

# Burnstad—Portrait

By Larry Sprunk

These later years have not been kind to small towns in North Dakota and 1977 finds our state dotted with villages which have just about closed up shop. Once these villages were the hopes of the early settlers: to be four or five miles from a healthy town instead of 25 or 30 was a blessing to the farmer-teamster hauling grain. And once these towns were healthy. The railroad located or attracted them, it nurtured them in a mutually beneficial relationship for years and the highways are taking or have taken them away. But once they were the strong pegs which held together the fabric of our state's unfolding culture.



**W**hen you go south of Napoleon on Highway No. 3 for about nine miles you will come to a sign which reads "Beaver Lake State Park" with an arrow pointing east. If you take that road another arrow will point you through the main street of the old town of Burnstad to the park. Now there is only a grocery store open sitting among the town's other abandoned buildings. Even the bar in the basement of the old school gym has closed. But Burnstad once was a town of vigor and strength.

#### Lively Debates

Established in 1905, Burnstad grew through the teens and was still holding strong with an estimated 142 people living there in 1934. It had hosted the national Chataouqua circuit of programs. Circuses had come to town. Lawrence Welk played for dances there. Indeed, the town had two orchestras of its own: Fisher's Famous Four and Nellie's Jazz Babies. There



Burnstad was a razzle-dazzle frontier gathering place. One of its prime attractions for homesteaders of the region was "Field Day"—a lively event of rodeos, cowboys dancing while riding horses, horseback-riding stunts, and the

# Of A Pioneer Town



Pure-bred herefords on the YO Ranch of C.P. Burnstad, from whom the pioneer town of Burnstad, N.D. derived its name.



presence of politicians. In the picture at far right, North Dakota Governor L.B. Hanna (in dark suit at right). All photographs for this article are submitted by Gail Hernet of Ashley, who was born in the Burnstad area.



The children of Mr. and Mrs. C.P. Burnstad pose on the front porch of their home. Left to right: Norman, Iva, Lorna, Grace, Elroy Burnstad. Picture was taken in about 1918. Elroy was often called "Pat" and Norman was nicknamed "Mike," named after Pat and Mike, the famous Irish folk-heroes popular at the turn of the century.

was a Literary and Debating Society which featured debates on a variety of issues between folks from Red Lake and Morningside Townships. Mrs. Nina Arntz writing for the Federal Writers Project for North Dakota in the mid-30s states in her "Reminiscences:" "Many 'weighty questions' were argued and settled. Some of the topics discussed were as follows, Resolved that war has caused more heartaches than whiskey. Resolved that the mind gains more knowledge from reading than from observation. Resolved that women should have equal rights with men. Resolved that fire is more destructive than water."

Red Lake, which gradually became better known as Beaver Lake, had hosted political rallies and one of them featured a debate between Arthur C. Townley, the acknowledged founder of the Non-Partisan League, and Bill Langer, that movement's legendary leader.

**O**ne of the town's biggest events were the annual field days sponsored by the proprietor of the YO Ranch, C.P. Burnstad. A front page banner story in "The Burnstad Comet" for August 20, 1914 states: "Preparations are now under way for the biggest celebration ever held in Logan County. Mr. Burnstad has had several very successful field meets here in years past and has exhibited his Wild West Show in many of the leading cities of this country and Canada and he is confident that this year's meet will eclipse all his previous efforts. Gove. L.B. Hanna and Dairy Commissioner Flint have already consented to be present and make addresses and the celebration is bound to attract visitors from all parts of the state. The program will consist of Relay Races, Bucking Brochos (sic), Chariot Race, Farmers Novelty Race, Cowboy Potato Race, Bucking Bulls, Romanstanding Riders, and Foot Races."

Politicians often came to Burnstad. F.T.C. "Fritz" Shepherd, whose father's homestead predated the town and who established Shepherd's store as one of the first businesses in the town, remembers that both Langer and



**PIONEER TOWN**  
(Continued)

Photograph at left: Bronco-riding was always a popular event at the Field Day in Burnstad.



**PIONEER TOWN**  
(Continued)

Photograph at left: Branding time at the YO Ranch. Harold Burnstad and C.P. Burnstad are shown in picture.

Photograph on opposite page: The YO Ranch used a wood hay buckler to make hay stacks. A team of horses pulled the hay up to make stacks.

