

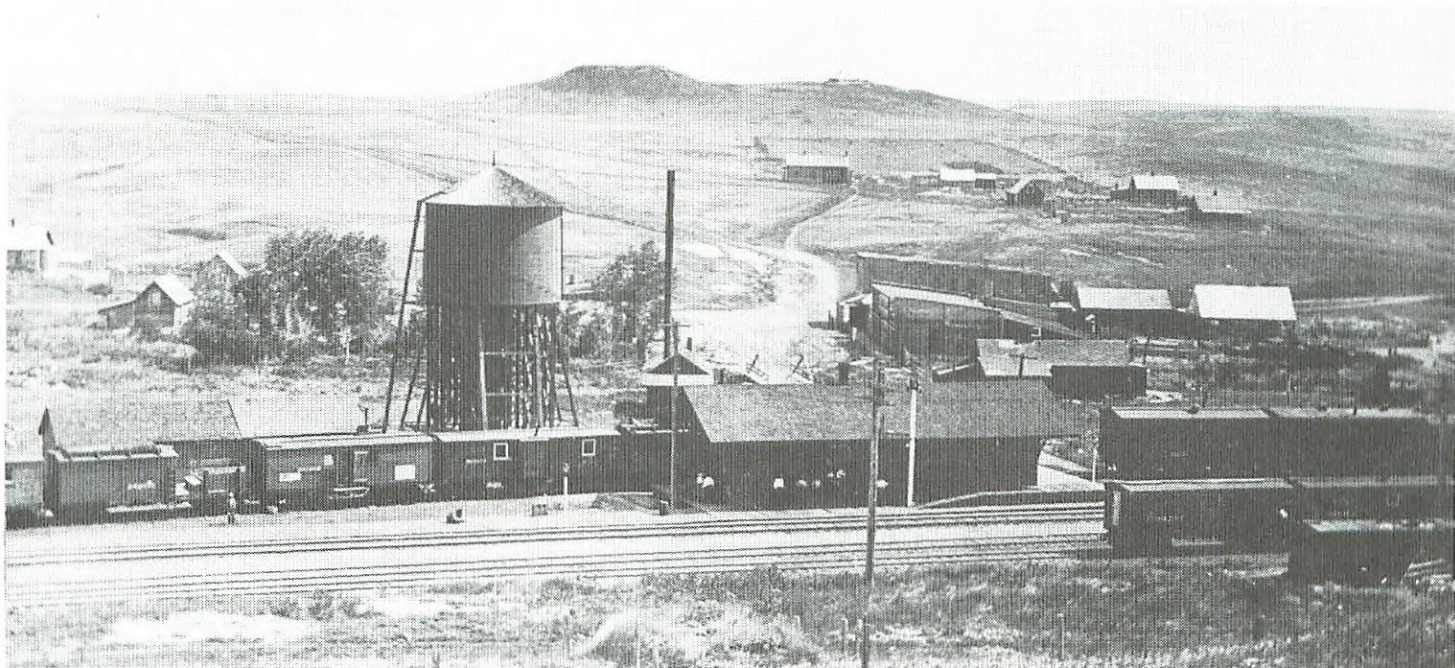
*Gone Are The Days*

*by Sig Peterson*

*Facts and  
Hearsay*  
SIMS - ALMONT

## § Sims §

*Sims — a ghost town now — was a booming and prosperous little city in its early days. Sims was known for its brick industry, coal mines and all the activity of a new settlement. It was the first town to be settled west of Mandan. It was also known to have had three names previous to being named Sims. The site was known first as Fort Hannafin. When coal was discovered in that area, the name was changed to Baby Mine and then to Bly's Mine.*



Sims 1884

In May 1883, the area was surveyed by the Northern Pacific Railroad and the site was named Sims, in honor of George Sims, chief clerk in the New York executive office of the NPRR. Its location was on the newly completed mainline of the Northern Pacific Railroad, 35 miles west of Mandan. Twenty-six blocks and 24 half blocks were surveyed at this time. Later the Newell addition was added, with 36 blocks and 24 half blocks. The blocks were 300x360 ft. with 80 ft. wide streets. Streets going north and south were numbered 1 to 13; those going east and west were named Main, Lignite, Carbon, Park, Bly, Clough, Taylor and Haupt.

The Terra Cotta Addition was surveyed sometime later; it contained six blocks and three partial blocks. This area was south of Sims proper, and included the site for the Lutheran Church. The addition was called Terra Cotta because of the proximity of the Brick factory, where terra cotta (brownish-red) earthenware and decorative tile were manufactured. This area was also referred to as Ramstown — most likely because the Bernt Ramslands from Norway were the first to settle there.

