

# Bowesmont ... The Little Town that Lives in the Heart

*It is a bright, hot morning in Bowesmont, North Dakota. An occasional breeze carries the scent of freshly cut grass. Pots of light pink roses are arranged in a semi-circle around a rock monument bearing a simple brass plaque. Nearby, an American flag on a makeshift flagpole flutters now and then.*

*One by one, cars drive up in front of the Bowesmont United Methodist Church. Old friends, neighbors, school chums warmly greet one another. Some stroll into a field next to the church to get a closer look at a newly planted grove of trees. Others climb the steep church steps and venture inside where the smell of old polished wood abounds.*

*For some, who now live as far away as California and Texas, coming to Bowesmont on the second Sunday of July has become an annual pilgrimage.*

*They come for one reason: To celebrate the town where they lived, learned and loved.*

What makes this reunion so unique is that Bowesmont doesn't really exist anymore... physically that is. The houses and buildings that made up this little town in the northeastern corner of the state are all gone. Now, grassy fields and a few narrow dusty roads keep a silent vigil. The lone survivors are the Methodist Church and, about half a mile up the road, the Bowesmont Cemetery.



*A historical marker and the Methodist church mark the spot where the town of Bowesmont once lived.*



*In 1997, record flooding seized Bowesmont for the last time. The homes in this photo now are gone, leaving the Methodist church (center) as the sole building that remains. Photo courtesy of City of Drayton.*

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In the spring of 1997, Bowesmont was home to about 25 residents. The town's businesses were already gone. In fact, there hadn't been any commerce there for years. But it was a nice place to live—quiet and affordable. And up until the year before, a handful of families still went to church there every Sunday.

There was, however, one problem. It wasn't far from the Red River of the North. And that meant one thing: it flooded.

In April 1997, the worst flood of all robbed Bowesmont of its last breath. Residents, already weary from a flood the year before, had petitioned the county for a government buyout of their damaged homes. But before that buyout could occur, the raging Red River smacked them again. Now there really was no doubt. Bowesmont would never recover. Or so it seemed.



*Friends from near and far gather at the church for the daylong Bowesmont reunion.*

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*Richard McConnell (left) and Dean Young are among those who refuse to let Bowesmont die. Several times a week, they are in town doing what is needed to maintain the church and surrounding grounds.*

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*More than 100 people are crowded inside the little brown church, which dates back to 1909. Strains of organ music signal the opening hymn of the community church service, always the first official activity of the daylong reunion. They begin singing “America the Beautiful” as box fans whir in the background.*

*The crowd reflects generations of Bowesmont residents, neighbors and friends. Some are direct descendants of the town's pioneers. Some were born there but grew up in another town. Some grew up, married and raised their families there. Some lived on area farms and attended church or school there in the days when the Bowesmont Blue Jays were all the rage. Regardless of how they are linked to Bowesmont, nearly everyone shares one common bond—they all have a piece of their hearts there.*

Bowesmont's ties to the river stem from its early beginnings. In 1879, it began as a small Dakota Territory settlement along the banks of the Red River on the old Ox Trail, used to transport agricultural products, furs and settlers from Minnesota to Canada. William Bowes, a New York pioneer, and his partner Edward Brooks opened the first store there, relying on steamboats to bring lumber and groceries.

In 1887, the town relocated a few miles inland to an expanse of land adjoining a Northern Pacific Railroad line that had just been built. There, it was renamed Bowesmont and soon thereafter, began to flourish.

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But in 1897, a massive flood hit, nearly wiping out the entire town. The community subsequently recovered and, by 1907, had grown to about 200 people.

Winifred Halcrow Bloomquist's parents were among the early families in Bowesmont. She was born and reared there. It was a good place to grow up, she says, fondly recalling her school days, the little red chairs in her Sunday school room and the special picnics they'd have near her family home. When she went away to college in 1944, the spirit of Bowesmont was deep in her soul. To this day, it still is.



