leave the city feeling that my own heart had been correspondingly enlarged.

In 2012, when I was planning my trip to Yankton, I came across the website livability.com (America's Best Places to Live & Visit) and was interested to see Yankton listed as the number seven choice out of its "Top Ten Small Towns" for that year. The commendation ran as follows: "What drew our attention to Yankton, SD, were three lows every city wants to have—a low crime rate, which is less than half the national average, low unemployment and low cost of living. What kept our attention was the large amount of things to do and the diverse economy."[50]

When I spoke to both the sheriff, James Vlahakis, and the chief of police, Brian Paulsen, whose offices are in the same building on Walnut Street, they confirmed that crime in Yankton was indeed low. Ac-

50. "Top 10 Small Towns, 2012: Yankton, South Dakota," http://livability.com/top-10/top-10-small-towns-2012/yankton/sd.

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cording to Paulsen, the few crimes that were committed in the city were petty: thefts and larceny under two hundred dollars, shoplifting, fighting, disturbances, and so forth. In line with the national trend, the only serious change in the pattern was in drug crimes, which were increasing. The drugs in question were mostly synthetic narcotics, especially methamphetamines, which were made in local "mom and pop shops" or imported from cartels, mostly via Nebraska. In the recent, past ephedrine disguised as bath salts had been popular, but the law in South Dakota had been changed to make them illegal. (Apparently, I was surprised to learn, these innocent-seeming little luxuries could be cooked in such a way as to give off an intoxicating gas.) I asked Paulsen if he had seen the television series *Breaking Bad*, in which home-cooked methamphetamine drives the plot. He had not seen the program, which was a disappointment, because he bore a suitably formidable resemblance to the main character's brother-in-law, Hank Schrader, an agent for the Drug Enforcement Administration. Paulsen acknowledged that Yankton was a respectable community that didn't offer much of a market to drug dealers. There was only a small student population at Mount Marty College, and it was well behaved. However, he wanted dealers to know that if they brought drugs into the community, he and the sheriff would be chasing them. As to other forms of serious crime, there had been one homicide during the three years since he had taken up the job, and that was a crime of passion in which a young man had killed his girlfriend. Paulsen had never seen anyone in the city, apart from law-enforcement officers, openly carrying a gun on his belt, although it was legal to do so. It was true that people wanted to preserve the right to own guns, but for that reason they did not abuse the privilege. It was, as he put it, "an honor culture."

Jim Vlahakis became sheriff of Yankton County in 2011, taking over from David Hunhoff, who had held the job for thirty-two years. (Vlahakis had previously worked for the South Dakota Division of Criminal Investigation, rising to the directorship before he retired in 2008.) He confirmed that by and large the county was safe. Despite advice to the contrary, people still left keys in their cars and their houses unlocked. There were no gangs to speak of, and Yankton was a comfortable place to live, at least until January. "I love the community; I hate

the winters," he said. Drugs were certainly a problem, but Vlahakis was confident that he and his staff knew who the dealers were; it was only a matter of catching them and putting them in jail. By the way, would I like a tour of the county jail?

Vlahakis led me through a great many security doors and passages until we reached the nerve center of the jail. On the way there we passed a modernized version of the padded cell, which was used to hold prisoners who were under the influence of drugs and unable to control their behavior. He invited me to step inside. The cell was a large, unfurnished cubicle without natural light. Its walls and ceiling were lined with gray rubber, and its rubber floor had a drain in the center. The door was closed behind me, not a comfortable moment for one who is mildly claustrophobic.

At the heart of the labyrinth, an officer sat in front of a battery of television screens. All the prisoners could be seen either directly or via the monitors, whether they were in their cells or in the communal areas; discreet blurring masked the toilets. In one of the open sections we could see a group of women prisoners, several of them American Indians, playing cards. The sheriff pointed to the lower half of a big window that had been masked with sheets of paper. It had been screened because the women prisoners had taken to exposing themselves to the male prisoners visible on the opposite side of the building. The officer in charge of the jail told me, "They've got nothing else to do, and plenty of time to think about it. They get up to all sorts of tricks. It's a game. They got all day; we're busy."