During the year of 1883, a bridge was built across the Sims Creek, which ran through the surveyed area, and buildings were erected east of the railroad tracks. Charles W. Thompson opened the first general store in Sims in May of 1883 and the Carbon Pressed Brick and Lime Co., with invest-

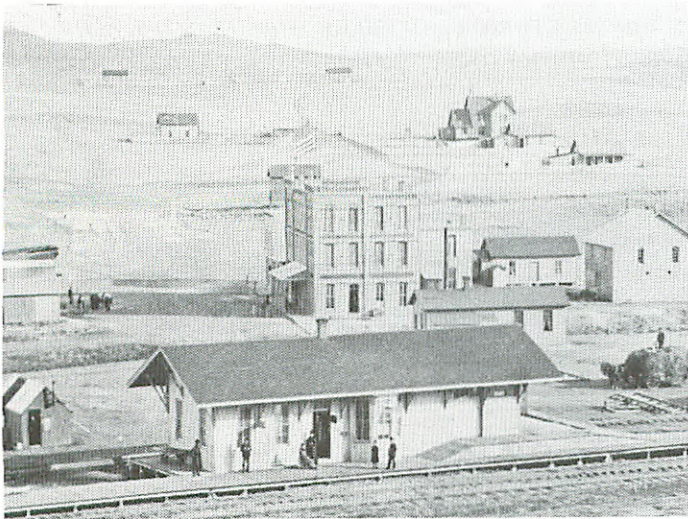
ments of \$30,000, was in full operation. The Oakes House, a three-story hotel, was built in 1883 at a cost of \$15,000. On the third floor of the building were the offices of the Brick Company and Company Coal Company. Officers of the Brick Company were: Chas. Thompson, president; W.A. Downs, vice president and J.H. Hansel, secretary-treasurer; officers of the Company Coal Co. were T.F. Oakes, president; C.G. Sanborn, treasurer; Col. W.P. Clough, secretary and Chas. Thompson, general manager. Some of these businesses must have been started before the town was named Sims, as it seems they were ready for business by the time it was surveyed.

The Oakes House was quite unique, as it had an "indoor outhouse" on the third floor. The chute, which extended from the ground up, was very convenient for those on third floor, but of lesser value to those on first and second floors. Not long after the Oakes House was completed, a tornado ripped through the area, taking off the third floor of the hotel. The same storm also blew down the railroad water tower and wrecked the Arjan Johnson home at Sims.

In 1885 a community building was constructed on the east end of Main street, about ¼ mile east of the hotel, at a cost of \$5,000. The Community Building was used for civic affairs and was a meeting place for the Presbyterian congregation. The building also served as a school, which was known as the

Territorial School until 1907, when a school was built south of town.

Sims grew fast, and by 1884 there were three general stores, two real estate offices, two boarding houses, several saloons, lumber dealer, banking services, grain buyer, number of coal mines, brick factory, post office, hospital and three church congregations — Catholic, Presbyterian and Lutheran.



Three story Oakes House and Depot — Sims 1885

The news of the possibility of work in the coal mines and brick yards at the new town of Sims, in western Dakota Territory, must have spread rapidly — not just in the U.S. but in foreign countries as well. Sailing time across the Atlantic was about six weeks, and by steamship it was two weeks. The June 1885 U.S. Census showed Sims population at 401. The residents were from eight foreign countries and 16 states. The largest percentage of those coming from foreign soils were from Norway; others came from Sweden, England, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland and Canada. The states represented were Massachusetts, Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, West Virginia, Wisconsin and several places in Dakota Territory.

**March 28, 1884**—The excursion to the enterprising and growing town of Sims, 25 miles west of the Missouri River, will occur on April 10. The liberality and enterprise of the owners of the townsite in placing a train of cars free of cost to the holders of tickets show the broad-gauge policy of the town-site proprietors.

**April 8, 1884**—Nearly a carload of people intending to go to Sims were left yesterday on account of arising from their slumbers at too late an hour.

**April 9, 1884**—The excursion to Sims was one of the largest ever passing over the Northern Pacific. Eight coaches were filled at Bismarck and a couple at Mandan, making the total number of excursionists 784. The town of Sims presents a very solid and pleasing appearance. Its buildings are mostly brick, which has given

the town the name of "Brick City." The excursion was gotten up by Messers. C.E. Thompson, general manager of the Northern Pacific Coal Co. and F.W. McKinney of the First National Bank, Bismarck.

