

## South Dakota: A Bicentennial History

By John Milton

“Prairie” as a general term, is the common denominator for the state, although variations from east to west result in a variety that at least makes a little sense out of the slogan, “Land of Infinite Variety.”

There are other kinds of variety. In the Black Hills northern, western, and eastern trees all grow together, one of the few places where this happens. Because South Dakota is in the center of the continent, it is subjected to prevailing winds from both north and south, receiving plant seeds and pollens from both directions. Southeastern South Dakota would be the logical place for a national research center for allergies. At the other end of the state the air is drier and clearer. This would suggest that characteristics of the people should differ somewhat from one section of the state to another, and in a sense the Missouri River does indeed provide a kind of dividing line. West River people are conservative, proud, independent, healthy, and reasonably contented, except that they are subject to violence in an Old west way, often preferring local or individual justice to legal justice, especially in relationships with the Indians. They drive pickups, outfitted with guns, and are not entirely opposed to illegal hunting as long as it is for good, not sport. They are an open people, like the land, and friendly and hospitable. But they are suspicious of change, of the power of the intellect, of the university, and of the “big city” – Sioux Falls. They want to be left alone to work out their own problems. Ironically, Pennington County, containing their own “big city” (Rapid City), with only 9 percent of the state’s population, furnished 46 percent of the population of the state penitentiary, located in Sioux Falls. In spite of the complexities caused by a sizeable Indian population, thousands of tourists moving in and out daily, and transients from the small towns south and west, Rapid City maintains a feeling of unity, as was displayed dramatically after the serious flood of 1972. In contrast, Sioux Falls, with fewer apparent problems, also seems to have less general agreement on how things should be done. East River people are inclined to be a little more liberal, more varied in opinion, and more influenced by neighboring states (Minnesota and Iowa), and more mobile. Their habits are more easily influenced by the weather, they have more sinusitis and allergies and spend more time going to doctors (often out of state), and, because many of them are relatively new to South Dakota, they are perhaps less concerned about being called Dakotans.

The big difference is probably the simple fact that although South Dakota is a rural state the East River half has more towns, more schools, and easier access to Minneapolis, Sioux City, Des Moines, Omaha, and Lincoln, giving the people at least a slightly more cosmopolitan view of life and an easier acceptance of ideas and cultural trends coming from the East. Their language and speech patterns are Midwestern, while those of West River are western. It is not quality that distinguishes east River from West River, not even racial relationships, but rather the degree of isolation and the differences in social structure caused by the differences of the land. “The character of a country is the destiny of its people,” said the New Mexican novelist, Harvey Fergusson, speaking of a state not unlike South Dakota. To the extent that South Dakota is two countries, separated by the Missouri River, it has two destinies. But it is just as easy to say that it is one big prairie, and that its people may be characterized as one people: stubborn, but not pushy; generally conservative, but not always; desirous of preserving what they have, rather than risking it in an attempt to get more; religious, but not zealous; quiet and friendly, but also independent and usually quick to object to interference of any kind.

