

Mott Centennial Speech

(This is a speech presented by Kevin Carvell during Mott's Centennial Celebration July 2004. Kevin is a Mott Native and a historian. He knows more about the history of North Dakota and Mott than any other living human being. It he doesn't we are wrong.)

Our neighboring community, the town of New England, had its 125th anniversary a couple years ago. But right before, organizers discovered they had miscounted and it was actually only their 124th anniversary. They were embarrassed about the discrepancy, but it was too late to cancel the event. They swore each other to secrecy and the celebration went on.

We have a similar problem. Some of you were around when Mott celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1957, an event which means, of course, that Mott had to have been founded in 1907. And most of you were here when we had our big 75th celebration 25 years later. And now here we are celebrating our 100th birthday. But it's only 2003. Are you doing the arithmetic? It's not our centennial! We're too early, folks. We're four years off. I've been giving organizers a hard time about this new math of theirs. But Ben Olien says it was absolutely critical to do it this year because by 2007 he's certain to be confined to the nursing home.

The justification for a centennial now is that the William Brown Land Company of Chicago did begin in 1903 to make plans to lay out a town here. Construction got underway in 1904 and by 1907 we actually did have the hotel, the Mott Supply, a little meat market and, most important of all, a blind pig located on the river bank about where Jim Larson's Electric is today. A blind pig was an illegal tavern and called that because the quality of the liquor was such that if pigs drank it they went blind.

Our famous slogan – "Mott's the Spot!" – dates to 1907. It was invented by county Auditor Robert Berry, newspaper editor Wellington Irish, States Attorney George Stone, and Postmaster Frank Bonesho.

The full slogan, more of a cheer actually, was: "Mott, Mott, Mott's the Spot! That's What!" In fact, the *Saturday Evening Post*, once one of the nation's great magazines, called it "the catchiest town slogan in America."

Some of you are thinking, "I know another line to that slogan that's not very complimentary." Well, that line – "Mott the Spot that God Forgot" – was coined by those lowlifes over at New England. Even in 1907 New England's sports teams couldn't beat Mott. And so New England's revenge was this taunt that has tormented us ever since. Our great revenge occurred in the winter of 1961-62 when St. Mary's High School at New England had a tremendous basketball team, but we beat them in our gym, we beat them in their gym,. We beat them in the finals of the district tournament in Dickinson, we beat them in the finals of the regional tournament, and we demolished them at Minot in the state championship game.

To have grown up in Mott makes me a lucky man. I feel about it like Garrison Keillor does Lake Wobegon: "The women are strong, all the men good looking, and the children above average."

But unlike Lake Wobegon, Mott's a real place. If you need proof, look at a globe. One of our bizarre claims to fame is that we're the smallest town in the world to be on those globes you see in libraries and classrooms. The Replogle Company makes them and, for some reason, keeps marking the site of Mott.

Last year, an old fellow named Paul Whitney was living in Oregon. Paul was feeling confined, residing as he was with his daughter. So he decided to make a run for it. When no one was looking, he climbed out the window and struck out for the place of which he was fondest, his boyhood home – Mott. Here, he decided, was where he wanted to live out his days. Paul was intrepid, determined, and fast talked his way past cops sent out to search for him. Of course, he had problems. Number one, he was 99 years old. But he headed out across America on his own. Now you know Greyhound doesn't run down here anymore, the trains pulled up their tracks, commercial aircraft have never stopped. But Paul got halfway across the continent, ended up in Dickinson and, never hesitating, never daunted, just called a cab and said, "Take me to Mott." He arrived pretty well exhausted, went to get a room at the hotel, and discovered it had burned down 13 years earlier.

Mott rallied around Paul, got him an apartment, filled it with furniture, signed him up for Meals on Wheels, and he was as happy as he'd ever been. Paul is now 100, coming up fast on 101, older than

the town itself, but if anything symbolizes this centennial, it's Paul Whitney. Here's a guy with a spirit of adventure and derring-do, with an enormous affection for the place he grew up, and he's home at last.

Paul Whitney's the most recent in a long list of wonderful characters that made Mott home. Who can forget O.K. Butts, Nate Margulies, the awesome athletic talent of Butch Lince? Milo Langwerthy? (Kids from the Catholic hayride are still carrying some of Milo's buckshot around in their hides.) Vince Senn and his pink Cadillac convertible full of girls? Short, stout, cigar-puffing Father Mandry? (Behind his back he got called Herman the German.) Oscar Buehler, Fearless Frank Serb, Lydia Reigel, and Butch Yates? (I'm 10 years old, walking to the drug store with my dog Skunky. By the play park, Skunky runs into the road and gets hit by Butch's garbage truck. The dog's in terrific pain. It's crying. Its back is broken. I'm stunned. Butch stops and comes over. He's got a sweat-soaked, garbage-stained t-shirt on, smoking a fat stub of a cigar. He's a big, tough, scary guy, but he puts his arm around me and says in his kindest way, "Don't worry, kid. I'll shoot him for you."

