

Tour 9 – WPA Guide to North Dakota – 1938

Text transcribed by the Center for Heritage Renewal
North Dakota State University

(McIntosh, S. Dak.) – Hettinger – Bowman – Marmarth – (Miles City, Mont.). US 12. South Dakota Line to Montana Line, 94 m. Milwaukee R. R. parallels route. Graveled roadbed. Accommodations in principal towns.

US 12 cuts across the southwestern corner of North Dakota through an area where herds of cattle and flocks of sheep graze on the hardy prairie grasses that grow in the small valleys between high, rough, brown mesa-topped buttes. The day of the pioneer homesteader and rancher is barely in the past here, and only within recent years has diversified farming gradually been adopted. Near its western end the route passes through the southern part of the Badlands, a strange land of fantastic enchantment where ever-changing combinations of color and shadow form a background of weird beauty (*see Tour 8*).

US 12 crosses the South Dakota Line at 0.0 m. on a railroad overpass at White Butte, S. Dak. (*see S. Dak. Tour 2*).

At **1 m.** the route passes through a gravel area adjacent to HIDDEN WOOD CREEK (L), also called Flat Creek. Along its course, approximately a mile apart and covered with brush, are two cutbanks known as BRUSHY BANKS, near which the Custer Black Hills expedition camped on the way from Fort Abraham Lincoln in 1874.

On Hidden Wood Creek in this vicinity in 1882 was situated the main camp of the Indians from the Standing Rock Reservation who took part in the last big buffalo hunt of the Sioux tribe, said to be the last large hunt in the United States, held under the direction of Maj. James McLaughlin, then Indian agent at Fort Yates (*see Side Tour 8C*).

In the years following the Custer episode in 1876 (*see HISTORY and FORT ABRAHAM LINCOLN STATE PARK*) many of the Sioux, except the faithful few who accompanied Sitting Bull into exile in Canada (*see Side Tours 6B and 8C*), returned to the reservations to assimilate the white man's civilization. Before the white man's restrictions had been placed upon them the Plains Indians had been trained from childhood to the pursuit of the buffalo, for the buffalo was the staff of the Indian's life, providing food, shelter, and clothing. The hunt in 1882 caused much rejoicing among the tribesmen, offering them a temporary respite from the humdrum reservation life, and a brief return to the activity which had once existed in this land that was rightfully theirs.

Long and extensive preparations were made for this hunt. Strict religious ceremonies invoked the blessing of the Great Mystery. Running Antelope, whose picture was on the old five dollar Treasury notes, was generalissimo of the affair, while under him, leading the different bands, were such famed Indians as Gall, Rain-in-the-Face, John Grass, Fire Heart, Kill Eagle, Crazy

Walking, Spotted Horn Bull, Gray Eagle, and Charging Thunder.

Approximately 2,000 men, women, and children, including a few white men, made the 100-mile journey from Fort Yates to the scene of the hunt, and McLaughlin estimated that more than 600 mounted red men took part in the actual killing. The herd, said to number 50,000 head, was first sighted near White Butte, 10 m. S. of the present South Dakota town of the same name, and covered the valley from that point to Haynes (*see below*). On the first day of the hunt 2,000 buffalo were killed, and the second day was given to skinning and cutting up the dead animals. The third day found the Indians again on the chase, and this time 3,000 bison were killed. The Hidden Wood Creek camp was maintained until all the meat was cured and ready to take back to the reservation. Years later when the railroad was built, many of the settlers made a nice profit shipping the bones of the buffalo carcasses left from this hunt.

HAYNES, **3 m.** (2,540 alt., 167 pop.), was named for George B. Haynes, general passenger agent of the Milwaukee R.R. when it constructed its main line in 1907. At **5 m.** are the junctions with ND 8, a graveled highway, and with an unimproved county dirt road. US 12 turns L.

1. Right from the junction on the unimproved road to the rammed-earth home and garage of the SCORIA LILY RANCH, **5 m.** The owner, Col. Paul S. Bliss, naturalist and author of three books of North Dakota verse, has had the two buildings erected as an example of the practical use of earth for permanent, low-cost farm buildings. In the building process earth is packed into plank forms. After "setting" it forms a durable, heat- and cold-resisting wall.

2. Straight ahead on ND 8 to the abandoned workings of the STATE MINE, **0.5 m. (R)**, an underground lignite mine once owned and used for experimental purposes by the South Dakota School of Mines. The mine was abandoned several years ago when the coal vein caught fire. The coal is still burning, and occasionally at night the red glow of this earthly furnace is visible where the tunnel timbering and earth have caved in, leaving the hillsides pockmarked and scarred. Nearby on two short rails is a rusty railroad steam engine, its gears fast in the grip of rust and its wooden cab nearly eaten away by wind and rain. Deserted, it stands where it was last stopped before the rails of the spur from Haynes to the mine were taken up.