**Feb. 2, 1889**—Thursday morning a large number of the members of the Legislature, visitors and officers took advantage of the kind invitations of Manager Thompson of the Sims coal mines and at 7 o'clock the special train that had been tendered by the Northern Pacific started west with the jolly junketeers. Arriving at Sims, the visitors were shown every courtesy by the managers and competent guides lighted the party through the labyrinthian recesses of the mines.

Sims in 1885 — there were five merchants: M. Hoke, F. Selle, George Wade, F. Mayer and Hugh Haley; four saloonkeepers: Sully, Knutson, Jarvis and Holt; lawyer H.C. Kaufman; shoemaker C.J. Kahl; jeweler Ole Mayhue; blacksmith A.P. Nelson; civil engineer A.H. Burr; bankers Theo. Shenkenburg and W. Chester Fletcher; brickmaker S.J. Monroe; teacher Gertrude McNaman and a number of carpenters, miners and other laborers.

Homesteaders walked to and from their work at Sims every day, some walking quite a distance. William Bethke, who lived south of New Salem, walked about six miles to work in the mines. He carried a rifle and was able to provide meat for the table by shooting wild life, which was in abundance. Bethke's neighbor, Wilhelm Zarndt, also walked to work and said many of the workers walked barefoot to save shoe leather.

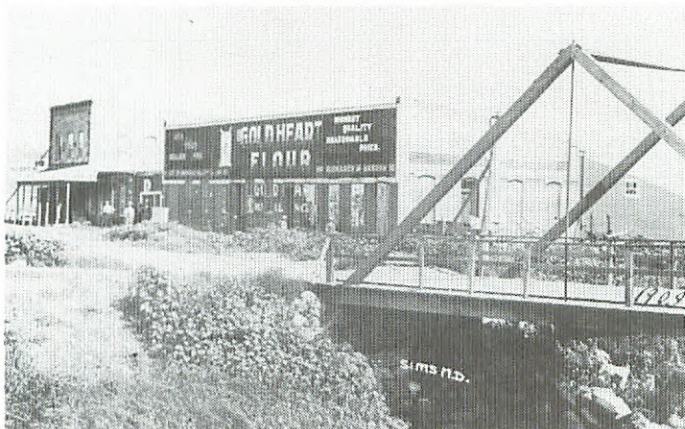
On Christmas Eve, 1886, August Weinreich, Sr. was walking home from Sims to his homestead, nine miles north, in a snow storm when he lost his way and eventually came to a neighbor's farmstead. His feet were badly frozen so he was taken to the Sims Brickyard Hospital where a Mandan doctor amputated both feet above the ankles; gangrene set in and he died in March 1887. He was buried in the Sims English Cemetery and years later his remains were moved to a New Salem cemetery.

The rapid growth of Sims, after the railroad tracks reached that point, is almost unbelievable. Construction seemed to be the greatest in 1883, when business places seemed to spring up over night. There were no power tools but the sound of hammers and saws must have kept up a continuous racket. Many of the homes were dug into the hillside, but most of them were of lumber frame, and faced with brick. Good lumber could be bought at \$12 to \$20 per thousand feet. Only one contractor, Andrew Anderson, is listed with the early businesses, but there were probably others who weren't listed; John Jacobson, a carpenter, was into the construction business later. Many of the pioneers must have been handymen who did their own building. There are a number of holes in our pastures, which indicate where a home with a cellar was located; the foundations were mostly of sandstone.

The question, "What was the population of Sims at its peak?" has been asked many times. We have arrived at a figure of between 1,000 and 1,200. I remember some folks saying there were up to 3,000 residents in Sims, but I doubt

that figure. Rumor-like stories usually increase in doubtful authenticity. Some have said that Sims was considered for the Morton County seat — it was centrally located in the county. We've heard, too, that Sims had hopes of being the Capital of North Dakota. Who knows — were they rumors or true facts?

A stage line was in operation from Sims to the Heart River, a distance of 15 miles. The end of the line was probably at the Heart River Hotel, where land agents made their head-



Timmerman Store and Oakes House — 1909



Sims Depot - water tower and water pumping station — about 1915.



Sims — Holritz store on left, Dave Pederson store on right — 1911.

quarters and met homesteaders seeking land.

Sims started going down hill in 1885 — only two years after the town was surveyed — when the Carbon Pressed Brick and Lime Company went bankrupt. A better grade of lignite coal was discovered further west, which had a negative effect on the sale of the Sims coal. The homesteaders, by that time, had become pretty well established, and were able to increase their land holdings, and make a living on their farms.

