



South Dakota's Quasiquicentennial 1889-2014

The Dakota Reform School had been in place for three years by the time Dakota Territory was split into two separate states. In 1886, the Territorial Legislature granted one hundred and sixty acres of land for the school. The next year, a granite building was finished at a cost of \$30,000.

In the First Biennial Report written in 1890, the Board of Charities and Corrections (Board) reported to Governor Arthur Mellette that the institution "is productive of immense good to the State and to society at large."

The Board credited Superintendent C.W. Ainsworth and his wife Sarah, who served as Matron, for overseeing a successful school. Ainsworth was a teacher by trade who taught literature to youth in reform schools in Ohio, New Jersey, Indiana, Iowa and Massachusetts before moving up into administrative positions.

The Board reported that the youths sent to the Reform School were not much different from others across the state.

"The reasons that have brought the inmates here, and would have undoubtedly led them to a confirmed criminal life, a constant menace and danger to society and the State, to finally bring up in the penitentiary, poor house or on the gallows, were undoubtedly bad home examples and surroundings. We, by no means think that people can be made moral by law, they are naturally moral. It is only when the surroundings have warped their being either now or in the past, that they are bad. The State owes a duty to these children, both for itself and them to remove obstacles that will lead to a bad life. These children will grow up with the children of the present citizens of the State, either as a natural blessing or a curse. Which, depends upon the action of the State now."



C.W. Ainsworth

The Board didn't insert itself into a debate over funding for the Reform School in the 1890 report.

The Legislature budgeted a total of \$15,600 for the year for the Reform School. The largest budget item was clothing, provisions and medicines at \$6,200. The total amount budgeted for the salaries of Superintendent Ainsworth and the other employees were \$4,842. The rest of the budget was split between fuel and lights, land payments, livestock, tools and machinery, office expenses and a contingency fund.

The Board reported that the expense for each child per day was just more than 70 cents.

According to the Board's report, the number of youth in the Reform School as of December 31, 1889, was 43, including 33 boys and 10 girls. By the end of 1890, the number rose to 62.

When South Dakota and North Dakota were granted statehood, our neighbors to the north did not have a juvenile reformatory of their own. Ainsworth reported to the Board in 1890 that there were still ten boys from North Dakota living at the Reform School in Plankinton. South Dakota was charging \$200 per child per year, but hadn't received payment from North Dakota. A bill was forwarded to the Governor of North Dakota for collection. When the bill was finally paid, the \$2,000 went into the general fund. The Reform School did not receive any of the money, nor did the school get any direct benefit from the payment.

By 1890, the Reform School's well had outlived its usefulness. The School had resorted to hauling water from the village of Plankinton the previous year for stock and laundry purposes. This was an inconvenience and came at great expense. The \$3,000 price tag was eventually approved.



A view of the buildings at the Dakota Reform School. The photo is dated 1887.