

Bower Family Band

Keystone Area Historical Society, Keystone, SD

The Bower family was very instrumental in the development of social, educational, and religious culture of early-day Keystone. In 1870, Calvin and Keziah (called Kizzie) Bower set out from Lodi, Wisconsin headed for Vermillion, Dakota Territory in a covered wagon with four small children, two boys and two girls. The family lived in Vermillion for about fifteen years and added four more girls to the family. The oldest girl, Alice, who they called "Od" married a young newspaper man, Joe Gossage, who had founded the Black Hills Journal in 1878 which is now known as the Rapid City Journal. The wedding took place on June 6, 1882. The Gossages made their new home in Rapid City.

Perhaps they missed Od because she lived so far away from them. In the late spring of 1885, the Bower family sold out and headed for the Black Hills. They left Vermillion in two groups at different times. The first group pulled a prairie schooner loaded with John Deere farm equipment and the second group traveled in a covered wagon. They came by way of Pierre and Fort Pierre. There were no railroads leading into the Black Hills.

After visiting Od in Rapid City, the Bowers traveled south and many of the family claimed homesteads on Battle Creek below Hermosa. Other members of the Bowers and other relatives before and after the Calvin Bowers claimed homesteads in the area.

The Bowers became quite popular in the area because they had their own family band. The Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Railroad (later the Chicago and Northwestern system) was scheduled to have the first train to arrive in Rapid City on the Fourth of July, 1886. Since this was on Sunday, they planned a celebration on Monday, July 5th. At the time, there was only one brass band west of the Missouri River, the military band attached to the Seventh Regiment, then stationed in Fort Meade. The military band was scheduled to perform at this celebration. Calvin went to extreme measures and was successful to persuade the committee to also book his Family Band to play for the occasion.

After the excursion train arrived, the celebration commenced. When the chairman called for music, the leader of the Fort Meade Band responded. After the speaker spoke, the chairman hardly rose when the Bower Band began to play without permission. The Bowers took the crowd by surprise and there was much clapping and shouting. It took the breath right out of the Fort Meade band and they folded up their music racks and left the platform. This was the introduction of the Family Band to the Black Hills.



Back Row: Sidney, Nettie, Lulu, Rose and Mayo. Front Row: Alice (Od), Laura, Father (J.C. Bower), Mother (Keziah), and Quinnie

The Bowers in Keystone

The new community of Keystone was platted in 1892 by Jacob Reed, a surveyor and one of the locators of the Keystone Mine, for which the town was named. The famous Holy Terror Mine was located in June of 1894. This event caused Keystone to “boom” and the community grew very rapidly. There were no schools or churches in Keystone. The Catholics, Methodists, and Congregationalists met in Baldwin Hall on Main Street which was on the second floor above a drug store. During the 1894-1895 term, Miss Mary Wheelock taught 40 students in a one-room log cabin with no windows. There was very little to help a teacher. There was only one globe, one map, a few blackboards and no books. So, Miss Wheelock did not follow the usual course of study. She mostly winged it.

Miss Wheelock got some reinforcements from Willis Bower, a younger brother of Calvin Bower. Uncle Willis arrived in Keystone in April of 1895. With the help of Calvin, he built a two-story home for his wife and stepdaughter. The first floor was left as a large room where Willis conducted a private school which was well patronized. Calvin and Kizzie soon moved to Keystone with some of their children. Sidney and Lulu were deceased, having succumbed to illness. Of course, Od was happily married in Rapid City. Mayo brought a wife, Carrie, with him and he worked in the Holy Terror Mill.

Uncle Willis was hired as the school principal and Quinnie was the primary teacher. Nettie worked as a saleslady for A.C. McDonald in a general store which

could have been the beginning of the Keystone Trading Company, commonly known as "KT."

Keystone was still without a church. Rev. James A. Becker, the minister at Hermosa, was sent to organize a Congregational Church. With the help of Uncle Willis making motions and Quin seconding them, the Keystone Congregational Church was organized. They started construction in March of 1896 and they completed the building in October. The Bowers were involved in the physical construction of the church.

From its inception, the Keystone Band was the leading musical organization of the central Black Hills. They played at all kinds of entertainments, led Fourth of July parades through the long, dusty streets of Keystone and provided band music when presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan made a whistle stop in Hill City.

The school system continued to expand. Quinnie taught the primary grades when school was held in the basement of the Keystone Congregational Church for several years. She completed her last year of teaching in 1900 before she married Milton "Mit" Everly, a shift boss at the Holy Terror Mine. In addition to working in A.C. McDonald's store, Nettie worked part time as a hostess in the famous McDonald Hotel, which was considered one of the finest hotels in the Black Hills at the time. Nettie had been clerking in the Keystone-Holy Terror company store which was perhaps also known as the Keystone Trading Company.

Calvin Bower was not interested in mining, but worked as a carpenter and other vocations. He was very active in politics. The Fourth of July was a favorite time for him and Keystone put on one of the most elaborate celebrations in the Hills. There were horse races in the middle of the street because there was no other location to race. For the parade in 1900, Calvin made a pretty float to carry the forty little girls dressed in white dresses with red, white and blue sashes symbolizing the forty states of the Union. The float was driven by Uncle Sam Bower and pulled by two white horses. One hundred years later, the last year of the 20th century, the Keystone Area Historical Society duplicated this float for the Holy Terror Day parade.

It was 1900, the year the Bowers last played together as a brass band. This was the same year the new school of Victorian architecture was completed in Keystone which contained five classrooms and a library. Rose Bower returned to Keystone after spending several years in the south and taught in the new school for three years. Mayo's interest was in ranching and he later moved to Montana. Quinnie and Mit Everly were married in October of 1900 and later moved to a ranch near Hermosa. Nettie married George Bale on November 11, 1901 and they raised horses in the Hermosa area. After teaching in Keystone for three years, Rose became the first librarian of the Rapid City Public Library. On September 15, 1910, Laura, the baby of the family, married Clyde G. Van Nuys, Professor of Physics at the School of Mines in Rapid City.

The last of the Bowers moved out of Keystone after the Holy Terror Mine shut down in June of 1903, marking the end of the Bower Family Band.

Laura Bower Van Nuys, the youngest of the Bower family, wrote a biography of the family, "The Family Band, From the Missouri to the Black Hills, 1881 – 1900,"

published in 1961. Walt Disney Studios bought the rights to the story and produced a movie based on the book called, "The One and Only, Genuine, Original Family Band". The movie was released in 1968 and starred Walter Brennan, Buddy Ebsen, Lesely Ann Warren, John Davidson, Janet Blair, and Kurt Russell.

In spite of four major fires in Keystone, all four buildings used for schools are still standing on their original locations, the log cabin, Willis Bower's private school, the Keystone Congregational Church and the five-room Victorian Schoolhouse. All of these buildings can be viewed from one location. The building was last used as a schoolhouse in 1988 and it presently houses the Keystone Area Historical Society Museum.

The Original Band

With Jimmy Baldwin as the leader, the following constituted the original band:

Cornets - Mayo Bower, Ned Bacon, Joe Hayes

Baritone Horn - Ed Hayes

Trombone - Nattie Bower

Tenor Horns - Patsy Hayes, A.C. McDonald

Alto Horns - Laura Bower, Carrie Bower, Aubert Canfield, Willie Graham

Tuba - Quinnie Bower

Drums - John Hayes, Cliff Pike, Charles Canfi