

## Dreams for Sale

On the dreary morning of September 17, 1908 a special train of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul stopped to let off passengers at the still incomplete depot at the northern end of the newly platted town of Three Forks. On the southern end of town, the Northern Pacific railroad passengers were unloaded at a small depot not much larger than a two-hole outhouse. The N.P. had given these passengers special excursion rates to reach Three Forks. Town lots were for sale and people came from around the country to buy them.

The auction was to be held on Main Street, which looked much like a wide-open prairie. Between the two depots there were only a few tents and two lumber yards. The number of people wandering the prairie that day was estimated between seven hundred and a thousand. Unfortunately, it was drizzling rain and the hopeful masses crowded into the freight room of the C.M.&S.P. depot for the auction.

One can imagine the mix of people in that room; bakers, bankers, businessmen, contractors, farmers, painters, land speculators, lumber yard managers, railroad executives, real estate agents, reporters and many spectators and family members. Of the hundreds gathered around the auctioneer Col. Harry Hilman of Sioux City, IA, there were only 72 people who ended up with lots that day. Among the spectators were E.M. Mestad, who later opened a bakery, and Fred Studebaker, an itinerant painter, who became the manager of the town baseball team only to disappear shortly afterwards.

As one would expect, many of the lot buyers were from towns and cities to the east of Three Forks, especially from towns down the Milwaukee line. Buyers from "Harlowtown" were predominate, but Lombard, Terry, Martinsdale, Lavina, Miles City, Roundup and Ruby, MT were represented. Out-of-staters mostly came from North and South Dakota; Bowman, Dickinson, Edgeley, and Marmarth, ND, and Armour, Haley and Lemon, SD.

Butte was the most represented with thirteen lot buyers including E. A. Barrett who was moving to Three Forks as the new Superintendent of the Rocky Mountain Division of the Milwaukee.

The original plat of Three Forks had 130 lots on Main Street and, according to the next week's Three Forks Herald, all but 11 of those lots were sold at the auction. Lots went from \$160 to \$1000 each and the auction lasted well into the evening.

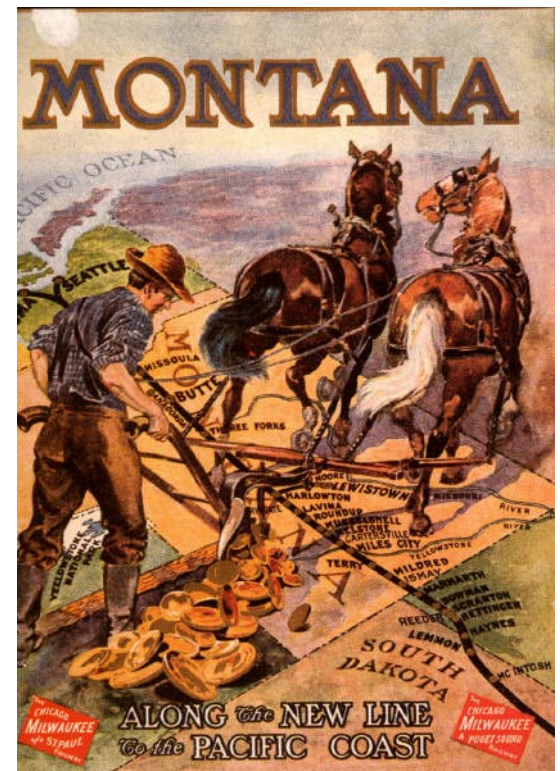
Mrs. Emma Bilstrom, of "Harlowtown," bought eight lots, selling most of them within a few years for a profit. She stuck around and built the Bilstrom building (now the southern portion of McCreanor's) which housed the Traveler's Cafe, where she was the proprietor.

Ida R. Wolfe, of Miles City and apparently a not a triskaidekaphobic, purchased lot 13 of block 13, where Fred's Place and the Big Sky used to be.

The Three Forks Centennial Committee is planning a re-enactment of this event during rodeo weekend of 2008. We'll see how much lots will go for these days. Who wants to be the auctioneer?



Milwaukee Depot c. 1920



Cover of a Milwaukee promotional brochure c 1910



The Northern Pacific Depot in early 1910. It was considerably upgraded by June 1910 when the "Better Farming" Special arrived.