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Article Summary: Covington, which eventually became part of South Sioux City, existed from 1857 until 1893. Toward the end of that time a local resident described it as one of the "wickedest places in the world."

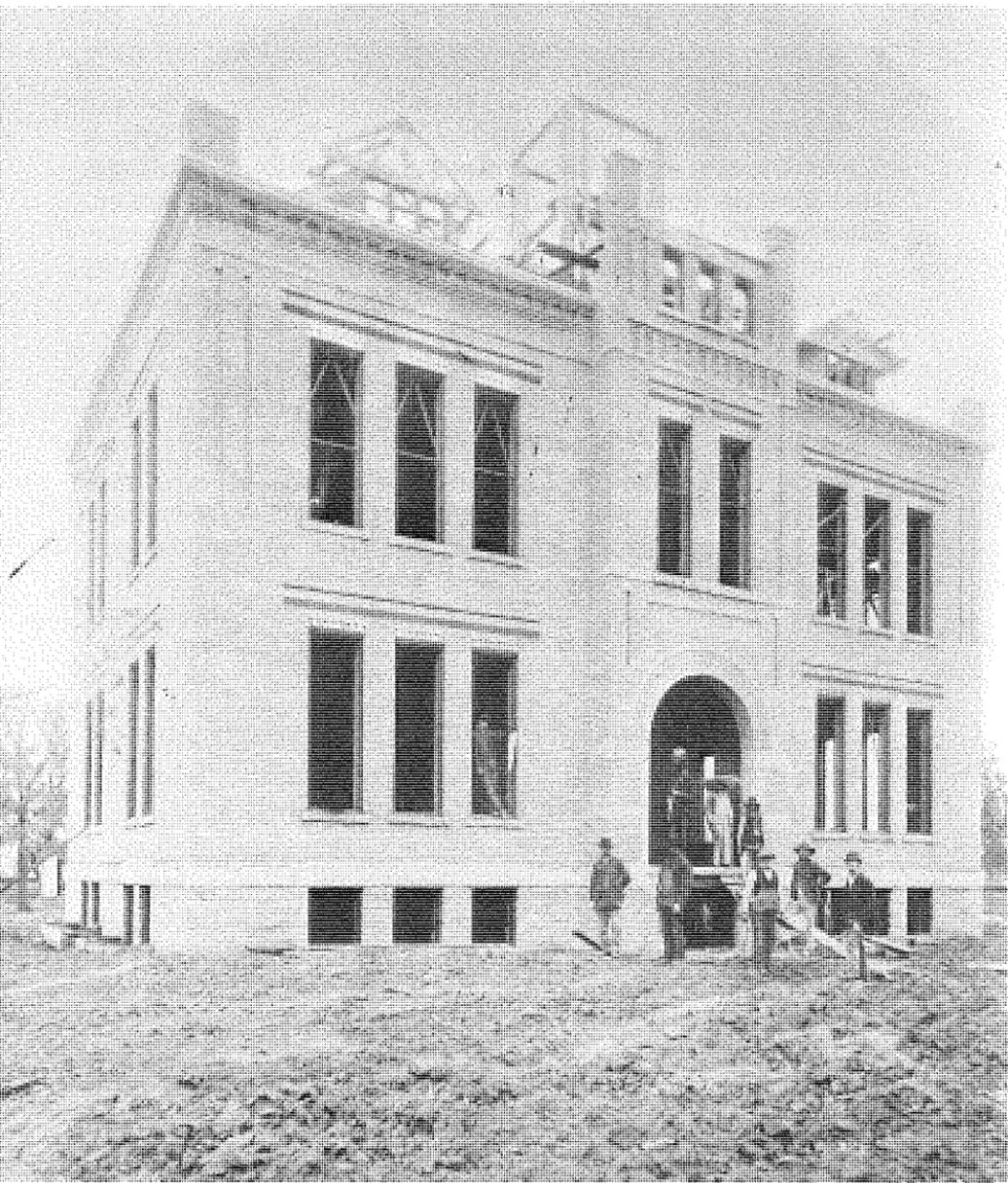
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Photographs / Images: construction of the Covington school, location of Covington on the 1885 Everts and Kirk *Official State Atlas of Nebraska* with overdrawing following a 1925 Dakota County atlas, combination bridge and remaining buildings of Covington as they appeared in 1896, three ways to cross the river (ferry, rail, or pontoon bridge)



Construction of the Covington school, later Lewis and Clark School, was financed through funds collected by Mayor John Peyson from his fellow saloon owners. When townspeople asked about the remaining money, Peyson supposedly said that since he had collected it, he had more right to it than they.—COURTESY MRS. ART MOSEMAN, SOUTH SIOUX CITY.

