



CHOUTEAU CREEK STATION

by Herbert T. Hoover & Sunshyne Thaler

A two-story hotel with livery barn housed a center of Missouri Valley Culture on the Bon Homme County side of lower Chouteau Creek, slightly more than a mile from its confluence with the Missouri River. Through the last four decades of the nineteenth century the place went by several names, under changing ownership.

The first proprietor was George L. Tackett, under whose management it was known as Tackett Station. He was an immigrant of French extraction who arrived at Sioux City in 1856, took as his first wife a Native American, and because of the marriage spoke several Indian dialects as well as English and French. In 1858 Tackett became the sheriff of Woodbury County, Iowa. Soon he took as his second wife a non-Indian, and on June 24, 1861, accepted appointment by Dakota territorial Governor William Jayne as Justice of the Peace with the charge of establishing law and order along the eastern

edge of the Yankton Sioux Reservation.¹

Trials evidently took place on the grounds or in the lobby of the hotel. According to local sources, Tackett hanged the worst offenders from a nearby tree, on which he cut a notch after every execution, and buried their remains on the grounds surrounding the hotel. More than a century later Yankton tribal elders still warned that the spirits of Tackett's victims hovered about, and haunted the place at night in protest against his brand of pioneer justice.

The hotel building contained a stage-coach station, post office, country store, saloon, gambling room, and lodging facilities. There were prostitutes, each of which arrived by steamboat to remain no longer than two or three weeks before moving upstream to another Missouri River Valley station. Tackett sold whiskey legally at \$1 a shot to non-Indians, and illegally for all his Yankton Sioux customers could pay. Quickly, to



Choteau Creek Station in Bon Homme County, circa 1985.

tribal members his facility became a meeting ground for Indian-White relations, and to non-Indians a way station and recreational center. By 1872 three of eight stage coach lines that carried passengers between Yankton and Fort Randall made daily stops. Soldiers came down from Fort Randall. Settlers slipped away from their Bon Homme County farmsteads to Tackett Station for an escape from toil and boredom.

Yankton tribal elder Joseph Rockboy reminisced while he surveyed the property for nomination to the national register of historical sites in the 1970s. On the first floor of the hotel he remembered a lobby, dining room, post office, general store, and business office. On the second floor near the head of a narrow stairway, at the west end, there was a gambling room. The floor still bore impres-

sions to indicate the location of tables and chairs, and the ceiling some patches that covered bullet holes. Along a hallway were doors to tiny rooms, on which numbers assigned to guests and prostitutes remained visible. Under the front yard of the hotel was a cache for whiskey, connected to the basement by a tunnel. In the back yard had stood a livery barn, whose location Mr. Rockboy still could remember, and he pointed in the direction of a trail that led down along Chouteau Creek to the landing in a shallow estuary on the Missouri River.

Through the 1870s Tackett Station appeared on several maps as a municipality called "Chouteau Creek"--on the Dakota Territory map by Silas Chapman of Milwaukee in 1872, for example, and on the General Land Office territorial map prepared by

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Choteau Creek Station Hotel from the northwest.

Commissioner J. A. Williamson in 1879. There was one crossing suitable for wagons and stage coaches over Chouteau Creek a short distance upstream, and another for foot traffic and horses known by Yankton people as “the stone bridge” a short way downstream.

Tackett sold out early in the 1880s to George and Caroline Trumbo. In 1869 Trumbo had left a homestead near Vermillion to take federal employment at Greenwood Agency on the Yankton Reservation, and for eleven years worked as a regular employee in the capacities of herdsman, issue clerk, and U. S. (“Boss”) Farmer. Evidently through the experience he earned cordial relationships with tribal members. While a herdsman, he and Caroline sometimes camped on reservation land to look after herds of cattle until they were slaugh-

tered for issue as annuity rations of meat. While serving as Boss Farmer with responsibility for the survival of Yankton people on family farms, on one occasion Trumbo demonstrated remarkable initiative to prevent suffering and possible starvation. During August of 1872, after it became clear that drought and grasshoppers had destroyed the Yanktons’ crops, he accompanied tribal members on a buffalo hunt west of the Missouri River. They found only 1 mature buffalo and 5 calves, but they killed and brought back the meat of some 800 deer and antelope plus 55 elk.

While Trumbo evidently gave his best effort to the needs of tribal members during the 1870s, he also looked after his own interests in Bon Homme County. In 1872 he proved up a preemption claim along



Choteau Creek Station Hotel from the southeast.

Emmanuel Creek. In 1873 he entered a homestead claim along Chouteau Creek, and the following year made it his permanent residence. From there he moved to the Chouteau Creek hotel, which under his management was best known as the Trumbo Stage Coach Station.²

In 1894 Trumbo sold the place to William Skakel and Thomas Hardwick, under whose management people in the area called it Skakel's Honolulu Ranch, because the new proprietor introduced new dimensions to its legacy. His image was one of a tough, self-made man, yet one with moral commitments. Under his management Chouteau Creek Station became a self-sufficient community with an ice house, slaughter house, and packing plant to process meat. Skakel exported beeves for sale at the Sioux City stockyard. He had an idea about the use of

artesian water for the irrigation of crops on a flatland nearby, south of the old Government Road. Doubtless he discussed this notion with Peter Norbeck, for at that time the future governor lived nearby in Charles Mix County, where he and a cousin perfected drilling apparatus for deep artesian wells. Norbeck like other men of means must have frequented the Honolulu Ranch. Skakel offered its facilities for use as a hunting lodge, and pastured race horses on the grounds. He had a favorite horse, which surely he rode at the nearest race tracks, located on the Fair Ground below Greenwood and at Old Hay Hall east of War Chief Hill on the Yankton Reservation. The race horse went to its reward in a grave at a corner of the yard surrounding the hotel, according to neighbors, wearing the silver-mounted saddle that its owner had used.