Townley stayed at his folks' house on trips to Burnstad. Fritz recalls that while yet quite young he served as Langer's chauffeur when "Wild Bill" was in the Burnstad area.

**No Class Distinctions**

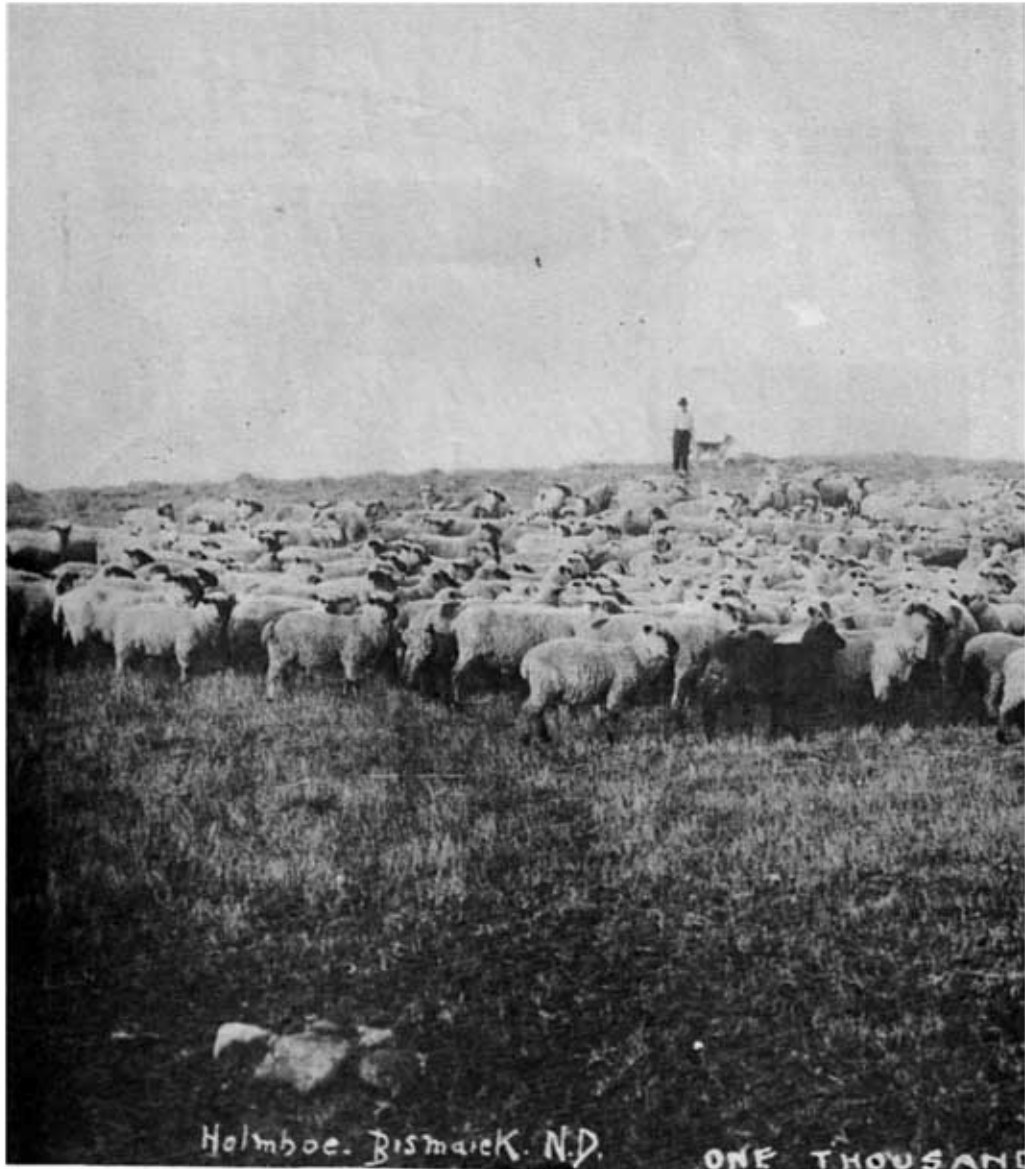
The town grew up in an area settled by a mixture of nationalities which seems to have added to its spirit and growth. Probably the Germans from Russia predominated in number but there were also Bulgarians, Scandinavians, and transplanted Americans from various parts of the country.

