
All Roads Led to Strool: The Rise and Fall of One Man's Town

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Hiding in the safety of the wooded Latvian countryside, Bernhard Stroohe narrowly escaped a massacre. The year was 1905, and the twenty-four-year-old Stroohe, who studied at Dorpat University in Estonia, had aided members of the intelligensia in their efforts to throw off the despotic rule of Czar Nicholas II in the Baltic. When reprisals followed, the young revolutionary went into hiding and eventually fled his homeland. Three years later, Stroohe had changed his name to Benjamin ("Ben") Strool and taken a homestead in sparsely populated Perkins County in northwestern South Dakota. His claim soon became the thriving settlement of Strool, where he lived and worked as a merchant and continued his political involvement, going on to win three statewide elections.¹ After his death in 1949, his town returned to grassland. Those traveling the country backroads today drive through the Strool town limits unaware that anything more than a bull pasture ever occupied the space.

After fleeing Latvia, Benjamin Strool sought sanctuary with his Jewish mother's extended family in Dublin, Ireland. In 1906, he boarded the Cunard Line's *Lucania* in Queenstown, Ireland, arriving in New York City on 25 August. His next documented residence is in Het-

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1. Ben Strool obituary, unidentified newspaper clipping, Biographical File "Strool, Ben," State Archives, South Dakota State Historical Society (SDSHS), Pierre; telephone interview with Jean Simon, Sturgis, S.Dak., 22 Feb. 2003.

tinger, North Dakota, where he filed his declaration of intention to become a naturalized citizen on 9 April 1908. Less than a month later, on the first day of May, he filed on a homestead of 160 acres just over the South Dakota border in Perkins County. Strool and two friends brought provisions to his property and started a store.²

Strool and his companions were not alone. Beginning in 1907, newspapers reported new settlers arriving in the area in droves. Nearly a half-century after its institution, the Homestead Act of 1862 was still creating hope for landless immigrants, for adventurous citizens from the East, and for single women left to their own devices. Each newcomer bet an investment of a registration fee, a dwelling, improvements, and five years of time that he or she would be able to prove up and claim ownership of a 160-acre parcel of land. Much of northwestern South Dakota had been opened to non-Indian settlers by the Sioux Agreement of 1889, but the area had long awaited the transportation links that would make the establishment of towns feasible. Once the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad (Milwaukee Road) stretched from Mobridge to Lemmon and on into southwestern North Dakota, homesteaders surged in by rail and team.³ The newcomers “came fortified with nineteenth-century notions of progress, success, and the opportunities provided by free land

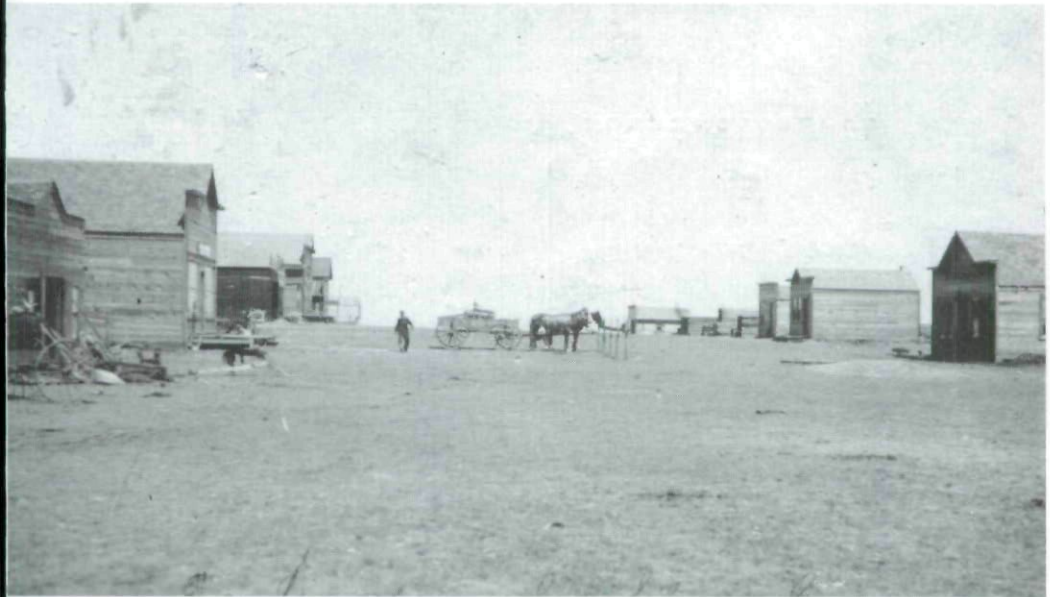
2. *Ibid.*; Certificate of Arrival, 25 Aug. 1906, ser. no. 238361, and Declaration of Intention, 9 Apr. 1908, U5941, Petition and Record, vol. 2, p. 2, Naturalization Records, State Archives, SDSHS; *Lemmon Leader*, 8 Dec. 1955; Mr. and Mrs. Lloyd I. Sudlow, *Homestead Years, 1908–1968* (Bison, S.Dak.: *Bison Courier*, 1968), p. 67. Ben Strool’s land patent (no. 220779), issued 14 August 1911, describes his claim as consisting of the “south half of the southeast quarter of section nineteen and the north half of the northeast quarter of section thirty in township eighteen north of range eleven east of the Black Hills Meridian, South Dakota.” A reproduction of the original document may be viewed online by accessing U.S., Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, “Land Patent Search,” <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/PatentSearch/>, and entering “Strool, Benjamin” into the database for South Dakota.

3. Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 4th ed., rev. John E. Miller (Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004), pp. 247, 253; Paula M. Nelson, *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900–1917* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), pp. 21, 86. Settlers could also “commute” their homesteads, shortening the residence period by paying \$1.25 per acre for the land. For more information on the homesteading experience, see John R. Milton, *South Dakota: A History* (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1977), pp. 81–101.

and were supported by twentieth-century technology,” writes historian Paula M. Nelson in *After the West Was Won: Homesteaders and Town-Builders in Western South Dakota, 1900–1917*. “These settlers of the last frontier sensed that their migration was the last chance America would have to tame a new country and civilize a wilderness.”⁴ Within a few months, Ben Strool’s homestead had become the town known as Strool.

The settlement and surrounding township grew rapidly in 1908 and 1909 as more homesteaders arrived to build upon their hopes. Many settlers took the Milwaukee Road to Hettinger and then paid \$3.50 to board the stage for the forty-two-mile-long day’s ride to Strool with driver Sam Erickson. Those who lodged in Strool overnight before going out to locate their claims had the option of renting a tent

4. Nelson, *After the West Was Won*, p. xiv.



A team and wagon park at the main-street hitching rail in this early photograph of Strool. Many small towns of the time were built with wide main streets to accommodate the large turning radius of the ox trains that bought supplies.

and a “prairie-feather mattress” (ticking stuffed with straw). Typical of the new arrivals was James Judy, who traveled with his mother, brother, and sisters in 1910 by train to Hettinger with their farm animals, machinery, and household furniture in one of the railroad’s “immigrant cars.” Fifteen-year-old Fred Allen and a companion walked to Strool from Manhattan, Kansas, with a string of mules.⁵

As sod houses and tarpaper shacks sprang up in the townships of Strool and surrounding Plateau, Maltby, Vail, and White Hills, mail arrived for the homesteaders in care of Ben Strool at his store. By 1910, the population of Strool township stood at 250, and the town’s thriving main street was poised to blossom as the center of commerce for the area between Bison and the Slim Buttes. The railroad depot in Hettinger offloaded homesteaders’ supplies, which Pete Larson transported by four-horse team for Pete Ogard’s store. Customers traveled the roads to buy their lumber, nails, and grocery staples from the Strool tradesmen. Over the next few years, the town hosted three general stores, a bank, three hotels, two lumber yards, a hardware store, a blacksmith shop, a drugstore, two livery barns, a restaurant, three real-estate offices, a pool hall, tavern, creamery, a “women’s furnishings” shop, physician/surgeon’s office, barbershop, and a newspaper. A church was built in 1910 to serve the Catholic residents of the Strool area, followed by a Protestant Union church in 1921.⁶

One of the shops listed in the Strool business directory for 1909 is that of dressmaker Martha J. Jordan, who had left Sioux Falls with her two young daughters, Elizabeth and Marguerite, sometime after her husband’s death in 1900. Jordan and her brother, Ole Johnson, filed on adjacent claims in Plateau Township less than two miles west of

5. Vertical File “Strool, S.Dak.,” State Archives, SDSHS; “The Village of Strool,” in “History of Prairie City Area” (unpublished typescript), comp. Strool School Lower Grades with Noreen Green, Suzan Hanson, and Bonnie Hanson, 1990, copy in author’s possession; interview with Arletta Allen Dailey, Rapid City, S.Dak., 19 Jan. 2003.