The entire unit was painted a tranquilizing shade of grey, and a kind of twilight prevailed. The officer pointed to skylights: "They let in the light and give 'em an idea of what the weather's like outside." Visitation was permitted twice a day for twenty minutes, but the rule was not rigidly enforced; if someone had traveled nine hours to be there, allowances were made. The staff seemed to take a humane view of their charges. "Some people in here have just made mistakes. Some of them are criminals, and you can't do anything with them." The jail had space for 125 inmates, but the place was rarely filled. In fact, Vlahakis had contracted to accommodate 28 prisoners from Fort Yates, North Dakota, on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation.

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This situation seemed to offer a way of summing up Yankton: it was home to a federal prison no one wanted to escape from and a county jail whose cells had to be rented out to criminals from elsewhere. The picture was reinforced when the administrator of the Human Services Center told me that during his year in the job only one patient had escaped, and he had returned within an hour.

In terms of presidential elections, South Dakota is a Republican state, having voted for the Democratic candidate only four times, most recently in 1964 when President Lyndon Johnson won a landslide over Barry Goldwater. In 2012, Mitt Romney defeated Barack Obama by a margin of 58 percent to 40 percent in South Dakota. (In keeping with national trends, the exception to the pattern were the voters on Indian reservations, who almost always vote for the Democratic candidate.[51]) In local terms, however, the situation is far more mixed. The state currently returns two senators, one Republican, one Democrat, and one representative, a Republican, to Congress. The Yankton district has a Republican senator and two state representatives, one Republican and one Democrat. In the 2012 general election, the voters of the state elected twenty-eight Republicans and seven Democrats to the state senate and fifty-three Republicans and seventeen Democrats to the house of representatives.[52]

Thanks to my acquaintance with Bernie Hunhoff, I found myself moving in Democrat circles. One Sunday afternoon Hunhoff invited me to a Democratic Party picnic in Riverside Park thrown in support of Rick Weiland, who was going to contest the United States Senate seat left open by the retiring Tim Johnson. It was a hot afternoon, and more than a hundred Democratic supporters were gathered in the shade of a pavilion close to the river. A generous spread of food had been provided, and the party's loyal supporters were making the most of it. As was his style, Hunhoff gave a rousing speech to introduce the candidate. He then urged me to speak once Weiland had finished. I demurred, having no experience in addressing political rallies. He in-

51. "Results," http://www.poppyware.com/bowditch/maps/elections/results.html.

52. Legislative Research Council, "South Dakota Legislature: Listing by District," http://legis.sd.gov/Legislators/Legislators/MembersByDistrict.aspx?CurrentSession=True.

sisted. "You must. They'll love it." I knew him well enough by then to realize that he would not brook a refusal. In any case, I thought, the opportunity to endorse a senator does not come along every day of the week. I agreed.

By then Weiland was making his own speech. His theme was taking the "big money" out of politics as part of a campaign he was calling "Take It Back." He wanted to overturn the legislation that allowed corporations to spend unlimited sums of money on campaigns so long as they remained independent from candidates and political parties. "I think Big Money and all it represents is the reason the rich are getting richer, the middle class is falling behind and the poor are barely getting by," he said.[53] He had challenged his Republican rival, former governor Mike Rounds, to run a campaign on one-hundred-dollar contributions, but Rounds had refused. In fact, he was aiming to raise nine million dollars for his Senate campaign. Weiland finished his address by picking up his guitar and harmonica and singing Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land." He sang well enough, and we joined in lustily, but I suspected this folksy touch would be dropped before the end of his campaign.

It was now my turn to speak. I found it an easy task, since Weiland seemed to me an attractive and plausible candidate. I said that I was glad to have the chance to endorse a would-be senator, not merely for the fun of it, but out of sincerity. I told them that if I had a vote in this country I would vote Democrat. To my surprise, this statement was tepidly received, and I sensed that the audience believed I was exhibiting nothing more than English politeness. I explained that I had been a lifelong supporter of the Labour party, which was the United Kingdom equivalent of the Democratic party. This admission provoked some cheers and clapping. I said that we faced parallel problems in Britain and that I believed in the kind of liberal, pro-justice policies Weiland and Hunhoff advocated. By now my own oratory was going to my head, and I finished by saying that with my endorsement Weiland had no right to lose, a line that brought a spirited response. When I had

53. Quoted in Nathan Johnson, "Weiland Vows to Take 'Big Money' Out of Politics," *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan*, 23 June 2013.

