

**NEWS for North Dakotans**

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May 21, 1998

**Plains Folk: Born, Lived, Died: Bowesmont, N.D.**

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When I was asked to document the history of Bowesmont, N. D., a town being bought out and eliminated because of the Red River floods, my assistant Julie Humann and I found that much of its story conformed to the general pattern for country towns on the northern plains: railroad boom, an all-too-brief period of social stability, followed by depression and then, it seemed inevitably, decline and demise. Not a pretty story.

Not the whole story, either. In community history, one size must not be made to fit all. Every town deserves to have its story told in its own specific terms, not just fit into some scholar's abstraction. Had we not listened to the details, we never would have gotten to know Doc McKay, Charlie Combs, and Auntie Mae.

Dr. J.F. McKay, a native of Ontario who came to Bowesmont in 1907, delivered 2,600 babies, nearly all of them at home for \$15 each. His method of handling an anxious father was to send him into the kitchen to boil water. When the father brought the hot water, Doc would take it into the room of confinement, throw it out the window, and holler for more. He and his wife lived above the drugstore, which meant it was never closed to a patient in need. Dr. McKay lived to the age of 100.

Charlie Combs did all sorts of things for a living but was best remembered for the way he entertained the town. He played his guitar for customers and loiterers in the barbershop, loved to amuse the children of the town (he and his wife being childless), and always was ready with a joke. A man died and met St. Peter at the gate, Charlie liked to tell, and St. Peter asked him where he was from. On learning the poor soul was from Bowesmont, St. Peter beckoned him in, remarking, "You've lived in hell long enough!" Charlie Combs eventually left Bowesmont and died in Arkansas. Someone there taped a note to his coffin when it was shipped back for burial: "Be kind to this man, for he was kind to me."

Mae Halcrow, pillar of the Bowesmont Methodist Church, was known to everyone in town as Auntie Mae. She operated the Halcrow family dairy farm and supplied milk to the whole town. She also originated the custom of the Washout Picnic annual event commemorating a day she took her nephews for a picnic in the washout under the railroad bridge and was frightened by a passing tramp.

If Bowesmont possessed a cast of characters and human experiences that distinguished it from other towns, it also had its own, eventually fatal problem that figured in its demise: It was laid out by Northern Pacific Railroad surveyors on hopelessly low ground. This resulted in severe flooding in 1897.

That may have been considered a singular event at the time, but the floods of a half-century later were

not so easily dismissed; Bowsmont was flooded in 1948, again in 1950, and still again in 1952. "Everywhere we look we see water," the town's pastor wrote in 1950. "To the West it is just as if you were looking at the ocean." These biennial floods were severely demoralizing. Folks in Bowsmont say they were the reason one family after another left town.

This explains why after the 1996 round of floods, when presented with a FEMA buy-out proposal, the citizens of Bowsmont acceded. It was not merely that the community was no longer able to resist flood, or government, or any other larger power. The people knew that other than their residence lots and their memories, there was little left to defend. They knew they no longer had an effective community.

For a little more than a generation Bowsmont had been a fine place to make a living and a life. For another generation after that it was a great place to grow up. Then it gave in to inexorable forces. But it is not forgotten.

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