6. Sudlow and Sudlow, *Homestead Years*, pp. 65–72; *Perkins County Leader*, 5 July 1912. No official records have been found to indicate that Ben Strool served as postmaster at any time, as several local historians have claimed. The post office at Strool (then a part of Butte County) was established 14 July 1908 with Simon Sigman as the official postmaster. The *Lemmon Leader* for 8 December 1955, however, reported that when Ben Strool moved to Sioux Falls around 1915, Peter Quaal became postmaster.



This group gathered on Strool's main street for a Fourth of July celebration. Local businessman Pete Ogard often provided the fireworks for the holiday, and ice stored from the previous winter was used to churn ice cream.

Strool in 1907. Four years later, Jordan married the thirty-year-old Ben Strool, and the couple made a home in town for her two daughters and their son Beryl, born 7 November 1911.⁷

7. *Strool, Perkins County, S.Dak., Business Directory, 1909* (Denver: Gazetteer Publishing Co., 1909); *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 30 Aug. 1900; "Black Hills National Cemetery, Sturgis, Meade County, South Dakota, Strool, Beryl M.," http://www.interment.net/data/us/sd/meade/blacknat/black_stesv.htm, accessed 9 June 2006. For an online image of Martha Jordan's land patent (no. 124239), see U.S., Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, "Land Patent Search," <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/PatentSearch/>. As a promoter of the town, and perhaps of himself as an eligible bachelor, Ben Strool had given five or six sterling silver spoons as Christmas gifts to area women sometime before his marriage. Approximately six inches long, the spoons have handles elaborately crafted with a mounted rider, an American Indian in feathered headdress, crossed rifles, bow and arrows, and an American flag. The bowl is engraved "Strool S. D." At least two families still own spoons. According to Klink Garrett of Spearfish, his mother Mary Klink received one and for years used it in her sugar bowl as a conversation piece. Whether Martha Jordan received the

In her book, *“And Prairie Dogs Weren’t Kosher”*: *Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest since 1855*, historian Linda Mack Schloff discusses the dilemma of Jewish homesteaders who wished to maintain a kosher household on the prairie but found it nearly impossible due to the difficulty of obtaining kosher meat or finding a rabbi to perform the ritual slaughters. Ben Strool’s Norwegian-American wife reportedly accommodated his aversion to pork by making her piecrusts using butter instead of lard rendered from pigs. Schloff also recorded the story of another Latvian immigrant who longingly recalled fresh herring—prepared raw with sliced onions, chopped up with stale bread as a pâté, or baked for festive occasions—as a staple of the diet in his native land. Immigrant Jews like Ben Strool would have found few fresh herring swimming in western South Dakota’s “sea” of grass. The community of Deadwood in the Black Hills had a fairly large congregation of Jewish businessmen and their families, including the gold-rush pioneer Solomon Star, but in 1910 the 150 miles from Perkins County was not easily traversed either to shop or to attend religious services.⁸

By the time Ben and Martha Strool were married in 1911, western South Dakota was in the midst of a period of withering heat and drought that ultimately culled many homesteaders. Despite the difficult conditions, the *Perkins County Leader* for 5 July 1912 reveals a spirit of boosterism typical of small towns of the time. “All roads lead to Strool,” the newspaper declared. “There is nothing that adds more to the improvements of a community than good roads and in this Strool township is taking a great deal of pride and as a result has roads second to none of any township in the county.” The local bank adver-

gift of a spoon is not known. Klink Garrett, Spearfish, S.Dak., to author, 22 Feb. 2003; telephone interview with Cheryl Marty, Prairie City, S.Dak., 9 Mar. 2003, and interview with Marty, Rapid City, S.Dak., 15 Mar. 2003.