At 9 m. on US 12 is the junction with an unimproved county dirt road.

Left on this road to PRAIRIE SPHINX BUTTE (R), **2.5 m.**, where the steep sandstone outcroppings at the top of the formation resemble the features of the Gizeh Sphinx.

HETTINGER, **13 m.** (2,668 alt., 1,292 pop.), seat of Adams County, is at the foot of a high hill rising from the valley of Hidden Wood Creek. Adams County was formerly part of Hettinger County, named for Mathias Hettinger, a Freeport, Ill., banker. When the counties were separated in 1907 each wished to retain the original name, and a compromise was finally effected whereby the new county could use the old name for its county seat. The new brick COURTHOUSE (R) was built in 1929.

Hettinger's first newspaper editor was a man of unusual enterprise. As he hauled his press overland from Dickinson, he stopped everyone he met to tell them about his forthcoming publication, and by the time he reached Hettinger he had procured nearly 100 subscriptions. In 1908 this paper, the Adams County *Record*, was appointed official paper for Hettinger, and in one of the first resolutions it published citizens were instructed to remove their buildings from the streets, where, in the rush of locating, they had built with little regard for the town site plat.

BUCYRUS, **22 m.** (2,778 alt., 124 pop.), was first known as Dolan, in honor of the contractor for the Milwaukee R.R. grade there. During the grading a new name was sought for the town, however, and Bucyrus, the trade name of one of the huge steam shovels in use, was suggested and adopted.

REEDER, **31 m.** (2,810 alt., 395 pop.), was named for E.O. Reeder, who at the time of the founding of the town was chief engineer for the Milwaukee R.R. Alden Scott Boyer, now a well-known American and French cosmetics manufacturer, operated a drug store here in 1909-13.

Right from Reeder on ND 22, a graveled road, to LOOKOUT POINT, **2 m.**, an elevation from which five towns, Reeder, Bucyrus, Gascoyne, Scranton, and Buffalo Springs, are visible.

WHETSTONE BUTTES (L), **9 m.**, a high range of hills visible for miles, are topped by a peculiar sandstone formation which is so hard that pieces from it were used by the Indians and early settlers for sharpening their tools and weapons.

GASCOYNE, **38 m.** (2,759 alt., 97 pop.), is L. of the highway. Northwest of town is a railroad RESERVOIR (*swimming and picnicking facilities*).

SCRANTON, **43 m.** (2,773 alt., 381 pop.), is a namesake of Scranton, Pa., because both are coal-mining towns. The first mine here opened in 1907, preceding the railroad which arrived late that year and providing the impetus for the town which grew up. The discovery of suitable clay resulted in the establishment of a brick plant, the product of which can be seen in many of the buildings in the town. On each side of the highway as it passes the Milwaukee R.R. station are two round markers picturing the head of a Texas longhorn steer and carrying the legend, "Comin' up the Texas Chisholm Trail." The markers indicate one of the trails by which cattle were brought to this part of the Great Plains. Although the Chisholm Trail is believed to have run no farther N. than Abilene, Kan., the name has often been loosely applied to other trails running N. of that city, unofficial extensions of the original route from the Panhandle region (*see Tour 4*).

BUFFALO SPRINGS, **48.5 m.** (2,850 alt., 75 pop.), was known briefly as Ingomar, but in 1907 received its present name, suggested by the nearby springs which once served as a watering place for the bison that roamed the plains. East of town is a railroad RESERVOIR (*swimming, fishing*). A COLLECTION (*open; inquire directions at post office*) of Indian artifacts, pioneer relics, petrified woods, and other curios, gathered by Ed Gorman, may be seen at his hardware store.

BOWMAN, **56.5 m.** (*see Tour 4*), is the junction with US 85 (*see Tour 4*).

RHAME, **73 m.** (3,184 alt., 356 pop.), named for M.D. Rhame, district engineer of the Milwaukee R.R. when it was established in 1907, has the highest elevation of any town in the State. It is in a high valley between two large, flat, scoria-capped buttes.

At **78 m.** is the junction with an unimproved country dirt road.