*Winnie Bloomquist admires the tree she purchased in memory of her family, among the early settlers of the town.*

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*The invocation... Scripture passages... personal reflections of the Bowesmont that used to be... Organist Muriel Paulson, 87, plays the next hymn, "Rock of Ages," a prelude to the featured moment: dedication of the Memorial Tree Park. Richard McConnell tells the story of the park, planted this year on three sides of the church. It is an important moment for this community of friends because of what the trees represent—the roots of the town that was and the future of the town that is.*

Though Bowesmont never grew much beyond about a five-block area and 200 or so residents, it had a plethora of businesses to support the needs of the railroad and area farmers. For a while, life was good.

Then in 1948, a long-lost foe came calling. It was a flood. And Bowesmont was in the way again.

Two years later, the "flood of the century" swamped the town and surrounding areas.

For more than three weeks, townspeople struggled to survive. Able to travel only by boat, they temporarily moved their families out of town. The water spread more than 18 miles, prompting one resident to write that the landscape looked like an ocean. The flood was a blow that some say spelled the beginning of the end for Bowesmont.

Whatever the cause, Bowesmont was slowly declining. One by one, businesses were moving out. The number of school students was dwindling. Buildings were becoming vacant.

By 1959, the last high school "class" graduated one student—Leo Stellon. Grade-school classes continued until 1967 when the two-story schoolhouse, Bowesmont's seat of learning for 37 years, closed its doors.

In the mid-1960s, the Bowesmont Town Hall, cornerstone for community social activity, was torn down after falling into disrepair. In 1977, the post office closed. And two years later, another big flood.

By 1985, there was only one business left—Walker's Garage. It closed in March of that year after proprietor Randall "Butch" Walker died at the age of 93. In 1996, the Methodist Church finally closed its doors, unable to be fully supported by its congregation of four families.

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*Dean Young joins the others in singing the last hymn of the service, “God Bless America.” He clearly loves being in the church where he worshipped for 59 years and, to this day, still takes care of two to three days a week.*

*After the service, many pause as they leave the church to sign the guest book that for years has kept track of all who enter. Others venture to the memorial trees, eager to find “their tree.” For many of them, there is something good and whole about spending time in the grove that now memorializes many Bowsmont families.*

*A few wander down the main road to read hand-painted plywood signs... “Oscar Thomson’s Store”... “Ida Bjork House 1903”... “Brosseau Lumber”... “Bill Homer’s Blacksmith Shop”... all staked into the ground for reunion day to mark the place where pieces of the town once stood and where memories were made.*



*Bowsmont Hall was the center of the community’s social activities.*

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In the spring of 1996, darkness descended upon Bowsmont when the Red River came to town and flooded everything in sight. It was another bad event—keeping some residents from their homes for three weeks.

For the dozen or so families still living there, it was time to decide... stay and fight more floods, or seek a voluntary buyout from the government that would enable them to permanently move from harm’s way.

They chose buyout. At the request of the residents, Pembina County put the buyout process in motion and applied to the state for funding through a Hazard Mitigation Grant Program. The program, administered by the state, is funded in large part by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to help pay for projects that will reduce or prevent future disaster damages.

In all, 16 properties were purchased for \$397,004. Through the grant program, FEMA paid 75 percent of the cost. Of the remaining share, the state paid 10 percent, the county paid 7.5 percent and the property owners contributed 7.5 percent.

Though the buyout meant removing all the buildings in town except for the church, a handful of area residents with strong ties to the community vowed that it would not mean the end of Bowsmont.

“We decided Bowsmont hadn’t died,” said Richard McConnell, who grew up on an area farm but went to school in town. “Bowsmont is alive and well in our minds. To us, Bowsmont is a community, not a town.”

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McConnell, Dean Young and several others began a revival of sorts. In May 1996, when the church held its last service, the group decided to form the Bowesmont Heritage Preservation Society, Inc., a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the church building and the community's heritage.

That summer, they brought back a tradition—the Community Hall picnic—which had been held annually from 1920 to 1965 (the years the hall was in existence), and a few times since. Sixty people attended and enthusiastically endorsed making it an annual event that has since drawn as many as 200 people.

“In years past, it was a tradition to have a Hall picnic in the summertime,” Young said. “Everyone would bring food and play games. So we just decided it would be nice to have a get-together in the summertime for all the people who formerly lived there.”