8. Schloff, *“And Prairie Dogs Weren’t Kosher”*: *Jewish Women in the Upper Midwest since 1855* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1996), p. 11; interview with Joan Meyer, Rapid City, S.Dak., 9 Jan. 2003; “Solomon Star,” *Adams Banner* 5 (Summer 2004): 1, 4. The Deadwood Masonic Lodge Number 7 had a number of Jewish members, and the Masonic Temple served as a place of worship for Jewish holidays. Ben Strool was a Scottish Rite Shriner in the Buffalo, South Dakota, Masonic Lodge. “Solomon Star,” p. 1; interview with Bill Carey, Rapid City, S.Dak., 7 Aug. 2005.

tised \$35,033 in real-estate loans and \$2,614 in cash on hand, telling potential customers, "We are growing—Grow with us . . . Start a bank account and check your expenditures to track your daily output; most dignified way of doing business nowadays." A real-estate office promoted the "good soil, good water, [and] healthful climate" of the area and pledged, "We are here to do a land business and to do it on the square both to the seller and the purchaser." One of Ben Strool's competitors in the mercantile business promised to "sell you an Edison Phonograph and as many records as you want at the same price and same terms as any dealer anywhere." The local news column



Strool, at center left, is just one of the northwestern South Dakota towns shown here that no longer appear on any map.

noted that banker William Toner had just returned from a bankers' convention in Belle Fourche; Dr. E. F. Jones was traveling by automobile to Newell and from there by rail to Rapid City; and a visiting dentist was poised at the ready with his instruments of pain relief.⁹

Such optimistic journalism denied the real conditions homesteaders faced. Soils in the area are composed largely of Pierre shale, a gumbo clay that becomes sticky when wet and rock-hard when dry. Many settlers came from states with easily tilled and cultivated soils, such as Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio, Nebraska, Iowa, and eastern South Dakota, and had to learn new methods of farming with different crop varieties. They also had to cope with the drying winds that blow year-round, sometimes at up to sixty miles an hour, and temperatures that can range from 115 degrees Fahrenheit in summer down to 57 degrees below zero in winter. They had staked their futures to the land "West of 20," where the average annual precipitation amounts to less than twenty inches. The belief current at the time was that rain would "follow the plow," bringing verdant conditions as cultivation progressed westward.¹⁰

The years 1910 and 1911, however, dealt a lethal blow to the dreams Ben Strool and others had of a metropolis on the prairie. Many homesteaders lost their investments of time and money when reality defied averages and the area failed to receive even its typical fourteen inches of annual precipitation. After the first year of drought, which, according to Paula Nelson fostered a "climate of disillusionment, doubt, and confusion," the spring of 1911 "arrived early and was unusually warm and much too dry. It was the beginning of a growing season that would exceed all others for drought, heat, and wind. This was the season that shattered any remaining illusions about easy prosperity or empire building overnight." Scores of families had no choice but to leave, having already mortgaged their land for what it was worth.¹¹

9. *Perkins County Leader*, 5 July 1912.

10. U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, Manuscript Population Schedule, Perkins County, S.Dak., Strool Township, Enumeration District 53, line 22; Nelson, *After the West Was Won*, p. 12; Milton, *South Dakota*, pp. 172, 179.

11. Nelson, *After the West Was Won*, p. 127. See also *Lemmon Leader*, 8 Dec. 1955, and Harry

In the same issue of the *Perkins County Leader* that sang the praises of the Strool area, editor E. A. Carlson announced that he was stepping down from the post he had held for four years. Carlson traveled a circuit, spending two days each in Strool, Bison, and Daviston. His newspapers used preprinted, boiler-plate interior pages, while local news appeared on the front page and the legal notices homesteaders were required to file upon "proving up" on their claims were printed on the back for a fee of \$6.50. As the homesteading boom dissipated, many local newspapers lost the revenue from the publication of final-proof notices and folded. The *Perkins County Leader* fell victim in time. From a population of 11,348 in the 1910 federal census, Perkins County could count only 7,641 people in the state census conducted five years later.¹²