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finished Weiland shook my hand warmly, though I could tell he had no idea who I was (why should he?) nor why Hunhoff had urged me to speak on his behalf.

As luck would have it, I had the opportunity to be evenhanded with my endorsements. Towards the end of my visit, Hunhoff generously gave a party for me in his daughter's yard, next door to the offices of *South Dakota Magazine*. Among the guests, and still wearing her white coat, was Dr. Annette Bosworth, whom Hunhoff encouraged to speak to us, adding almost as an afterthought that she was proposing to run for the Senate as a Republican candidate. Bosworth took up the invitation. She spoke angrily and at length about the bureaucratic and institutional obstacles that prevented a patient from receiving suitable treatment in the hospital. She told us that her stance had brought her into conflict with the authorities at the hospital where she used to work, forcing her to leave her job. She had been driven to sell her house and other property and was now living in a van with her husband and two children. They were waiting for her, parked in the street outside the party.[54] I read later that like many Republican candidates, she was passionate about tax policy. "Never have a people been taxed as heavily as the American People and still called Free," she had tweeted.[55] Like so many of her colleagues, she was making the repeal and defunding of Obamacare her paramount issue.

As before, Hunhoff encouraged me to speak, and on this occasion I was pleased to do so, because there were several people among the guests whom I wished to thank for making my time in Yankton so enjoyable, not least Hunhoff himself. I told Dr. Bosworth that, alas, I could not endorse her as I had Rick Weiland, since she belonged to the wrong party, but in a sporting spirit I wished her luck.

Once again I felt I was taking part in something that was distinctive of Yankton; the party was an event that struck me as most unlikely to be reproduced in political circles in England. It may well be true of South

54. For more on Dr. Bosworth and her medical work, *see* "Meaningful Medicine," https://www.meaningfulmedicine.org/.

55. Asawin Suebsaeng, "GOP Senate Candidate Calls Marxist Revolutionary Che Guevara Her 'Beacon,' Is Fighting to Repeal Obamacare," *Mother Jones*, 15 Aug. 2013, http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2013/08/republican-senate-annette-bosworth-che-guevara-beacon-south-dakota.

Dakotans in general, but Yankton's citizens have a great fondness for getting together in groups to talk and debate, a liking reinforced, no doubt, by the habit of churchgoing. Here was a group a people who found nothing exceptional in attending a party where they were addressed by several speakers. What gave the event its most distinctive quality was the fact that Hunhoff had invited a Republican candidate to an essentially Democratic gathering and allowed her to speak at length about one of the main planks of her campaign. By the same token, she had accepted his invitation, and the audience had listened to her with close attention.

This open-mindedness can be seen in another of Yankton's institutions. The Dakota Territory Hospital for the Insane, later called Yankton State Hospital and now the South Dakota Human Services Center, was founded in 1879, two years before Yankton College. It is located on a sizeable campus on the northern edge of the city. Many of its old buildings, some dating from the nineteenth century, are still standing, notably the Mead Building (1909), once the women's hospital, which is being converted to house the Dakota Territorial Museum.

Dr. Leonard Mead, who served as superintendent of the hospital between 1891 and 1920, was remarkably progressive and enlightened for his day. He rejected the idea of an insane asylum where the allegedly mad could be locked up and forgotten. "Insanity," he wrote in 1917, "is a misfortune which may come to any of us and it is no disgrace. You or I may be stricken with it and, as I have dealt this sickness, I have tried to create conditions as I should wish them for myself and my family."[56] An indication of the ignorance surrounding mental health can be gleaned from the list of alleged causes of disease suffered by those admitted to the hospital between December 1881 and December 1882. In addition to injuries to the head and hereditary factors, masturbation accounted for six among the seventy-four cases listed and intemperance for four. Also on the list were disappointment in love, religious excitement, change of life, financial trouble, overwork, exposure to heat, and loss of friends.[57] Although they may seem benighted to us, there is something

56. Susan Miles, *The Dakota Hospital for the Insane* (Yankton, S.Dak.: Yankton County Historical Society, 2011), p. 6.

57. *Humanist* 2 (Apr. 1979): 14.

