

Dakota Images

Arthur C. Van Metre, a Dakota Territory pioneer and Vermillion town founder, was born to John and Mary Gorrell Van Metre in Winchester, Virginia, on 2 April 1837. As a boy, Van Metre went to live with relatives in Missouri, where he signed on as a teamster with General William S. Harney at the age of sixteen. He later traveled with the Harney Expedition to Fort Pierre and assisted troops in refurbishing the former fur post to accommodate its first army garrison.

Van Metre next worked as a freighter for the United States government between Fort Pierre and Sioux City, Iowa. Following his promotion to express messenger, he carried mail on horseback along the military road between Sioux City and Fort Randall. In 1858, Van Metre married Mary Aungie, the daughter of a Yankton Sioux woman and an American Fur Company trader. The young couple settled on Yankton land near the trading post at the mouth of the Vermillion River. When the area opened to non-Indians in 1859, Van Metre became one of the first white settlers in Clay County.

During his years in the Vermillion area, Van Metre farmed, traded, and operated a ferry across the Vermillion River, transporting military personnel and others traveling the Sioux City to Fort Randall road. He is recognized as one of the founders of the town of Vermillion, where he owned a large segment of land, assisted in building the first school, and played an active role in civic affairs. Arthur and Mary Van Metre had five children, all of them born in Vermillion: Viola, Jane, Alvira, John, and Charles.

With the Black Hills gold rush of 1876, Van Metre invested in a milling operation and engaged in freighting to Deadwood, but the enterprises proved unsuccessful. He then moved his family to Brule County, where he engaged in trading and ranching. In 1883, Van Metre relocated to a ranch along the Bad River near Fort Pierre. Fluent in the Sioux language, he often acted as an interpreter and was present for the signing of the Sioux Agreement of 1889 at the Cheyenne River Agency.

Following the death of his wife in 1894, Van Metre continued ranching until his sudden death on 18 January 1903 at the age of sixty-five.

—Jennifer L. Littlefield



Arthur C. Van Metre

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