COVINGTON

NEBRASKA'S SINFUL CITY

By J. R. JOHNSON

PROBABLY few Nebraskans are aware that a town called Covington ever existed. Yet this Missouri River settlement across from Sioux City, Iowa, officially began in 1857 and retained its identity until it merged with South Sioux City, Nebraska, in 1893. Near the close of this period, Covington had the undesirable distinction of being one of the "three wickedest places in the world," the others being the Hong Kong waterfront and the San Francisco Barbary Coast.¹

Covington was rated with such towns as Dodge City, Deadwood, Tombstone, and Virginia City. Characters such as Beefsteak Bod Thompson, Winnebago Jane, Dutch Mary, Doc Middleton, and Black Diamond Nell enlivened and gave color to the town. Saloons, bawdy houses, burlesque palaces, and gambling dens were centers of iniquity that crusaders for

1. Letter from Willis Forbes, retired managing editor of the *Sioux City Journal*, January 16, 1967.

Dr. Johnson, Professor of History at Bellevue College, Bellevue, Nebraska, wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to Mr. Charles M. Mulhair for much of the material in his article. The data is drawn primarily from an unpublished M. A. thesis, "The History of Covington, Nebraska: A Frontier Ghost Town," written by Mr. Mulhair under the direction of Dr. Johnson at Wayne State College in 1963.

morality failed to crush.² The White House, the Cabinet, the Senate, the Tontine, the Oak, the Little Allen, and the Grove were names applied to drinking places. When the heat was on in Sioux City, the town's riff-raff migrated to Covington. Floaters of bad reputation from other areas included the town in their itinerary. As the *North Nebraska Eagle* of October 31, 1889, observed: "Covington is the veritable hell. No man or woman of decency is safe upon the street day or night. The city is entirely given over to drunkenness, debauchery and prostitution."

Yet, throughout the early part of its existence, Covington differed little from any other frontier village, except that its frontage on the Missouri River and its close proximity to Sioux City, Iowa, brought experiences which most other Nebraska settlements escaped.

One might say that Covington had its beginnings in the same year Nebraska became an organized territory, in 1854. That was the year in which Gustave Pecauc built a cabin there. A native of Switzerland, Pecauc migrated to America at the age of fourteen, engaged in the fur trade on the upper Missouri, and served as a messenger between the forts of the American Fur Company. He had many encounters with the Indians and carried scars to prove it.³ Others like Thomas L. Griffey, a man with similar experiences, also settled here.⁴ Though these early settlers underwent hardships such as severe winters, inadequate shelter, and food scarcity, they did not suffer like Father Treacy's Roman Catholic colony farther west at St. Johns.⁵ They were more adapted to frontier life.

2. *North Nebraska Eagle* (South Sioux City), October 31, 1889; *Sioux City Journal*, July 25, 1954, article by Ward R. Evans, who was considered to be an authority on the history of Missouri River crossings at Sioux City.

3. Constant R. Marks (ed.), *Past and Present of Sioux City and Woodbury County, Iowa* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1904), 768-769; M. M. Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska* (Lyons, Nebr.: Lyons Mirror, 1893), 31-39.

4. *North Nebraska Eagle*, January 1, 1892; Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska*, 173-176.

5. Sister M. Aquinata Martin, *The Catholic Church on the Nebraska Frontier, 1884-1885* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1937), 53-54.

Wildlife furnished food; timber provided both fuel and building materials as well as a source of income from the sale of lumber. A sawmill was set up in 1856, and cottonwood and walnut lumber was sold to new river towns as far south as Omaha.⁶

The early territorial period was one of speculation with little attention paid to agrarian pursuits. Wildcat banks sprang up, townsites were platted, and real estate promoters swarmed everywhere looking for suckers. Eight town sites were laid out in Dakota County alone in 1856 and 1857. Some of these were superimposed on others. The Sioux City Land Company, soon reorganized as the Harney City Company, had a plat almost identical with that of later Covington. Newport, another paper town, was platted inside of Harney City.⁷

The Covington Town Company initiated the city of Covington and officially recorded it on February 9, 1857.⁸ Although all three of these towns had been platted, filed, and registered as individual towns, Covington, with some additions was the only one incorporated and legally recognized. This was done April 5, 1870.⁹ Later Stanton, a settlement to the east, took root and was generally believed to be an extension of Covington. However, when South Sioux City was incorporated January 4, 1887, Stanton was included in that town's boundary.¹⁰

The origin of the name "Covington" is controversial. Perhaps the best explanation is that it was named for Covington, Kentucky, since some of the early settlers came from there.¹¹ At any rate, the name stuck and great promise

6. Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska*, 43.