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heartbreaking about these categories, which in their way illustrate the hardships, translated into the form of mental instability, suffered by the pioneering community of 1880.[58] Mead's compassion for his patients was given an extra dimension, perhaps, by his having spent his childhood on the family farm in Wisconsin.

As part of his enlightened approach to his patients, he believed that accommodating them in a serene environment would improve their mental health. In contrast to prevailing opinion, Mead insisted that mental institutions should not be warehouses but, rather, places where a combination of comfort and beauty would help to restore mental wellbeing. He had both the funds and the imagination to design buildings for the hospital on a grand scale, and during his tenure in office he oversaw the construction of six major buildings, among them the Herreid (men's receiving hospital, 1903), Mellette (men's infirmary, 1905), and Ordway (disturbed men, 1915), as well as the building named after him. Those built to house patients had large parlors, patterned terrazzo floors, wide verandas, tall windows, and grand porticos, and they represented a kind of catalog of architectural styles popular at that time: neo-Classical, Art Deco, Italianate, and Prairie.[59]

Yankton found itself playing host to an institution, in this case one that was state-funded, that required it to show hospitality to problematic outsiders, a situation that was to be repeated with the establishment of the federal prison in 1988. These days, the Human Services Center can accommodate up to three hundred patients who suffer from a wide range of conditions, including chemical dependency, dementia, and psychiatric disorders. The center also accommodates three hundred or so trusties from the South Dakota Minimum Security Unit, mostly drug offenders, who can be seen walking freely around the campus or working in the city wearing their distinctive T-shirts. Here was another group that made demands on Yankton's civic hospitality.

Ric Compton, the center's administrator, had been on the job for just a year when we spoke, and he told me that he had found the people of Yankton supportive. In his opinion, "one of the wonderful things

58. Ibid.

59. Johnson, "Imagining the Future: The Plans Being Developed for Historic HSC Buildings," 29 Aug. 2013, http://nathanvjohnson.wordpress.com/2013/08/.

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Herreid Building, State Human Services Center

about Yankton is that because HSC has been a part of the community for so long people have a better appreciation of what mental illness is, and how it can be treated." Such awareness and support was, he said, a unique feature of the city.

It is a shame that the same spirit of compassion has not been extended to the old buildings on the campus. Despite the fact that the campus has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1980, no less than eleven buildings are due for demolition. This wholesale destruction seems regrettable, because apart from the architectural interest and value inherent in these older buildings, they are symbols of a characteristic that I had come to find characteristic of Yankton: tolerance. Demolition of the Haas Building, dating from 1956, began last fall,[60] and an eleventh-hour appeal to stay the executions of three

60. Nathan Johnson, "Demolition of HSC Buildings Begins," *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan*, 4 Oct. 2013.

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older constructions, the Ordway, Mellette, and Herreid, in favor of renovating the buildings recently failed. The effort had the support of Yankton County's three legislators, Senator Jean Hunhoff, Representative Bernie Hunhoff, and Representative Mike Stevens. Echoing his campaign to save the Meridian Bridge, Hunhoff stated, "If we can keep these buildings standing for the next two years, then I believe they'll be standing and serving the community for the next 200 years—and on the tax rolls."[61]

I was sorry that the brevity of my stay in Yankton did not give me the chance to get to know Mount Marty College better. Furthermore, my visit coincided with the summer vacation, so I was unable to gauge the effect of the students' presence in the city, though both the chief of police and the sheriff commented on their law-abiding behavior. My impression was that the college was somewhat detached from the city. This statement reflects the obvious in one sense, because the college campus occupies a superb position on the bluff at the western edge of the city, whose silhouette is skewered, so to speak, by the spire of the Catholic church attached to the monastery. But whereas Yankton College was situated in the very center of the city, Mount Marty seems to be sequestered at the top of its hill. No doubt, this semi-isolation is part of its strength, since although it calls itself a college of liberal arts, it is essentially a Catholic college, with a strong emphasis on Benedictine principles. Its mission statement makes this philosophy explicit: "Mount Marty College, an academic community in the Catholic Benedictine liberal arts tradition, prepares students for a contemporary world of work, service to the human community, and personal growth."[62] The college was, after all, founded, built, and paid for by the Benedictine Sisters of Sacred Heart Monastery in the teeth of the Great Depression in 1936. Although it is an independent institution, the influence of the nuns continues to be profound, and they supply a formidable spiritual example.

