

# Martin Vetleson

The names of the men who were influential in the early days of Three Forks are many and recognizable; Adams, Abbott, Miller, Parnacott, Menapace, Dorsey, and Bryant. But one name seems to be consistently left off the list, but played a vital role in the formation of this city nearly 97 years ago.

On September 17, 1908, 73 men and women bought lots from the Milwaukee Land Company and began to lay down roots in Montana. A year later, the TF Herald of September 2, 1909 notes that "Martin Vetleson, of Ruby, North Dakota is in town this week and looking over the field with a view of establishing himself in the practice of law." The Herald goes on to say that Vetleson, who was 26 at the time, came with high recommendations from citizens of his former state. Vetleson and his parents were born in Minnesota, among the Norwegian immigrants of that state.

A perusal of the local paper would make it seem that Three Forks was the perfect place to get in on the ground floor. The Justice of the Peace, P.M. Abbott, was busy dispensing justice, the First National Bank had just opened its doors, and real estate firms were booming. Seeing some opportunities, Vetleson set up an office above the drug store (now Joanie Marie's) by the end of September.

Within a month, he had one of his first clients, The Three Forks Commercial Club. The Commercial Club was a Chamber of Commerce, a booster club, and the unofficial government of the Town rolled into one. Vetleson was called upon to guide the town's incorporation process through the legal terrain. A petition was drafted and signed by many of the residents of the unincorporated town and Vetleson presented it to the County Commissioners. At their November 1 meeting, the Commissioners approved the petition and appointed Vetleson as census taker. If the census showed more than 300 inhabitants, the commissioners would call an election for the incorporation of the town, which they did on December 13, 1909. The polling place was the office of the Milwaukee Hotel and Vetleson was the election officer. He took the election results to the County Commission, and in a special meeting, they declared Three Forks an incorporated town on December 15, 1909.

In January, residents of Three Forks met in a caucus to nominate candidates for Mayor and Wardsmen. Herald Editor P.S. Dorsey, an adamant promoter of Three Forks, was elected Caucus Chairman. When he called for nominations for the office of Mayor, Martin Vetleson was the first to be recognized and "in well chosen words stated the duties and responsibilities which would befall the first set of officers" and nominated P.M. Abbott for Mayor.

Unfortunately, Squire Abbott did not win the Mayoral race. William Parnacott was elected Mayor on January 17, 1910. Joseph Menapace and L. R. Thomas were elected first ward Aldermen, while Charles Ellison and E.C. Bryant were elected Aldermen for the second ward



**MARTIN VETLESON**  
CANDIDATE FOR  
**POLICE JUDGE**

**B. A. Y.** Willow Creek Home  
stead, meets every  
**FIRST AND THIRD SAT. EVENING**  
at the school house. All visit-  
ing brother and sister Archers  
welcome.  
Mrs. Izzie Walbert, Cor. Paul Woodward, foreman

**MARTIN VETLESON**  
Attorney-At-Law  
Practices in State and Federal  
Courts and before United  
States Land Office.  
Attention given to Renting and  
Insurance of City Prop-  
erty.  
**Three Forks, Montana**  
Date St. One Door East of the  
Menapace Store.

**THE**  
**THREE FORKS DAIRY**  
  
is the sanitary dairy. The milk  
goes from cow to bottle  
without coming in con-  
tact with the human  
hand.  
Our buildings are sec-

At left, a 1915 campaign ad, and on the right a 1914 Professional Card ad, both from the Three Forks Herald.

Courtesy of Headwaters Heritage Museum Microfilm Archives

At the February 21, 1910 meeting of the Council, Vetleson was hired as the Town's attorney until May. In the meantime, he was directed to set up the annual election in April. At this election, the Mayor and both Aldermen from the first ward were replaced, J.W. Ross becoming the second Mayor and L.W. Thomas and B. H. Everett Aldermen. In May, the new Mayor and Council decided not to continue the services of Vetleson.

Vetleson did not let the loss of one client stop him. By June 1910, Vetleson was the local U.S. Land Commissioner. As Commissioner, Vetleson oversaw the homestead claims and proof of claims for the area. And 1910-1915 saw a lot of homesteaders making claims or proving claims. Things got so busy, that by 1912, Miss Pearle Buchele arrived from Burlington, Colo., to accept a position as stenographer in U.S. Commissioner M. Vetleson's office. Over the years Vetleson had many different locations for his office; above the First National Bank, above the Ruby, in the Independent Telephone Co. building, in the Herald Office, above the Post Office Drug Store, and one door east of the Menapace store as noted in the ad above.

Vetleson eventually married his stenographer and they had a son, Norman. The family lived in Manhattan for a number of years and Vetleson went on to become the Park County Attorney in the mid 20s. Vetleson died in Tacoma, WA in 1967. So much history is made by people behind the scenes, but for a brief time, nearly 40 years after his death, Martin Vetleson once again stands in the spotlight.