By 1906 the census showed the population of Sims at 300, and by 1910 it had dropped to 86. Two of Sims merchants, Fred Holritz and Dave Peterson, moved to Almont as soon as it was founded in 1906; only the Timmerman Store remained. In 1913 Timmerman also moved his store to Almont — and then Holritz moved back to Sims. The Holritz Store continued to serve the Sims people until Fred retired and sold his business to Simon Johnson in about 1920. The Post Office, which had been in the depot, was then moved to the Johnson store. The railroad water pumping station continued to operate, usually 24 hours a day, until diesel locomotives replaced the steam engines. Sims was noted for the good spring water that was accessible just north of the store; many Almont residents came to Sims to get their coffee water from the spring.

U.S. Highway 10 — east and west traffic — went through Sims until 1928 when a new road was built from New Salem, across the hills, to Glen Ullin. Later the railroad did the same, following the route of the new highway and cutting off railway service to Sims. The last train to go through Sims was on December 7, 1947. Irvin Olin was the last person to operate the Sims Post Office and store, which closed for business at that time.

Sims is now just a ghost town — but a place that will always be dear to the hearts of many of us who have our roots there.

We write with pride of our pioneering forefathers who helped make Sims a very popular and thriving city. They endured many hardships, made many sacrifices and worked hard to make a scant living. I have heard that there were very few Norwegians who wished to go back to their native land — the great majority were proud to become 100% American citizens.

## ❧ Coal Mining ❧

*The discovery of coal in the Sims area played an important part in attracting the early pioneers to settle here. The homesteader could supplement his income by working in the mines and was paid according to the amount of coal mined.*

**D**ennis Hannifin, a speculator, is credited with being the first to discover coal in Dakota Territory. After the survey for the new railroad had been completed, west of the Missouri River in 1871, Hannifin and his crew went west as far as the present site of Dickinson, trying to find a good site for a town. In 1873 they found an outcropping of coal about 35 miles west of Mandan; they opened a mine there, hoping to start a town, but abandoned it that winter.

On July 5, 1879 Charles W. Thompson opened a mine at Fort Hannafin (later known as Sims) for the Northern Pacific Coal Company, a separate entity to the railroad company. The mine was located west of the proposed railroad track, and later produced about 100 ton per day, operating 24 hours a day. The railroad track reached this spot about 2 months later and established a station there which was named Baby Mine.



The first mine at Sims (then called Baby Mine) — 1883.

In February 1880, Colonel Eber W. Bly bought section 11-township 138-range 86 from the Northern Pacific Railroad. Section 11, being an odd numbered section, was railroad property. The mine and new station then became known as Bly's Mine — the first town west of Mandan (renamed Sims in 1883).

In December 1882, the Northern Pacific Coal Company bought the mine, which they had been operating, from Col. Bly for \$20,000. They had evidently opened and operated the mine without lease or ownership. The company mine had a total of 7 ft. of coal; the veins varied in thickness from 2 to 4 feet, with clay seams between. In May 1887, the Northern Pacific Coal Company ceased to operate; they had piled up a \$38,311.92 debt. Better quality lignite had been discovered further west. The large slack dump, west of the railroad tracks, and numerous cave-ins are the only remaining signs of this large mining operation.

Coal mining was the main occupation of many Sims residents for about the first 20 years of Sims' existence. The homesteaders worked part-time during the winter months. From interviews with pioneers of this area, I learned there were between 150 and 250 miners in the early years. I have counted caved-in mine entries and find there were at least 20 mines at Sims. The mining area was about 2 miles long and one mile wide. We do not know how many were in operation during the peak years.

The Burton-Feland Mine, one mile south of Sims, was perhaps the largest in the area; the main entry must have been between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and  $\frac{3}{4}$  mile long. The state mining laws required an air shaft, when the entry was beyond a certain length. My dad, Pete Peterson, dug the air shaft for the Burton-Feland mine; it must have taken considerable surveying in order to strike the main entry. Spur tracks were built to the Burton-Feland mine, and to several others, so railroad cars could be loaded from the close proximity of the entry.

Harry Wadson, who had a mine  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile south of Sims, on the west side of the track, invented the tippie. This piece of equipment enabled the loaded mining cars to tip forward and unload automatically into wagons or coal cars. A replica of this patent has been on display at the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks, for many years.

Mules were used to draw the coal cars to the mine entrance. When a miner had loaded a car (each car held one ton of coal), he would call for the "mule skinner." The "skinner" was a man who would stand between the mule and the first car, to protect the mule from being run into, as there was no pole on the car. One mule could pull several cars. When the mules were brought out of the mine, after having worked a shift, they were momentarily blind; but their sight was soon restored.