61. Nathan Johnson, "Lawmakers Offer Hope for HSC Proposal," *Yankton Daily Press & Dakotan*, 13 Sept. 2013.

62. Mount Marty College, "Mission, Vision & Values," http://www.mtmc.edu/about/mission.aspx.

There is an unmistakable sense, as you walk around the small campus, that the place has been gathered to the bosom of the monastery. Whatever the students themselves may think, their parents have sent them to this place in order to gain a Catholic education with a special Benedictine emphasis. Father Thomas Wordkemper, the college pastor who ministers to both students and faculty, told me that every student is required to take a class called "The Wisdom of Benedict." Likewise, every member of the staff and faculty when interviewed for a job is given a session on Benedictine values and core values of the college to make sure the match is a good one, both for the person concerned and for the institution. Could Father Wordkemper give me Benedictine principles in a nutshell? Seeing everyone as Christ, and treating them as Christ, he replied. That is what the college attempted to inculcate in its students.

According to the website city-data.com, 69.3 percent of the people in Yankton County claim to be affiliated with a religious congregation, and of them, 49 percent profess to be adherents of the Catholic church.[63] These figures suggest that Yankton has a stronger Catholic following than the rest of the state, since figures for South Dakota in 2000 showed that between them the Protestant churches commanded a following of 61 percent, while 25 percent of the population supported the Catholic church.[64] Yankton College was founded on Christian principles, but no one can say how strictly it would have adhered to those principles had it survived and remained open for business. The fate of the small, liberal-arts, faith-based college must always be precarious, especially when the faith concerned is professed by a minority of the regional population from which it draws most of its students. The nuns are still held in great respect in the city; however, that respect derives from past achievements, especially the founding of the hospital and the tradition of training nurses. In any case, the number of sisters at the monastery has dwindled, and many of them are now elderly.

63. "Breakdown of Population Affiliated with a Religious Congregation," http://www.city-data.com/city/Yankton-South-Dakota.html.

64. Association of Religion Data Archives, "State Membership Report: South Dakota," http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/s/46/rcms2010_46_state_adh_2000.asp.

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The college maintains a strong connection with the federal prison through its educational program, and its educators do sterling work. It is no surprise that Jim Reese, for example, has received an award from the National Endowment for the Arts for his writing courses five years running. As I have tried to suggest, however, because the prison is a federal institution, its relationship with the community must necessarily be at arm's length. By the same token, when prisoners are released, they presumably flee the place as fast as they can. While they may be grateful for the education they have received, they are unlikely to feel any great nostalgia for their place of confinement. Nor are they able to redirect the benefits of their education back to Yankton, because they do not belong to the city. In this way, the college dedicates a significant amount of its educational energy to students who have only a shadowy presence in their alma mater.

If I did not spend as much time as I would have liked on campus, I did at least attend a handful of alumni events at the end of June when the so-called All-Schools Rockin' Reunion was celebrated. Among them was an alumni baseball game billed "The Mount Marty Alumni Classic: Young Guns versus the Oldies but Goodies," which took place on a perfect summer's evening. The ballpark, called Riverside Field, enjoys an exceptionally pretty setting, because the Missouri flows along the edge of its outfield, seeming to weave its way like a ribbon through the cottonwoods on the bank. On this occasion the diamond itself was emerald green, the result of all the rain that had fallen. The event was well attended, and the concessions were doing good business amidst clouds of savory steam billowing from the hot-dog stands and barbecues. I accompanied my neighbor, a member of the college staff, who introduced me to several of her colleagues, including some who were nuns, though I never would have guessed it from their attire and behavior (beer, unrestrained cheering). Before the game began, the retiring college coach and vice-president was honored with a presentation, and the day was named after him. The crowd stood to say the Pledge of Allegiance, and a young woman sang the national anthem in a voice that was more patriotic than tuneful. An announcer introduced the players, and after Sister Clarice (class of 1973) had thrown the first ceremonial pitch, the game finally began with commentary provided