*A mile down the road from the church, there is a bustle of activity in and around a large Quonset building on Leo Stellon's farm. Tables upon tables hold hams and a feast of potluck salads, side dishes and desserts. Gallons of lemonade and fruit drink sit nearby.*

*Friends are breaking bread together and swapping stories about their days in Bowesmont. Some are taking photos of one another in front of the Community Hall pillars, salvaged when the building was demolished, and now permanently stored in the new unofficial town hall—Stellon's Quonset. Still others are playing old-fashioned bingo.*

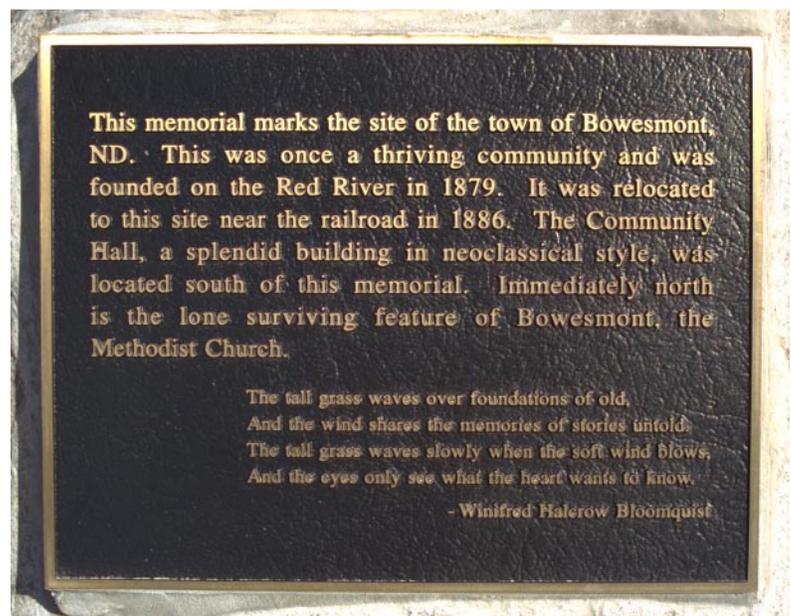
Since the buyout, the picnic has become a celebration of the town as a whole, McConnell said. Twice, the event has included “guided tours”—attendees were driven around town (the first year on a flatbed trailer with couches for seating, the second year in a limousine), stopping at each sign marker to hear the history of the business, house or building that once stood there.

To Bloomquist, one of the town's most ardent supporters, the reunions are priceless.

“These reunions are helping to keep the spirit of Bowesmont alive,” she said. “There's this feeling of closeness. People are happy to see one another.”

The sentiment is moving forward in other ways, too, because so many are eager to create a lasting tribute to the town. In 1998, attendees dedicated a historical marker, erected near the church and provided by the government as part of the buyout. The marker contains a brass plaque with one simple theme... the town of Bowesmont once lived here.

In 1999, at the suggestion of a Bowesmont school alum, the heritage society launched the Memorial Tree Park. Trees were sold for \$40 each to anyone who wanted to leave a lasting legacy in honor of a friend or family member. Three special trees were planted to recognize the town's founding pioneers. Forty trees were sold outright and with demand still high, another 29 are planned.



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In 2001, the society is planning a book that will chronicle life in Bowesmont through the eyes of the families who lived there.

Bloomquist, 76, is one of those who will share her family story. She has been telling the tales of Bowesmont for years in a local newspaper column. Because of people like Bloomquist, McConnell and Young, Bowesmont will live, in some form, for generations to come.

*It is the end of that hot July day. The tables have been cleared and the bingo cards put away for another year. The last goodbyes are being said before friends again part.*

*Down the road in Bowesmont, stillness is settling in. The flag is barely flying. A setting sun is turning the open fields, dotted by wildflowers, a darker shade of green. A lone car drives slowly down the dusty road that leads out of town. And the sentiments of Winnie Bloomquist can be heard in the occasional breeze...*

*“Bowesmont will not be forgotten. It will live on in the smiles and the handshakes and the hearts of the people who were drawn into the bond that grew and touched each one at the church and the picnic that Sunday.*

*“Bowesmont has become... a family.”*