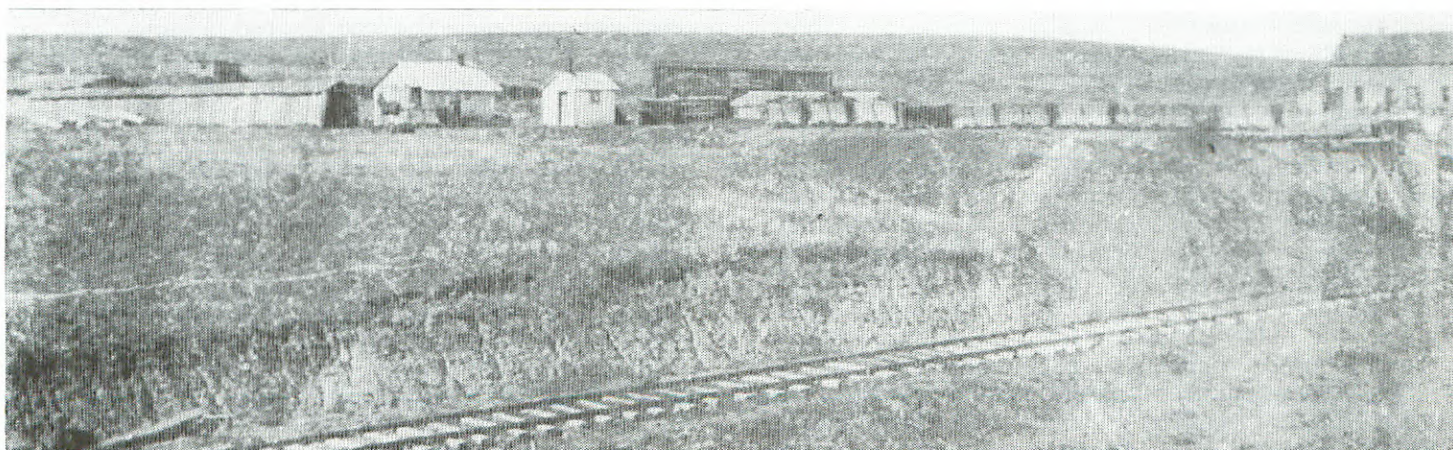
"Driving entry," as it was called, was slower mining, so the miner received more pay per ton. Off the entry, the miners dug out rooms which varied in size, with a pillar of coal between each room. The pillars were pulled as the coal mining was completed, and the room abandoned; pulling the



The Burton-Feland Mine at Sims.



The Wadeson Mine at Sims.



Mine of the Consolidated Coal Company - Sims.

pillars was dangerous work as it could cause cave-ins. Melvin Knutson was pulling pillars in the deep mine at New Salem when a cave-in resulted in his death.

Every morning before a new shift entered the mine, a close inspection was conducted to check the roof for weaknesses; enough coal was left in each room to support the roof. A creaking or cracking sound was a warning that more post props were needed.

Miners received 75¢ to \$1.25 per ton of coal mined — and furnished their own blasting powder. Most of them used powder rather than dynamite, as powder was slower and did not pulverize as much. In various locations clay seams were a problem; where there was much clay, four ton of mined coal represented a good day's work.

There were many injuries in the coal mines. In 1894, Pete Underdahl (grandfather of Alfred and Norbert Underdahl of Hebron) was caught by a cave-in and died the following year. Ben S. Olson was mining with two other men; after they lit the fuse for a shot, Ben realized that the other men had not brought out their tools, so he went back into the mine to get them. The shot went off and he was buried up to his hips in the rubble; a doctor set his broken bones, but from then on he was crippled. Tinius Thompson was also seriously injured by a cave-in which resulted in his death a few years later. Sometimes a shot of dynamite would not go off when expected, perhaps from a faulty fuse, or the fuse had pulled away from the powder. It was risky to go back into the mine to investigate, as the slow burning fuse might still reach the powder. Such was the case with my uncle Ted Peterson; a charge went off as he went back into the mine to check on it. He wasn't seriously injured, but coal dust was imbedded in his face, and he carried the marks of the explosion for many years.

Every morning the mines had to be checked for gas. Black Damp was a suffocating gas often found in underground mines. It was a mixture of carbon monoxide and nitrogen. The presence of gas would show on the flames of the miner's lamps; a short yellow flame indicated gas, and a long white flame meant the air was clean. Another serious hazard for the miners was Black Lung, which was a pneumoconiosis condition caused from inhaling too much coal dust.

Opening a mine involved much work, as the entry had to be shored up with timber and lumber, up to the coal vein. In many cases it extended further — until a good natural support was reached. In the larger mines, where quite a few men were employed, it was necessary to have a mine boss. Joe Schollaert, who had mined in Pennsylvania before coming to Sims, was the boss at the Burton-Feland Mine and was responsible for safety measures.

