

Absaroka: A State That Never Was

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Local dissatisfaction with state representation sparks fantasies of secession to form a new state somehow more responsive to local needs with lower taxes. Californians should be familiar with the State of Jefferson, an idea that seemingly will never die. Bill Maginnis of Yreka told an Examiner reporter that in 1941 he bought a gold pan and painted two Xs on it to publicize the “state” and the peoples’ feelings that they had been double crossed by the states of Oregon and California. World War II intervened, but the fantasy has never faded away. Their’s was not the only movement to express local dissatisfaction with representation in the 1930s.

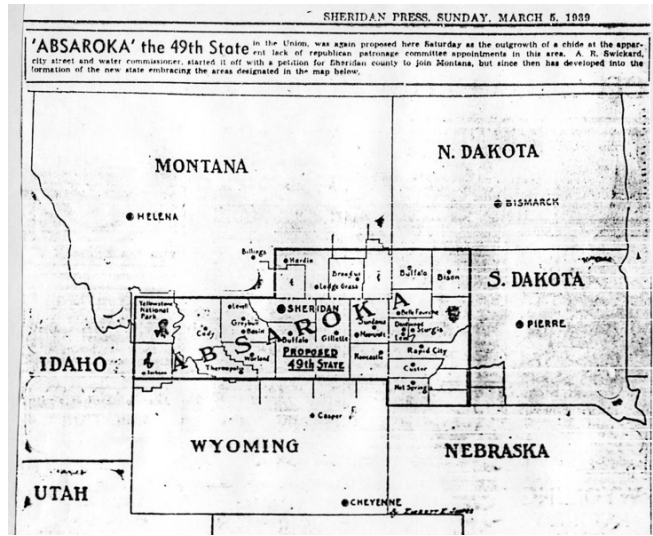


Bill Maginnis with his gold pan. Image constructed from historic images.



ALUMINUM 35MM

My acquisition of an uncommon aluminum token piqued my interest in local secessionist movements. “Greetings from the Proposed State of Absaroka.” And what was Absaroka, other than the fictional county in Craig Johnson’s Walt Longmire mysteries? The reverse declares it is “The Playground of the Nation / Black Hills / Big Horns / Yellowstone Park.” A google search yields the proposed map.



Sheridan Press, Sunday March 6, 1939

Secessionist complaints followed a familiar theme, rural communities had been forgotten as the state focused its resources on improving life in the population centers. The great depression left rural residents feeling left out and forgotten. The Absaroka movement was successful in attracting New Deal funds to rural states in 1935, but they did not trickle down to the farmers. Broken banks, drought, and no jobs resurrected the secessionist movement.

The proposed new state encompassed the ancestral lands and reservations of the Crow and the Northern Cheyenne. The name Absaroka was drawn from the name of the Crow, the people of the long-necked bird. In keeping with the times, no one consulted with either tribe as to their preferences for inclusion or exclusion. Sheridan politician A.R. Swickard gained local fame when he proposed to once again pursue the State of Absaroka. Despite the lack of the required approval in Congress, the state legislatures, and local referendum approval, Swickard declared himself governor and had license plates made to issue to local drivers. He wisely had both Absaroka and Wyoming plates on his own car to avoid running afoul of the law. He even sponsored a Miss Absaroka beauty pageant.

Given the poor economy, how did Swickard draw the boundaries of his fictitious state? The answer is found on the reverse of his promotional token. The new state

economy would be based on tourism. Mount Rushmore was only a few years away from drawing tourists to the Black Hills. Yellowstone National Park was already a tourist draw, and the Big Horns drew tourists to the Indian battlefield monuments. Tourism would be supplemented with mining interests. When the Crown Prince of Norway visited to region's natural wonders, Swickard took the opportunity to declare it the first state visit to the fictional state.

The Absaroka State movement died a similar death as the State of Jefferson movement with the start of World War II. The nation's attention turned to more serious events. But the ideas never completely faded away, The State of Jefferson lives on hats, tee shirts, and lawn signs. Absaroka lives on with a simple aluminum token and in the minds of fans of the TV series *Longmire*.



REFERENCES

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