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Baseball game at Riverside Field

in classic style by Scott Kooistra of radio station KYNT. The audience relished every pitch and strike. Whenever a player did anything significant, spectators called out his name and rowdily applauded. My normally genteel companion whooped and punched the air.

Of course, I didn't really understand what was going on, and my friend's explanations merely obscured matters further, but I loved the whole event. It was quintessentially American: here was a small town enjoying itself in a way that was probably common to most small towns with small colleges, and yet, at the same time, it was unique to Yankton. Towering over the ballpark behind the bleachers and scintillating in the cooling blue-sky park, stood the enormous silver grain bins that occupied a whole block between Second and Third streets. By then my eye had acquired a Midwest aesthetic, and I was able to see a kind of beauty in these gleaming towers where, earlier, I might have seen no more than industrial hardware. Thus, the baseball park and its festive

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audience were embraced by Yankton's history: the river to its south, and to its north the old railway yard, now developed for use by trucks, and the grain bins—the city's treasure chests.

After the game we went for supper at The Marina Restaurant beside Lewis and Clark Lake and walked at dusk along the beach. It could have been a Mediterranean resort: families were packing up their picnics; little children with buckets and spades were making last-ditch stands at the water's edge; sunbathers were rolling up their towels. We saw a killdeer fearlessly pottering across the sand, bands of black and white plumage tied around its throat like a scarf. A woman in a bikini, brown as toast, bicycled a pedalo across the paper-smooth water, while her dog, standing on the thwart, piloted their vessel towards the shore. The bluffs on the opposite bank, picked out by the sunset, were turning from white to pink. The dying sun was giving way to fires lit in a chain outside the camping cabins along the shore, their smoke disappearing into the curtain of trees.

And finally, after midnight, I took a solitary walk across the Meridian Bridge. Standing on the lower deck, I could hear the din of a party as it floated back along the unruffled river: a throbbing bass, a girl's sudden laughter, the snarl of a motorbike. For once the water was a little smelly, perhaps an effect of the heat. The rusting trusses creaked and banged occasionally, a strange arthritic groan, as if the old structure was settling its bones. From the Nebraska side I heard the cry of a whippoorwill, a new sound to me, but immediately identifiable because the bird pronounced the trio of syllables that made up its name so clearly, as though repeating an elocution exercise. If it was a death omen, as folklore suggested, the creature had surely picked the wrong night to sing its ghoulish song, for I had seldom felt so well, a sensation I attributed to Yankton. The oldest city in South Dakota, Yankton seemed fresh with promise that evening, as I did.

FIREWORKS AND FAREWELL

As it happened, my last complete day in Yankton was the Fourth of July, an event I had not experienced before in the United States, and an interesting one for a member of the nation from whom independence was being celebrated. The night before, I was given an inkling

of the scale of Yankton's celebrations. While walking across the Meridian Bridge at dusk, I noticed two men on the beach on the upstream Nebraska side who appeared to be measuring something, but in the poor light I could not work out what they were doing. The following morning I found out. An enormous Stars and Stripes the size of a tennis court had been painted on the sand, its colors applied in such a way as to suggest that the flag was rippling in a breeze.

On the evening of the Fourth my neighbor invited me to join her family on the riverfront to watch the municipal fireworks display. We arrived downtown soon after sunset, and from our car we could see that the entire length of the bank was filled with people lying on the grass, or sitting on chairs, or standing in line to buy snacks. Both levels of the Meridian Bridge were packed with people squeezing together to find room along the railings of the eastern side, for the fireworks were due to be let off downstream from the bridge on the Nebraska bank. There was nowhere to park within two blocks of the river, but as patrons of The Landing we were allowed to use the lot next to the restaurant. None other than the proprietor himself waved us into our place with a flourish. "Rock-star parking," said my neighbor appreciatively.