Several Sims mines had water problems. The mine below the big hill northwest of the Sims Lutheran Church, seemed to have an abundance of water. Ben Ramsland, who lived nearby, thought there might be enough water for irrigation, so he made a ditch on the contour from below the mine entrance south to the corner of the Sims Cemetery. The ditch is still visible on the east side of the hill. There was not sufficient water for irrigation; perhaps the mines below tapped some of the supply. Harry Wadeson had a very good mine north and east of the Big Hill, but water was such a problem he had to abandon the mine in 1906. He moved to Hebron where he opened a mine north of the town.

The distance from the surface down to the coal veins varied with the different locations. The entries would extend into the hillsides to the coal. My dad had the only coal mine in Sims

without the usual entry. His entry was a shaft 30 feet deep down to the coal. He rigged up a winch, powered by a horse walking in a circle, which hoisted up the mine cars and miners.

The last mine to operate in Sims was on the John Jacobson farm; this mine had a lot of water and was abandoned in the 40's. The first year we were married (1937-38) we lived on the Theo. Feland farm, and that winter I mined coal for our own use from a mine on the north side of the coulee, just across from the big mine; this mine caved in a couple years later.

The last mining car that was used in Sims can be seen in Almont Heritage Park.

About eight miles south of Sims, coal was found close to the surface. This coal was mostly "strip mined." The "overburden" was removed by using four horses on a fresno. This was slow and hard work compared with the earth-moving equipment we have today. George Ormiston perhaps removed the greatest amount of overburden; he stripped off 20 feet of soil before reaching the coal vein. On an average, about 10 feet was the depth of earth covering the coal. Dynamite was used to loosen the coal; the wagons would be backed down to the coal's edge for loading.

There were several strip mines southwest of Almont, where coal was sold for about \$1 a ton. The mines of Carl Thor, Trygve Olson and George Reichel had the most business; they also shipped coal out of Almont by rail. When local folks came to the mines for coal, they would often have to wait their turn, especially in the fall, when putting in their winter's supply. It was not unusual for farmers to strip on their own land, or by permission, strip on a neighbor's land. Pete Hoovestol had the only underground mine in that area.

Frank Owens had a strip mine about 5 miles southwest of Almont; after he moved out of the area, Tinius Ramsland took over the mine. The government had reserved mineral rights on this piece of land, so Tinius was brought to court for selling coal from it. At the hearing, 20 neighbors testified that the \$1 per ton they had paid for coal hardly covered the cost of stripping and the dynamite used. Tinius was acquitted.

Supplying the merchants and schools in the area with coal added to the income of some of the farmers; they were, however, hard earned dollars. Some hauled coal to be shipped out on the railroad — it was all hard manual labor. Melvin Olson told of his experiences hauling coal — he had to keep his horses "sharp shod," meaning the calks in the horse shoes had to be replaced quite often (the calks screwed out like a bolt). Two tons was a pretty good load for a team to pull, however, some used four horses to haul larger loads. Cornelius Knutson was credited with hauling the largest load of coal with one team. The load weighed 3½ tons.

The sound of the crunching of steel rimmed wagon wheels on the frozen ground, could be heard from a great distance on still, frosty mornings. There were no rubber-tired wagons in those days.

A wagon weighing scale was installed in front of Nelson Templeton Implement Co. store for the convenience of coal haulers. The scale had been moved to Almont from the Timmerman Store in Sims. Two hundred tons of coal was shipped out of Almont one week in January of 1911. The Northern Pacific Railroad charged 60¢ per ton to transport coal up to 60 miles and 80¢ up to 100 miles.

There were several large strip mining operations in later years. Timpe-Nilles and Kaelberers were two of the largest in this area. They were both forced to close when Federal regulations became too strict to comply.

## § Brick Manufacturing §

The discovery of clay, suitable for making brick, played an important part in the founding of Sims.

The first brick manufacturing works started operation when Sims was called Baby Mine. The clay which covered the coal, and also that which was between the coal veins, was of good quality for bricks.

James Pugh made bricks from the clay between the coal seams. According to Otto Feland, the bricks from the Pugh factory were of very good quality. The first carload of brick shipped out was from Bly's Mine (later called Sims). According to our 1883 map, the brick works was located west of the depot on the railroad right-of-way.

The 1885 census shows James Pugh, 57 years of age, born in England; his wife Rebecca, also from England; they had 4 children. Pugh filed on a homestead about five miles south of Sims. He met a tragic death, resulting from a rough and tumble fight in Sims, with a man from Glen Ullin. He was beaten and kicked in the stomach to the extent that he died. The fight was witnessed by several local folks. No inquest was filed; Pugh was buried in the English Cemetery, northwest of town.

