

This Prairie Land

Napoleon,


Referring to the cover photograph, this article is not necessarily about barbershops, not about French generals, and not about meditations. But it does concern itself about a North Dakota town—Napoleon, to be specific.

Most people probably think that Napoleon was named after Napoleon Bonaparte. It wasn't. Actually, the name of the city was originally intended to be Gage City, but this attempt failed. An election was decided to be the means to settle a growing controversy over two contending locations of the proposed new settlement. It was raw pioneer democracy in action. What is astounding is that only nine people are believed to have voted—six in favor of the present-day location of Napoleon.

So from whom did Napoleon get its name?

From Napoleon Goodsill, part-owner of a store in the neighboring small town of Steele. Goodsill was also president of the townsite company promoting the Napoleon location.

In 1884, a prospective settler had

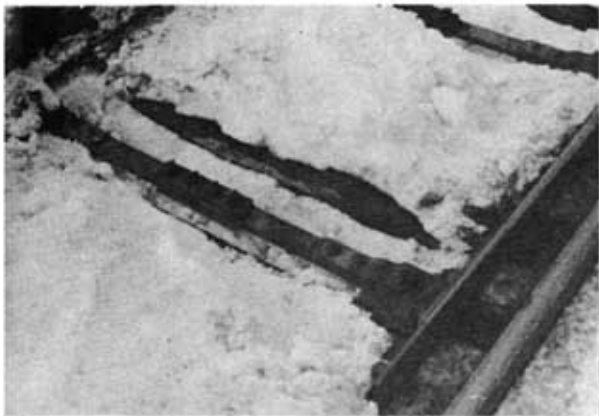


The French general's image imperially decorates this doorway. The old-fashioned sign indicates that inflation was beginning to be a problem even "way-back-then." The old-time five-cent cigar had upped its price 100 percent!

North Dakota



Icy sidewalks and a man pushing a snow shovel—a common sight the past two months in the Dakotas.



Waiting for the railroad to come to town was a traumatic experience for the Napoleon settlement, just as it was for many other new towns in the Dakotas. Broken promises finally discouraged one element of the Napoleon population, the Pennsylvania Dutch, and they moved on to greener pastures (where there most likely already was a railroad).

heard glowing reports in Fargo and Bismarck about a prosperous little community with an almost unlimited amount of future potential. Quite excited, he traveled to the area, probably expecting some kind of prairie metropolis. He was apparently duped by the extravagant promises of a well-developed advertising campaign, because the metropolis's sole buildings consisted of only a small shanty and a barn. The man's name was Samuel Barry.

Another prospective settler, Charles Hoof, was entranced by the fertile soil, nearby lake, and numerous ponds. So he decided to file a homestead. Later, he noticed on a map that a town was located not too far away. Traveling there, he eventually found Sam Barry, and asked where the town was. "This is the town, and you're talking to the population," Barry is supposed to have replied.

But Hoof apparently was not dismayed. He lived in the Napoleon area until the time of his death in 1945.

How A Town Starts

One of the community's eminent historians was Jay A. Bryant, whose grandfather founded the town's newspaper, The Napoleon Homestead, which still is in existence today. Jay Bryant eventually succeeded his father as publisher, and for the town's diamond jubilee, he researched the old newspaper files to relate some of the community's history. Here are some of his discoveries:

—IN 1886-87, there was a blizzard every day for 100 days. Temperatures sank to 40 degrees below zero. In fact,



A foggy morning, with the modernistic architecture of St. Philip Neri Catholic Church in background.



A winter still-life: snowman, shovels, broom . . . and snowman's smile.

temps remained below zero throughout. There was no mail for three weeks at a time. To make matters worse, the early inhabitants ran out of fuel—and resorted to burning twisted hay and straw. Even provisions became scarce. They resorted to cooking wheat—and grinding it in an old coffee-mill.