And Sister Helen Margaret, and Harry Hintz and Oswald Tufte, and Emil Patek who was eaten by his own house cats. And Bobby Trousdale, Fuzzy Bozanco, Muggs Maercklein, Enid Bern, Ike Bratcher, and a hundred more. Some of them builders and doers, some of them odd characters, but all part of a cast that Thornton Wilder would have loved to have in his play "Our Town."

Our town grew up on the prairies that Native Americans camped and hunted and traveled over for 15,000 years. But the cattlemen and sheepmen moved in during the 1880s – Levi Colgrove and his sons, all the way from Australia, settling along the buttes that still bear their name along Highway 8 near the Stark County line; Charles Mutchelknaus, a Russian sheepman along the Cannonball River at the Texas crossing west of town; and the Beisigls, August and his brother, George, a lawyer who said the hell with law and came west to become a cattleman and owner of the V Cross O ranch south of town on Timber Creek. East of Mott was Ozborn Chase. His ranch is still there, right next to the football field. Known as Oz, he was 6'2", had tremendous strength and the kind of raw courage the frontier required. Bit by a rattler, he sucked the poison out, and went about his work. No whining was allowed. When two of his toes froze, he whacked them off with his hunting knife.

They're pretty much all gone. But if you see Bruce Colgrove, he'll tell you how his great-grandfather

went on the last buffalo hunt in Hettinger County. And if you check the courthouse, you'll see Marie Weinberger's wonderful painting of that hunt.

With the buffalo and the Indians gone, the ranchers had 20 years before settlers started pouring in off the Northern Pacific mainline. A fellow riding from Mott to Richardton could in a day run across 50 to 60 wagons on the move. Sod houses along the route might have 40 overnight guests, all strangers, bedded down toe to toe. A few days after one of those sleepovers, a cowboy saw a pretty girl in Mott and teased her about it, saying, "I remember you. We slept together last week." Food ran short in those halfway houses and fried rabbit ended up on the menu at the Colgrove ranch although guests were carefully never told what they were eating.

The first celebration was the Fourth of July 1905. It rained hard west of town and, by the time festivities broke up, people who lived south of the Cannonball couldn't get home until the river subsided two weeks later. The next year we were better prepared. The river was again in flood, but this time celebrants were ferried back and forth in a pig trough.

July festivals like this one have always been trouble. If we don't have the year wrong, we've got ourselves a flood or God knows what. When the railroad arrived in 1910, there was a big barbeque to celebrate and a fellow came with a giant balloon and basket underneath. Using kerosene, he heated the air in the balloon down at the end of Main Street and off he went into the sky and across the river where the balloon caught fire. The basket crashed to the ground and he was carted off with a broken leg.

These were God fearing and straight shooting people, as decent and honest as any on earth. But some things have not changed. They were then, as they remain today, hard partiers. Out in the countryside, when homesteaders would gather at the sod houses and claim shanties, the dancing and whooping and hollering would go on all night. Nobody left until dawn. There was a practical reason. The countryside was so dark and roadless no one could find their way until first light.

Speaking of roadless, my homesteading relatives from Bohemia, the Svihovecs, were so concerned

about getting lost, they put a flagpole on a hill so they would have a point of reference they could see from far off on the trackless prairie. That high point is still called Flag Hill. An American flag flies there this weekend and the nearby farm of John and Arlyce Friez is called Flag Hill Ranch.

When R.A. Grant came out to Mott in 1909 to work for the Brown Land Company, he expected to find a pleasant community like those he'd left in Minnesota. Instead, he found this treeless place with a couple houses and handful of stores. After his first day, he was so appalled by what he'd got himself into that he walked up to the highest hill, sat down, and wept. Of course, he eventually became wealthy and, on that very spot where he'd shed those tears, built himself a fine brick home. (That's the house lived in today by Don and Carmen Schaible.)

Grant and others decided one night to raid the watermelon patch of Sheriff Emanuel Barth in West Mott. A half dozen of the most upstanding men snuck across the new bridge and began pilfering the ripe watermelons when Barth exploded out of his house, firing away with his shotgun. Pandemonium broke out, adult men ran every which way. Afraid to use the bridge, knowing Barth had it covered, most opted to plunge into the Cannonball. Several nearly drowned. Later, Sheriff Barth let it be known he'd been firing blanks.

Mott was not settled by saints and angelic characters, but people full of high jinks and good humor, who were devilish and delightfully human, who got themselves in scraps, and who flat out laughed a lot. It's a great legacy.