Bowing to the loss of his customer base, Ben Strool and his family joined the diaspora of failed farmers and business owners to begin anew in Sioux Falls, where Strool opened a retail grocery store at 207 South Main Avenue. In 1915, the farmers who had stayed put in Perkins County harvested their first real crop in four years, and Ben Strool appears to have acted on the new hope. The 1920 federal census indicates that the family was again living in Strool. The household consisted of Ben and Martha along with eight-year-old Beryl, twenty-two-year-old Elizabeth, and twenty-year-old Marguerite. Ben is listed as a merchant, and Elizabeth is a clerk, perhaps in her stepfather's store.¹³

With the return of better times came a revival of town spirit in Strool, whose name became known and feared in the mid-1920s, thanks to its baseball team. Headlined by the Fitzgerald brothers (Hank, Ray, Elmer, and Clarence) manning the bases and bats, Art

F. Thompson, ed., *A New South Dakota History* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Center for Western Studies, Augustana College, 2005), p. 28.

12. *Perkins County Leader*, 5 July 1912; interview with Rodney Carr, Prairie City, S.Dak., 11 Jan. 2003; Nelson, *After the West Was Won*, pp. 141, 130.

13. U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920*, Manuscript Population Schedule, Perkins County, S.Dak., Strool Township, Enumeration District 175, line 51. The 1915 South Dakota State Census (card no. 2093, State Archives, SDSHS) shows the Ben Strool family as residents of Sioux Falls, as does the 1916 *Sioux Falls City Directory* (Sioux Falls, S.Dak.: Polk-Avery Directory Co., 1916), p. 571.

Hullinger on the pitching mound, and Art Rolien managing, the team stacked up win after win, year after year. The size of the spectators' wagers grew in proportion to the degree of rivalry with the opposing team. Bets placed on the outcome of a game with the Lemmon team, for example, ran especially high. The competition sometimes became rough, as when a visiting team of Negro League players took umbrage with an inebriated Strool rooter who hurled insults faster than pitches. When one of the visitors pulled a knife out of his uniform sock, the local quieted down and play continued. At the next day's game, the visiting team presented the man with another bottle of wine and strongly suggested that he change his cheers.¹⁴

Saturday night dances offered another source of entertainment for area residents. The Strool town hall was the setting for dances, which even the children attended, since no sitters were available on those exciting nights. Fights, products of the bottles cached in wagons or cars, were part of the entertainment. Midnight suppers could be had for a small fee, and children eagerly anticipated returning on Sunday morning to look for coins lost during the rowdiness of the night before. Church dinners, held as fund-raisers, provided tamer opportunities for socializing, and Ben Strool is said to have supported both the Catholics and Protestants in their efforts.¹⁵

By the late 1920s and 1930s, Ben Strool was a portly, balding man, who always dressed well, as described by some of those who knew him at the time. He spoke English with no noticeable accent, could quote literature, and presided over a good mercantile store that sold groceries and bought local producers' eggs and cream. One woman recalled him as kindly, fastidious about his hand cleanliness, and more interested in the radios he sold and repaired than the other merchandise in his store. His granddaughter, Martha Jean Peterson, remembers him gargling daily with expensive whiskey. The 1930 fed-

14. Sudlow and Sudlow, *Homestead Years*, p. 69; interviews with Arlie Peck, Sturgis, S.Dak., 3 Feb. 2003, and Edward Fitzgerald, Rapid City, S.Dak., 17 Jan 2003; telephone interviews with Clarence Hullinger, Murdo, S.Dak., 10 Mar. 2003, and Claire Smith, Prairie City, S.Dak., 9 Mar. 2003.

15. *Ibid.*; interviews with Arletta Dailey, 19 Jan. 2003, and Janie Anderson Holbrook, Rapid City, S.Dak., 23 Jan. 2003.