—A MAN froze to death on February 6, 1887 while returning to his home from Red Lake. His name was Ole T. Thompson, who has the dubious honor of being the first white man to die

in Logan County. At the time there was no cemetery, no undertaker and no doctor.

—A GROUP of 100 people from Pennsylvania, known as "The Pennsylvania Colony," were brought to the Napoleon area by an immigration agency during the spring of 1886. Most of the colony left that year. Some of their problems: crop failures, severe winter, and proposed railroad did not come to area as was originally promised.

—NAPOLEON'S first Fourth of July celebration—always a big event in many of the frontier towns of the Dakotas—was in 1888. Highlights included horse racing, baseball game between the married men and single men, and dancing—which was reported in *The Homestead* as being "first class."

—CALVES sold for \$8, and yearlings for \$15, in 1892.

—AN extraordinary long cold spell persisted throughout January and February in 1893, forcing the tiny schoolhouse to close for two weeks, which was all for the best. As *The Homestead* commented: It was an uphill pull to keep that shack warm, being it was only single boarded and there were many cracks that let in the daylight.

—BY 1896, the condition of the county's schoolhouses had not con-



Business transaction with flourishing ivy plant by window in background.



Sheriff Matt J. Schneider was born in Strasburg, North Dakota. He moved to Napoleon at the age of nine—and has been a resident there ever since.



Chapel on outskirts of Napoleon.

siderably improved. The school board minutes, as bemoaned by the board director, was quoted: "Let us take a glance at our schoolhouses, or more appropriately, our school caves. The greater number are being taught in Russian homes. These houses are what eastern people call caves or outdoor cellars, being built of sod and covered with clay. They are heated with Russian ovens and have no ventilation except the door. I know of a room of this kind in which there is one bed, a lounge, and a table; the family table is spread three times a day on this table in the school room. No desks, blackboards or maps. True, we have a few good school houses, the best at Napoleon. Outside of Napoleon, we had but three months of school, the teacher receiving not more than \$35 per month."

—**MORE PROGRESS** was recorded in 1896 when two citizens "faithfully put in posts and crossbars near the school house for a place to hitch horses. Now there is room for all to tie their horses without fear of having to go home by foot." (It appears that even in the horse-and-buggy days, there were acute parking problems!)

—**FOR THE** second time in not more than 15 years, the Napoleon settlement painfully experienced attempts to wrest its county seat status to another "town." At the general election in 1898, the vote in favor of removal won with 105 votes to 50 who wanted the county seat to remain in Napoleon. An intense legal battle ensued. Several taxpayers alleged there were many illegal votes cast, some from whom may not even have been citizens. Nevertheless, a judge refused to grant

an injunction against the removal. (Meanwhile, over in neighboring Emmons County, another courthouse battle developed! About 200 citizens of southern Emmons County entered Williamsport, nabbed the county records, and took them to Linton, despite an injunction granted against removal.)

Napoleon's competitor for county seat status remained weak—and rather laughable. The new town was still unnamed, perhaps having the distinction of being the only county seat in the United States without any name. Finally, in 1899, a special election was held in November, and the Napoleon faction won out. A neighboring newspaper, the Steele Ozone, maliciously suggested that the people in Napoleon put a bell on the courthouse so that people would know where to find the courthouse should it decide to again take flight. The Homestead hotly replied that the courthouse "would remain in Napoleon permanently."

—**57 WOLVES** were captured in 1902 by John and George Wentz, who reported: "It was a good business venture and heaps of fun."

—**THE LOCAL** dentist advertised fillings at 50 cents and "best 22 K crowns at \$5." This was in 1910.

—**RINGLING** Bros. circus bought 188 head of horses in 1912, which came from the Gilfillan ranch.

Good Old Days

Those were the good old days, the priceless heritage of just one of the unique communities growing up on the prairie. Today, Napoleon ranks as one of the more progressive centers in the Dakota heartland—and it is still, by the way, the county seat of Logan County. ■