The story of rascals swimming from one side of Mott to the other to escape the law was repeated a half century later. In town was a seismograph crew and a box of blasting caps disappeared. For that summer and into the autumn, explosions shook Mott after dark. There was little damage for these were just pranks of a noisy kind. But danger was involved. On one occasion when there was a fast burning fuse, one culprit did not make a full escape and the blast sent him flying in the alley behind the Mott Supply, sliding on his face for several painful feet. It came to an end one night when there was an explosion at the bank while Sheriff Earl Kramer and new Police Chief Rheiny Schaible happened to be drinking coffee in the hotel. Fearing the bank vault had been blown, they came charging out,

revolvers in hand. The three culprits took off running west, sprinting through the Mott Motor implement lot. Bullets ricocheted off the machinery. Several of the party escaped by swimming the Cannonball in pretty much the same spot where, a half century earlier, the watermelon thieves had made their retreat, but from the other direction. An hour later, there was a knock at a house in nearby Burt. It was Sheriff Kramer wondering if their son was home. "Well, yes he is," said the mother. In fact, he was in bed. Sheriff Kramer had an odd request. Could he feel the clothes the young man had worn that evening? They were soaking wet. And that ended what has always been known as the Summer of the Dynamite.

Sheriff Kramer was an able lawman. One night, spotting a procession of vehicles winding its way into Mott after dark, he stopped the first car which happened to be occupied by one Pete Ressler and asked from where everyone was coming. Pete feigned great surprise that 20 cars were immediately behind him. Earl ordered him home. In the back seat of the next vehicle was a keg of beer and in that car, at the sight of the red light, panic broke out. A coat was quickly thrown around the keg, a hat put over the spout, and Gary Berreth threw his arm around it, trying to pretend he was making out with a fat girl with a very long, thin neck.

Who can't love this place?

- _ What other town has a big enough sense of humor to name a street Millionaire Avenue? And locates its welfare office on it?
- _ National Guard units in every other town are sent off to places like Iraq and Bosnia. But the Mott Guard got called out to quell a drunken party in Zap, ND..
- _ And the newly spiffed up golf course has taken all the fun out of the old one. Remember old #4 across the crick when, in later years, if you got within 25 feet of the cup, it was considered a gimme because so many wasps lived on the edge of the green that you had to grab your ball and run? Old #6 was a challenge. The open dump next door was often on fire and the smoke so thick you couldn't see, not to mention burning debris occasionally blowing across the fairway. And on the very next hole, the entire fairway had been sold for the gravel and all that was left

was the excavation. Old #9 had a little trail that ran along the west side of the fairway. People had gotten in the habit of depositing their dead pets there. If your ball landed in a decomposing animal corpse, you got a free drop.

- _ Some things weren't so funny. In the 1930s, everybody was near busted. Fence lines were buried by dust. Army worms invaded homes. One day grasshoppers were so thick the city had to turn the street lights on so people could see.

- _ And war – take Vietnam where four great young guys died. We remember their names and their sacrifice – Lowell Hardmeyer, Gary Klein, Cookie McNeill, and Stanley Ottmar. Nobody knows this, the saddest of facts, but Mott's loss was the greatest of any community in North Dakota. No town lost more young men on a per population basis. Places like Wahpeton, six times bigger than Mott, suffered no deaths. Actually, Mott's losses were even greater. Freddy Belmore, who grew up in Mott, was killed when his plane went down on the way to Vietnam.

- _ But somehow and always, we found our balance, human nature continued in its rhythms of laughter and tears, life and death, marriage, divorce, jobs. Few of us ever got wealthy, but life was always rich, often funny, sometimes silly. One New Year's Eve, Lynn Peter Ferguson shot off fireworks indoors at the Log Cabin bar. In the noise, smoke, and chaos, a big pack of firecrackers in another celebrant's back pocket caught fire and he was last seen running south on Main Street with an exploding rear end.

- _ Did you hear Paul Harvey's national radio show a couple months ago? He was talking about our own Troy Mosbrucker being named volunteer of the year for his endless generosity and human kindness. One example – when Troy's driving his sanitation truck to the landfill at Dickinson, he stops by the nursing home and picks out a resident to take along for the pleasure of an outing.

- _ Valentine Frank knocked on my parents' door one winter night 40 years ago to report his car had slid into mine which had been parked at the curb. My mother praised Val, saying, "You did the right thing. A lot of people would have just driven off and not said anything." "I couldn't," replied

Val. "Our bumpers are locked."

Tell stories, stay up all night, laugh hard. You won't get to do this again until our 125th anniversary which, by Ben Olien's reckoning, will be in about nine years.