Right on this road, across the railroad, to FORT DILTS STATE PARK (L), **2 m.**, marking the site where Capt. James L. Fisk's 80-wagon immigrant train, bound for the Montana gold fields, was corralled in defense formation for 14 days in September 1864. The expedition, accompanied by a cavalry detachment of 50 men, left Fort Rice in August, and encountered no trouble until September 1, when a wagon overturned in crossing a steep-sided creek. Fisk detailed another wagon and a detachment of eight cavalymen to remain and right the overturned vehicle. As soon as the main party was out of sight over a hill, a band of Hunkpapa Sioux—part of the group met by Sully at the Killdeer Mountains (*see Side Tour 8D*) and in the Battle of the Badlands (*see Tour 8*)—who were at that time engaged in hunting buffalo, attacked the detachment, killing nine and mortally wounding three. The expedition heard the rifle shots and returned to aid their comrades, but were too late to do more than rout the Indians. Just as the natives were being driven off, Jefferson Dilts, a scout for the expedition, returned from reconnoitering in the Badlands, and rode directly into the fleeing band of Sioux and was killed.

The expedition moved 10 m. the next day, and when it broke camp the morning of September 3 a large box of poisoned hardtack was purposely left behind. The Indians swooped down and hungrily devoured it, and it is said that 25 died from the effects of the poison, more than were killed by the expedition's bullets. That day the wagon train advanced only 3 m. before going into corral and beginning to throw up a defense, which they called Fort Dilts. Oxen and plows were used to obtain sod with which a dirt wall 6 ft. high and nearly 2 ft. thick was built outside the ring of wagons. The cavalry was stationed between the wall and the wagons. That night 16 volunteers slipped through the Indian lines and after 3 days and nights of hard riding reached Fort Rice, whence Col. Daniel J. Dill and a detachment set out at once. They arrived September 17, but by that time the Hunkpapa had departed for Cave Hills, S. Dak., where they had learned a large herd of bison was running. They had lingered only a day or two after the fortification was thrown up, sniping at it occasionally, before their interest waned.

The State park, which contains approximately 9 acres belonging to the State historical society, was dedicated to Jefferson Dilts in 1932. Within the fenced area are the remains of the sod fortification, and eight Government grave markers have been placed inside it in memory of those who lost their lives in the episode.

MARMARTH, **87.5 m.** (2,709 alt., 721 pop.), is at the confluence of Little Beaver Creek, Hay Creek, and the Little Missouri River. Known as the "city of trees", Marmarth is almost an oasis in the treeless Badlands country. Its name is derived from the mispronunciation of her own name, Margaret Martha, by a small grand-daughter of the president of the Milwaukee R.R. The

town had its inception in 1902, and grew rapidly following the advent of the Milwaukee R.R. in 1907 and the establishment of a railroad division point here the next year. Proximity to the Little Missouri and its tributaries has not always been advantageous; the town has been flooded five times--1907, 1913, 1929, and twice in 1921. To prevent another flood a dam has been built on Little Beaver Creek W. of town, and dikes have been put up around the town adjacent to the streams.

Theodore Roosevelt killed his first grizzly bear a short distance W. of Marmarth on the Little Beaver, and just N. of the town on the Little Missouri he shot his first buffalo. Many years later, when he was campaigning for the Presidency, on an appearance in Minneapolis he met a Marmarth pioneer. When informed the man was from Marmarth, at the mouth of Little Beaver Creek, the President exclaimed, "A town there? Do you have boats tied to your back doors?" He had visited the site only at times of high water.

Marmarth is a shipping point for cattle brought overland from range grounds in this State, Montana, and South Dakota. The stockyards, which cover an area of 45 acres, and contain 86 pens and 15 loading chutes, are built on the site of the old O-X (O Bar X) ranch. Nearby, on Hay Creek, still stands the squat old ranch house in which Theodore Roosevelt was once a guest.

Activity in the Little Beaver Dome, an oil field near Marmarth (*see below*), brought the town a boom in 1936. Business buildings and residences that had long stood idle were quickly occupied.

At **88.5 m.** is the junction with ND 16, an unimproved road.

Left on this highway to the junction with a country trail, **2 m.**; here 1 m. to THE WOMAN IN STONE, a 50-foot rock which shows the head and face of a woman, even to the hairline, clearly outlined against the sky. The form of the sandstone is the result of countless years of weathering.

On ND 16 to a junction with a well-defined prairie trail, **16 m.**; R. on this trail to the NUMBER TWO WELL of the Little Beaver Dome, **21 m.** Work has not advanced far on this well, but results of the Number One Well, just over the State Line in Montana, show a crude oil apparently high in gasoline and kerosene content, very light, but darker in color, and with a somewhat different odor from that usually associated with midcontinent crude oils. The Little Beaver Dome is part of the Cedar Creek Anticline, a geologic formation of arched rock strata extending from eastern Montana into southwestern North Dakota. It is one of the greatest natural gas fields in the United States.

US 12 crosses the Montana Line at **94 m.**, 95 m. E. of Miles City, Mont. (*see Mont. Tour 17*).