The Carbon Pressed Brick and Lime Company was established in 1883, with investments of \$30,000. Offices for the company were on the third floor of the newly constructed Oakes House. Chas. Thompson was president; W.A. Downes, vice president, and J.H. Hansel, secretary-treasurer. The brick plant was located ½ mile south of town, on the east side of the railroad track, and at the south end of the clay hill, directly east of the present site of the Lutheran Church.

Brick manufacturing attracted many laborers. We are not sure of the highest number employed, but heresay has it as being close to 100. The wages were about \$2 a day. A brick yard boarding house was built to accommodate some of the workers. Boarding houses were very important and necessary in Sims at that time as many of the workers were young single men; houses could not be built fast enough to meet the needs. The brick company boarding house was located on the north side of the clay hill; the brick factory was on the south end

of the hill from which clay was mined for the bricks.

Elias Larson was a cook in the Sims Brick Yard Boarding House for two years. He had been a sailor who came to Sims from Norway in 1882. He very likely came from Norway at the same time as my grandfather, Gabriel Peterson, as the two men were married to sisters. After he got to the "new land," he wasn't satisfied, so returned to Norway, where he went back to sailing. He was shipwrecked in 1887; a few years later his widow and four sons: Christian, Tinius, Amandus and Tobias came from Norway to Sims.

The Carbon Pressed Brick and Lime Company also had a hospital; we do not know the exact location of it. The fact that there was a hospital came to light when translating the secretary minutes from the Sims Lutheran Church, which were written in Norwegian. It stated that the church parsonage, which at that time served as the church, was faced with surplus brick from the Brickyard Hospital.

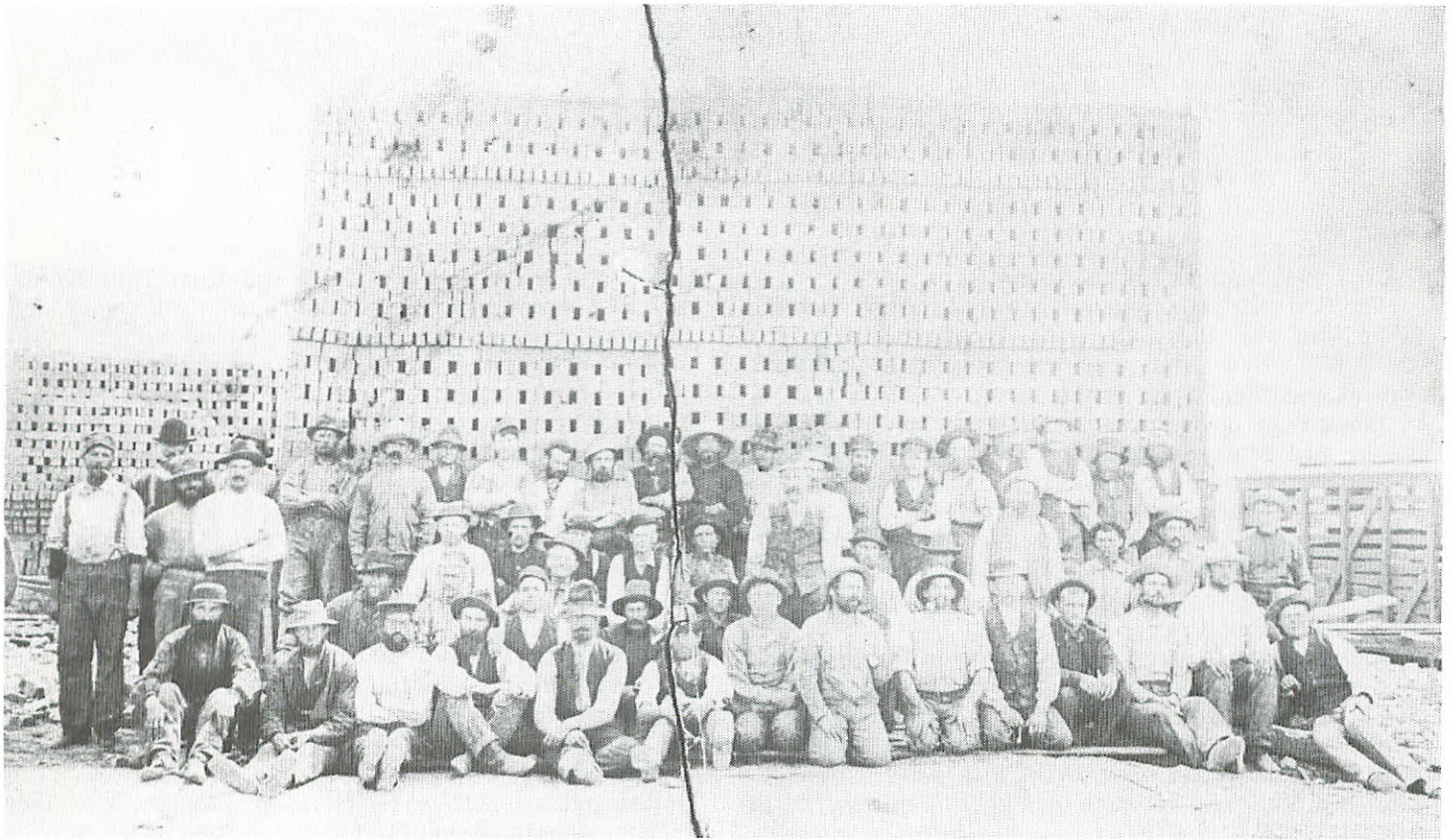
Sims brick were used locally and in surrounding communities. Sims was referred to as the "Brick City" by Bismarck and Mandan people. Many commercial buildings and homes in Mandan and Bismarck were faced with Sims brick. The Cloverdale building, located on west Main in Mandan (razed in 1989) was of Sims brick, we are told.