Saturday night dances took place in the Strool town hall, the white building at far right. Dances provided residents with entertainment and a chance to socialize.

eral census records Ben, Martha, and Beryl Strool living in a home (the remodeled Grand Hotel) valued at one thousand dollars. The enumerator also marked the column showing that the household had a radio. Ben's occupation is listed as "storekeeper" of his own establishment.¹⁶

In addition to his modest holdings in personal and business property, Ben Strool owned all of the land upon which the town of Strool sat. Residents paid a minimal annual rent of about twenty-five dollars a year to their landlord, who chose not to sell any part of his homestead. They dug no basements and poured no concrete for their busi-

16. Interviews with Joan Meyer, Rapid City, S.Dak., 9 Jan. 2003, 8 Sept. 2005; telephone interview with Martha Jean Rick Peterson, Lemmon, S.Dak., 15 Sept. 2005; *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930*, Manuscript Population Schedule, Perkins County, S.Dak., Strool Township, Enumeration District 53, line 22. Curiously, the language spoken in Ben's Latvian home before coming to the United States is recorded as Greek; in the previous two enumerations Yiddish and German were mentioned. Martha is shown as four years older than Ben, whereas in 1920 she had been six years his senior. His immigration date is erroneously given as 1930, and he is marked as not a naturalized citizen.

nesses, homes, icehouses, post office, hotels, or newspaper office, choosing to perch the structures on flimsy foundations rather than fasten their futures to the landowner's whims. Some townspeople speculated that Old Testament law prohibited Ben Strool from selling his land, or "Jewish birthright," a theory that has no religious basis. Whatever his reasons, Strool took no action to sell, even though renters sometimes ignored their payments, particularly during the Great Depression and severe drought of the 1930s.¹⁷

17. Interview with Keith Carr, Prairie City, S.Dak., 11 Jan. 2003; Kevin Proffitt, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, to author, 12 Feb. 2003. For more on the Great Depression in South Dakota, see Schell, *History of South Dakota*, pp. 281-97.



Benjamin Strool is pictured here around the time he ran for statewide public office.

As in his youth, Ben Strool continued to be politically active, although less radically so. He helped to organize the Perkins County Democratic Party Central Committee and remained active in the organization for thirty years. One woman who grew up in the Strool area recalled receiving a campaign pencil from Ben Strool in 1928. Topping the pencil was the image of Al Smith, the Democratic—and Catholic—candidate for the presidency running in opposition to Herbert Hoover. With great excitement, she took the pencil to school. Before she could get it sharpened, however, one of her first-grade classmates deliberately snapped it in an act of anti-Catholicism. She speculates that Ben Strool was “out of his element” in Perkins County, being more liberal and of a different ethnic and religious background than the majority population. She also relates that local prejudices extended to his family members, as well, noting that Beryl’s first-grade teacher had heard her students call the little boy a “Christ killer” in imitation of what they must have heard from adults at home.¹⁸

In 1932, Ben Strool ran for the office of South Dakota commissioner of school and public lands, winning 79 percent of the vote to become the first Democrat to serve in the position. Even he reported surprise at the positive election results. In two subsequent elections for the office, Strool won by similar margins, polling 82 percent of the vote in 1934 and 75 percent in 1936. Acquaintances recall him as affable and gregarious, traits he no doubt used to his advantage in campaigning.¹⁹

As a member of the Democratic administration of Governor Tom Berry, Strool managed the permanent funds, sales, timber sales, oil leases, and fines pertaining to the school and public lands of South Dakota. In 1934, despite the state’s adverse climatic and economic conditions, the permanent school and endowment funds amounted to more than \$20 million. Strool’s main challenge throughout his three terms lay in dealing with the drop in income from interest on contracts and loans that occurred during the Great Depression. He also

18. Ben Strool obituary; interview with Meyer, 9 Jan. 2003.

19. South Dakota, *Legislative Manual* (1933), p. 307, (1935), p. 337, (1937), p. 395; telephone interviews with Simon, 22 Feb. 2003, and William Marty, Prairie City, S.Dak., 9 Mar. 2003.

did what he could to help the hard-pressed constituents in his home community, using his influence to secure the appointment for one desperate widow, Laura C. Toner, as Strool's postmaster in 1934.²⁰

During his time with state government, Ben Strool lived with his wife in the Saint Charles Hotel in Pierre, located just a block and a half from the capitol. Martha's daughter Marguerite Rick and her husband moved from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, with their two children, Martha Jean and Lawrence ("Skip"), to live in the Strool home and run the store. During the summer of 1936, Martha Jean lived with her grandparents in Pierre, attending Roman Catholic mass each Sunday at her grandfather's bidding, taking Martha to her doctor appointments for cataract treatments, and running errands to Ben's office in the capitol. The door to Governor Berry's office was always open, she recalled, and he would invite her in for an informal chat, teasing the tomboy by calling her "Jim."²¹