Neither nationality, financial resources nor religion were used to categorize or separate people. Mrs. George Lubbers, now of Napoleon but for many years a Burnstad area farmwife, recalled that the Methodist, Lutheran and Catholic ladies formed a Ladies Aid Society and after meetings would divide "the pot into three parts." She described Burnstad as "one of the liveliest towns along the Soo Line." George: "Everybody was always welcome there." Clara Burnstad, George's sister, stated, "I don't thing there was ever any class distinction among people around here."

Postmaster, attorney, and newspaper editor, Wm. L. Jackman was a frequent advocate for an industrious, and responsible town. In a short



HAYRACK



At one time there were as many as 1,000 sheep at the YO Ranch.



**PIONEER TOWN**  
(Continued)

editorial statement in "the Burnstad Comet" of Sept. 14, 1916, Jackman wrote: "Stop kicking and get out and push for a bigger and better Burnstad. If you see a defect, remedy it instead of complaining. Do something yourself instead of leaving it for others. This town is and always will be just what we ourselves make it. You can't cultivate corn with a dead horse and you can't make a live town simply telling others what they ought to do."

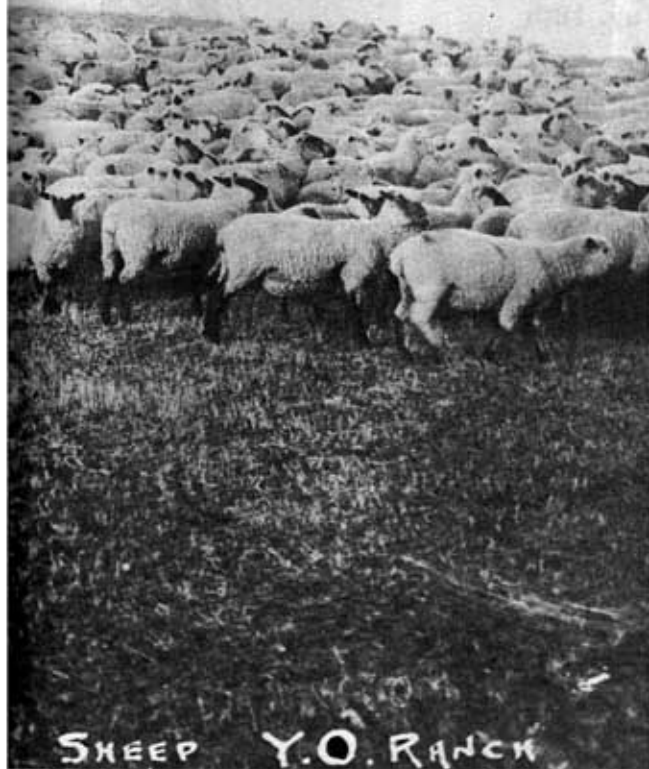
**O**n the south shore of Beaver Lake there would be tabernacle tent meetings held every summer. A "Comet" story of June 27, 1912, announced: "Tabernacle meetings continuing for ten days beginning June 30th, at the south end of Red Lake, west of the bridge. Conference Evangelist Taylor of Bismarck in charge assisted by Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman of Turtle Lake, singers. Everybody come."

Pat Burnstad remembers that a fellow from the area would annually help himself to a YO steer but C.P. never worried because summer would bring the tent evangelist, the fellow would be saved, and payment for the steer would be forthcoming! However, the last steer he got was a nice 1200 pounder, the tabernacle meetings had been discontinued and the culprit, consequently, felt no moral obligation to make restitution!

**Those Baseball Teams!**

Burnstad, like almost every town of the time, had a baseball team supported by all. If a crucial game with Napoleon or Wishek were scheduled, C.P. would go down to Pollock, cross on the ferry and bring back some talent from the Reservation to help insure victory. Besides son Leo, who was a top-flight baseball player and later played for the University of North Dakota, there were other ballplayers on the payroll at the YO and all of them would be released from their duties for an afternoon ball game.

There are many other stories which could be told but space prohibits. If you have a weekend to spare this summer, I strongly recommend Beaver Lake State Park. It's an oasis in the middle of sensual slopes filled with rock outcroppings which have resisted the plow and are still virgin North Dakota prairie. The fishing is usually pretty good, they tell me, and the folks around Burnstad and Napoleon are as friendly, salt-of-the-earth types as you'll find anywhere. If you are a history buff, Napoleon has a museum filled with local lore and relics of the past. ■



SHEEP Y.O. RANCH