We had brought blankets with us and made a little camp in a space on the grass in the park. The sun had all but disappeared, and the last of the daylight was surrendering to the street lamps and car headlights. A dozen fishing boats were on the river, their riding lights beginning to show and reflect on the black, silky water. On the opposite bank we could see the hectic movement of torches as the fireworks operators made their preparations like little demons setting the fires of hell.

At 10:00 P.M., when it was quite dark, the first of the fireworks was detonated, and it was followed by a lavish and magnificent display that lasted twenty minutes. It was as if we, the citizens of Yankton, had commissioned a stylist to decorate our sky and would not be satisfied until we had seen his entire portfolio. We lay back and stared into the erupting heavens, gasped, clapped, and waited for the next revelation. Most of these multicolored paroxysms took the shape of exploding flowers, buds that burst in huge refulgent circles, seeming to dilate their petals above the crowd and fall on us in showers of dying blossom: peonies, dahlias, chrysanthemums, and even cauliflowers that expired in cata-

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Fireworks over Missouri River at Yankton

racts of sparks. Some resembled great chandeliers in the sky, hung with crackling droplets of emerald and silver; some were like sparkling palm trees, with fizzing trunks and cascading fronds; some were like tangles and clusters of sparkling leaves and smoking flowers, every bloom an explosion of light; some rose like shooting stars, trailing kite tails tied with fiery ribbons; some rocketed over our heads like ballistic eggs and then, with a bang, burst open to deliver spiders that dangled from fiery threads, extruding dozens of glittering legs. The colors were metallic, like Christmas decorations, and mostly red, blue, green, and purple, all effervescently shiny. And the whole noisy, kaleidoscopic show was reflected in the gliding waters of the Missouri.

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The finale was signaled by a smoldering barrage of flame that rose from the opposite bank in a climbing wall of pyrotechnic color. The crowd, sensing the end was at hand, clapped vigorously, glad to receive this spectacular gift from the city to itself. And then it was over; the dazzle was extinguished, the crowd dispersed, and darkness took back the night.

My stay in Yankton was almost complete. After saying goodbye to my neighbors, I returned to the Meridian Bridge around midnight for a final, inevitable, valedictory walk. The town seemed to be empty, and I had both levels of the bridge entirely to myself. I looked across the river to the silent, lightless Nebraska bank, which only a couple of hours ago had been blazing with the symbolic declaration of national independence. Odd, I thought, that something as profound as independence should be celebrated with fireworks, which were so transient. I walked slowly, already grieving my departure from the city. On the lower deck I came across the stick of a rocket, and I wondered what kind of firework it had carried as its payload; something prolonged and spectacular, to judge by its size. Leaning over the railing, I threw the stick into the Missouri and made a wish, telling myself it would come true if there was a visible splash.

Farewell Yankton, and thank you!

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During my stay in Yankton a great many people were kind enough to talk to me about their city, some of whom I recorded. I was not able to quote all of them directly in the text, but I would like them to know that I came away from every interview having learned something new and having had my picture of Yankton amplified. I would like to express my gratitude to the following individuals: Dr. Lars Aaning, Mary Abbott, Jessica Albers, Cena and Curt Bernard, Gert Boyles, Bill Charland, Ric Compton, Lance Corbit, Todd Cowman, Bruce Cull, Ryan Cwatch, Joe Delvaux, Joyce DeMaro, Agnes and Clark Eide, Denise and Michael Erikson, Tom Goddard, Charlie Gross, Kathy Grow, Ann and John Gunderson, Ben Hanten, Inez Harris, Doug Hellmers, Katie Hunhoff, Mark Hunhoff, Kathy Jacobs, Kay James, Sister Ann Kessler,

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On the covers: In this issue, Fraser Harrison presents an essay that is part travelogue, part history, written after he spent several weeks living in Yankton in 2013. The historic Meridian Bridge over the Missouri River (front) provided him a place to muse on the nature of the city and its residents, past and present, and he took an active part in community events, including the traditional Fourth of July celebration (back cover).