Following Martha Strool's second cataract surgery in the spring of 1937, her stitches became infected, and she developed a raging fever. Her husband arranged for treatment in Omaha where Beryl was living, and she died there on 17 April despite Ben's attempts to obtain the new "wonder drug," penicillin, from New York. The *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader* reported her death as caused by a brain infection. Rabbi Fineberg of the Mount Zion congregation in Sioux Falls officiated at Martha's funeral in the city, and she is buried in Mount Zion Jewish Cemetery there. In his eulogy, Rabbi Fineberg noted her contributions to the development of South Dakota as both a pioneer and the wife of a state official. Ex-governor Tom Berry served as an honorary pallbearer, and a large contingent from Pierre and Mitchell attended the services.²²

Little is known of Ben Strool's life following his wife's death and the end of his state government service. He continued as the owner of Palace City Jobbers, a liquor, tobacco, and candy business in Mitchell,

20. South Dakota, Office of the Commissioner of School and Public Lands, *Twenty-third Biennial Report of the Commissioner of School and Public Lands*, 30 June 1934; Lemmon Leader, 8 Dec. 1955; telephone interview with James Toner, Reno, Nev., 20 Aug. 2003.

21. Telephone interview with Peterson, 15 Sept. 2005.

22. *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 19 Apr. 1937.

which he apparently started following the end of prohibition in 1933. After World War II, Strool served as a price specialist with the Office of Price Administration in Sioux Falls, living at 2308 South Minnesota Avenue in 1947. The following year, he was named as an alternate delegate to the Democratic National Convention from South Dakota.²³

Ben Strool had a long fight with cancer and was critically ill at the Kansas City Research Hospital before his death on 30 June 1949 at the age of sixty-seven. After services led by Rabbi Karl Richter in Sioux Falls on 8 July, he was buried next to his wife Martha in the Mount Zion Cemetery.²⁴ The first item in his will instructed his executor "to provide, at the expense of my estate, and erect a suitable monument to perpetuate my memory in the minds of my family and friends."²⁵ Despite these mandates, no marble marks his final resting place.

Much of the reason for his survivors' failure to carry through on his wishes probably lies in the events that took place just before and after Strool's death. As family members gathered in the presence of the judge and lawyer to hear the reading of the will, a thirty-three-year-old woman named Reizel Hirschfield Strool walked in, bearing a marriage certificate that verified her status as inheritor of Ben Strool's estate, including the townsite of Strool. Indeed, probate papers contain his Last Will and Testament, executed three days before his death and granting to "my beloved wife Reizel" the total estate, with the exception of a one-hundred-dollar bequest to his son Beryl and five dollars to each stepdaughter.²⁶

23. Strool seems to have moved rather fluidly between Mitchell and Sioux Falls. His probate papers in 1949 show assets in a liquor distributing company in Mitchell. *Polk's Mitchell City Directory* (Omaha, Nebr.: R. L. Polk & Co.) for 1942 lists him as a "requisition officer" living at 216 West Fifth Avenue (p. 129), and he appears in the 1948 edition as a "distributor" living at 416 West Tenth Avenue (p. 176). He was listed in *Polk's Sioux Falls City Directory* for 1947 (p. 380). See also "Strool, Ben," Political Graveyard, <http://politicalgraveyard.com/bio/stroock-stryker.html>, accessed 10 Oct. 2006; *Lemmon Leader*, 8 Dec. 1955.

24. Mount Zion Cemetery Journal, p. 224, Mount Zion Temple, Sioux Falls, S.Dak.; Ben Strool obituary; Last Will and Testament, Benjamin Strool Probate Record, 12 July 1949, Davison County Clerk of Courts, Mitchell, S.Dak.

25. Last Will and Testament.

26. Interview with Earl Dailey, Rapid City, S.Dak., 19 Jan. 2003; telephone interview with Freda Hosen, Sioux Falls, S.Dak., 13 Mar. 2003. The Vital Records Office of the South Dakota Department of Health shows no record of a marriage between Ben Strool and Reizel



Reizel Hirschfield was a sophomore at the University of South Dakota at the time this photograph appeared in the 1935 *Coyote* yearbook.