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One other item of interest in the memory of William Skakel was a lineage that linked him through family ties to Ethel Skakel (Mrs. Robert) Kennedy. Elders recall her visit to Chouteau Creek Station in search of the place where this ancestor had lived. If community recollection is accurate, there exists a family tie not only to the late Senator's widow, but also to her son, U. S. Congressman Joe Kennedy. (John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library staff members in Boston deny the possession of genealogical documents to verify William Skakel's connection to the Kennedy family.)

Through approximately four decades, Chouteau Creek Station flourished not only as an urban center for area residents and overland travelers, but also as an important way station for steamboats that docked at the mouth of Chouteau Creek. Here they dropped passengers, merchandise, spirituous beverages, and entertainers as they took on cargo and passengers for transportation further upstream. Through Chouteau Creek Station went also cargo and travelers to and from Andrus, a short way up Chouteau Creek.

Suddenly near the outset of the twentieth century Skakel's Ranch closed down, for an obvious reason. Steamship lines lost business to railroads, and to commercial traffic on roadways that opened as the agricultural frontier approached the Missouri Hills. Tabor, Tyndall, Avon, Wagner, Lake Andes, and several other prairie towns replaced Chouteau Creek Station, Fort Randall, White Swan, and Wheeler as commercial centers.

The hotel building at Chouteau Creek remained in use for more than half a century as a farmstead home. When surveyed during the 1970s by Mr. Rockboy it was rented as a residence to a young couple, but showed the signs of steady decay. Unfortunately, vandals burned it to the ground in 1992.

At the least, an historical marker beside

its foundation should preserve the memory of its importance as a center of Missouri Valley Culture. Merchants who lingered in the wake of the fur trade flourished here until the railroads came because theirs was the only docking place between Running Water and Greenwood Agency on the Yankton Reservation, because they were situated in close proximity to tribal customers on the reservation, and because they owned an advantageous location along a military road that bore heavy traffic between Fort Randall and Sioux City.

To Chouteau Creek Station is attached some folk history. In the oral traditions of Yankton Sioux remain expressions of apprehension regarding the spirits of the men hanged by Judge Tackett and recollections about the relationships of forbears with merchants, gamblers, whiskey traders, and prostitutes for some 40 years. There was an incident in September of 1863 that represented the extension of fear as far west as lower Chouteau Creek because of the Minnesota Sioux War. Despite the best efforts of U. S. Agent Walter Burleigh, Struck By The Ree, and the Yankton Sioux Scouts who worked for General Alfred Sully, four Indian men attacked a U. S. Mail Stage at the crossing above Tackett Station. They killed one U. S. Cavalryman, frightened the rest of the passengers, seized their property, and rode off with all the horses. For 20 days a column of 40 men from Fort Randall searched for the attackers, without success.

The passing of river towns and stations such as the one on Chouteau Creek caused general concern among people who continued to live along the Missouri Valley, and evoked expressions of regret about their disappearance. One by John McLaughlin about Fort Randall, which was abandoned by the U. S. Army in 1896, appeared in the *Avon Clarion* on August 8, 1907.

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The absence of river boats upon the Missouri river for the past sixteen years has been a great drawback to the settlers, who are so far from railroads. Half their products never see market. Now the government has ordered that the river be cleared of any obstructions with a view to permitting Kansas City and St. Louis to establish a boat line. . . . There were fourteen boats running from St. Louis to Bismark [sic], North Dakota, and further, into Montana. It is almost shameful to see the longest navigable river in America shut off by railroads which are of no service to people living on the river. . . . I have applications for a site to build elevators at Fort Randall but owing to my having for sale Fort Randall lands comprising 327 acres, I could not with justice to myself or the would-be purchaser give my consent. I am also to sell forty acres for a town site, which I have refused pending the sale of this place, which is the paradise of South Dakota. . . . Old age prompts me to sell my home here with all improvements, consisting of two dwelling houses erected by the government costing over \$42,000; artesian well; barn; cattle shed; church building, 105x50; timber for all purposes for the next 200 years. . . . All this I will sell for the small sum of \$17,000, \$11,000 down, the balance on three or five years time.

A similar lament would have been appropriate from the owners of properties that fell into disuse at Chouteau Creek Station, White Swan, Wheeler, and other places along the Missouri River that had flourished for

nearly half a century. Their passing represented the replacement of Missouri Valley Culture with a network of prairie towns connected by railroad tracks and roadways.

Notes

1. *South Dakota Historical Collections*: XXIII, 317.
2. *South Dakota Historical Collections*: V, 85-91.

Mouth of Choteau Creek, 1984.



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Wood and
water needed
to build new
communities



above - Workers slice cottonwood logs into boards at an old-time saw mill near Springfield.



left and below left - Choteau Creek Lumber Mill

below right - Dirk Dykstra Well Drilling on Charles Dirk's Ranch in 1907 (located one half mile west of Dahlenberg School). Pictured from left to right are Ben Fitch, Roy Hampton, standing is Dirk Dykstra, Billy Gates, Rudolph Dykstra. Picture submitted by Charles M. Kaufman grandson of Charles Dirks.