In July 1883, Chas. Thompson of Sims got the contract to build the Dakota Territorial Capitol at Bismarck. His bid was \$97,600. Construction started on August 5, 1883, and on September 5th the corner stone was laid. The corner stone had been made in Sims by Sakarias Egan and Ole Barstad. Henry Villard, president of the Northern Pacific Railroad, had the honor of placing the stone. Four million brick were used in the construction of the capitol — two million were from the Carbon Pressed Brick and Lime Co. of Sims and the other two million were supplied by a brick works in Bismarck, owned by Col. E.H. Bly. All decorative tile (terra cotta) used in the capitol came from Sims. The terra cotta made at Sims seemed to be very durable and satisfactory. There are quite a few samples of it in the Almont Museum. There is also a piece of pottery, made at Sims, which I found in our pasture just a few years ago.

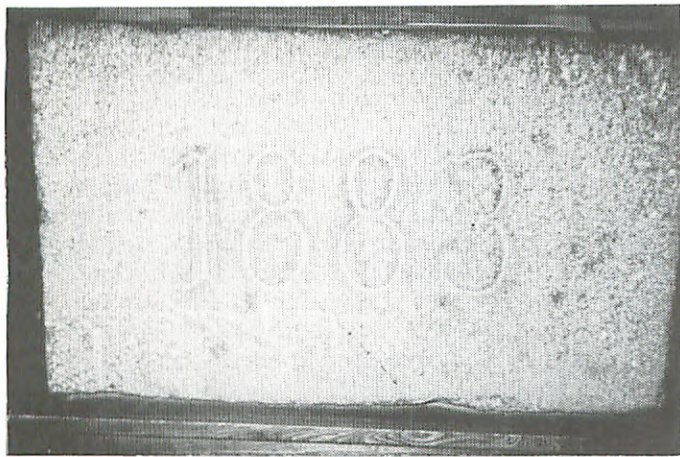


Sims Brick Yard about 1885





Brick factory workers in front of stack of bricks.



Corner stone from Dakota Territory Capitol. Made in Sims 1883 now on display at North Dakota Heritage Center.

Sims brick in the Territorial Capitol showed signs of crumbling, due to flecks of lime in the clay. After a rain, the flecks would fall out which gave a rather unsightly appearance to the building. The capitol building burned to the ground December 18, 1930.

Morton County's first Court House was faced with Sims brick. It was built in 1885 at a cost of \$35,000. It burned May 15, 1941.

The Carbon Pressed Brick and Lime Company went bankrupt, and in 1885, Col. E.H. Bly bought the plant. It continued to be in operation for a few more years; the quality of the brick was not satisfactory.

The only present evidence of the brick works at Sims are some concrete pillars in our pasture, with large bolts embedded in them. There are some bricks on display in the Almont Museum.

**NORTH DAKOTA PUBLICITY:** North Dakota is so fertile, and the climate so invigorating; if you plant a railroad spike in the spring, you will have a crowbar by fall.

In North Dakota you will find potatoes as big as beer kegs and cabbage heads of Congressional and Senatorial size.

It was so dry in North Dakota one year, that the government outlawed water skiing — because it raised too much dust.

It got so hot in North Dakota that the corn popped on the stalks.