Beryl sued, contending that Reizel was not legally Ben's wife and that his father's signatures on the will had been forged. He further claimed that the two individuals who witnessed the document did not know his father, who was "mentally and physically incapable of making a will and did so under menace, fraud, misrepresentation and undue influence."²⁷ Beryl lost the suit but did receive his one hundred dollars in 1952. At the time of the final accounting of assets and dis-

Hirschfield. The date and place of their marriage is not included with court records, although an official confirmation must have been submitted with the filing of the documents for probate. Reizel Hirschfield's family had no knowledge of the union, either, until sometime after the funeral. Telephone interview with Rabbi Karl Richter, Tampa, Fla., 21 Mar. 2003.

27. Petition in Opposition to Probate of Will, 8 Aug. 1949, Ben Strool Probate Record.

bursements, the estate held \$44.46 in cash. Ironically, Reizel Strool inherited a sum that was less than the forty-eight dollars in annual taxes she owed on her new land and less than half the amount Beryl Strool received.²⁸

Ben Strool's young widow went on to become an accomplished woman. Born 21 July 1916, she had attended Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa, for her freshman year and the University of South Dakota for her sophomore year. After graduating from the University of Iowa in 1937, she had a long career as a hospital dietitian and may have met Ben Strool in Mitchell when she served as chief dietitian at Saint Joseph Hospital in 1940–1941. At the time of his death in 1949, she was working as the chief dietitian at the Lyons, New Jersey, Veterans Administration Hospital. She later married again and appears as Reizel H. Horel in the 1968–1969 edition of *Who's Who of American Women*, filling other chief dietitian positions, instructing at the college level, and holding offices in professional societies.²⁹

Soon after the final settlement of Ben Strool's estate in the early 1950s, his widow arrived in Strool driving a Cadillac. Understandably, she did not receive a warm reception. Clutching a survey Ben Strool had commissioned in 1947, she insisted the townspeople purchase the land on which their homes and businesses rested. In response, the residents moved their buildings two miles north, creating the new town of Prairie City, which they promoted as the fastest-growing community in South Dakota in 1955.³⁰ In 1974, after marrying a man named Bruce Horel in 1961 and moving to New York City, Reizel sold Ben Strool's homestead in two parcels for a total price of twenty-four thousand dollars. The north eighty acres, which constituted the for-

28. Order Admitting Will to Probate and Appointing, n.d.; Final Account and Petition for Distribution, 21 July 1953; and Decree of Settlement of Account, 5 Aug. 1953, all *ibid.*

29. *Who's Who of American Women*, 5th ed., s.v. "Hirschfield, Reizel."

30. Interview with Rodney Carr, Prairie City, S.Dak., 11 Jan. 2003. Many Strool residents had decided earlier to cluster in Prairie City when the expected railroad branch and the blacktopped South Dakota Highway 8 bypassed Strool. The Rural Electrification Act, which brought power to the area in 1952, also helped to spark the exodus. Some people were reluctant to improve their homes by wiring for electricity since they were not the owners of the property. Sudlow and Sudlow, *Homestead Years*, n.p.; telephone interview with Simon, 22 Feb. 2003.

mer townsite, became a bull pasture. The new owner declared the south eighty, once the town's baseball field, unproductive despite the real-estate agent's claims that it contained the best soil in the area.³¹

The town of Strool has long since vanished from roadmaps. Like the pasque, the South Dakota state flower that pops up in the snow-moistened fields of early spring, Strool blossomed for a brief, vibrant time before withering on the Perkins County prairie. Today, only tumbleweed pyramids stand in the fence corners of an unused field to mark the spot where homes and businesses stood for a scant half-century. Like the unmarked grave of the town's founder—immigrant, homesteader, businessman, and politician Ben Strool—the land offers no sign of what once thrived there.

31. Warranty Deeds, Book 278, p. 477, and Book 270, p. 135, Register of Deeds Office, Perkins County Courthouse, Bison, S.Dak.; interview with Mick Quaal, Rapid City, S.Dak., 3 Feb. 2003.

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