7. Addison E. Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1931), I, 272-276; Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska*, 49-97; *Sioux City Eagle*, July 18, 1857.

8. Original Plat of Covington, Nebraska Territory, in Dakota County courthouse.

9. Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska*, 72.

10. *Ibid.*, 96; *North Nebraska Eagle*, February 28, 1889.

11. Lillian Linder Fitzpatrick, *Nebraska Place Names* (Lincoln, 1925), 42. Original notes of Dr. J. T. Link furnished by the Conservation and Survey Division of the University of Nebraska.

was held for the town's success by papers in Sioux City and other nearby towns. In fact, it was proclaimed a possible rival of Sioux City. Several stores, a hotel, and a number of dwellings attested to its growth. But the seeming prosperity was based on insecure foundations. The Panic of 1857 swept over Nebraska and soon prostrated land speculation. Bank failures brought chaos. The value of town lots dropped and business slumped. An exaggerated estimation in June, 1858 placed the population of Covington at three hundred to four hundred persons. The official census of 1860 placed it at forty-three.¹²

The golden age of land speculation was over, at least for a while. The actual settlers began to see the possibilities of agriculture. The Colorado gold rush of 1859 and the coming of the Civil War gave them hopes for a market, and the Homestead Act held promise for the future. However, there was little change in the structure of Covington during the war years.

The year 1870 is given as the turning point in the transformation of Covington from a wilderness outpost to a small village that might become a rival of Sioux City. Several developments indicated this. The first newspaper, the *Covington News*, appeared in the spring of that year, though it expired the next year. The principal buildings were the National Hotel, Jones & Morris General Store, and two real estate agencies. However, a report in May, 1870 stated that twenty-six new buildings had been constructed within a four month period. Prospective businesses included a saloon, a dry goods store, and an express line to Dakota City.¹³

A more stabilized community was indicated by the construction of a Methodist Episcopal Church, built through donated funds in 1871. A stagecoach line ran to Omaha via Decatur, and a wholesale house shipped goods—food, clothing, and hardware—by steamboat to various ports. All in all, brisk activity was developing in Covington. Then the

12. *Sioux City Eagle*, July 25, September 17, October 24, 1857; Martin, *The Catholic Church on the Nebraska Frontier, 1884-1885*, 33-36.

13. *Sioux City Daily Times*, May 19, 22, 23, 1870.



The combination bridge and remaining buildings of Covington as they

impact of the Panic of 1873 hit. Plans to build extensive rental housing and the dream of founding a Methodist university fell flat. The town began to deteriorate again.¹⁴

The Black Hills gold rush of 1876 aroused new hopes and brought some renewed action to Covington since the town was on the direct route of the Sawyer Road. This road began

14. *Ibid.*, June 21, July 8, August 16, 1870.



appeared in 1896.— COURTESY MRS. ART MOSEMAN, SOUTH SIOUX CITY.

in Sioux City and ended officially in Idaho. However, after gold was discovered, miners sometimes used part of the trail as a route to the Black Hills. A warehouse was built and stables for horses constructed. Some outfitting money stimulated business, and plans for a railroad west got under way. Sioux City promoters organized the Covington, Columbus, and Black Hills Railroad Company. The plan was to build westward to Niobrara and thence to the Black Hills. A branch line south would connect with the Union Pacific at

Columbus. Financing was to come from bond issues of counties through which the road passed. Dakota, Dixon, Cedar, and Knox counties voted to approve bonds, but only Dakota County turned its bonds over to the railroad. Construction began in April, 1876, and trains were running to Ponca by September. This is as far as the road went. Accused of shoddy workmanship, the company fell into disrepute in Dixon County and went into the hands of receivers in 1878. In 1880 it was sold to the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railroad.¹⁵

There was little activity in Covington for several years after the demise of the railroad, though optimism generally prevailed. It was believed there would be a revival of rail construction, which, along with river traffic, would bring prosperity. Another newspaper, the *Covington Journal*, was started in 1877, but expired the same year. Still another, the *Dakota County Mail*, began publication in December of the same year, but moved to Dakota City the following March.¹⁶ Actually, Covington coasted along until the middle of 1888. In January of that year there were only two grocery stores, two hotels, one blacksmith shop, and two saloons. Then suddenly, it seemed like all hell was breaking loose. It stemmed from events across the river in Sioux City.¹⁷

A group of determined crusaders led by one Rev. G. C. Haddock had organized the Law and Order League and set out to clean up the hell holes in Sioux City.¹⁸ The minister was shot down, but no one was ever convicted of his murder. However, he became a martyr to a cause, and the tough element skeedaddled across the river to Covington. What had been a relatively quiet village suddenly became a depository for undesirables. This was accelerated when a saloonkeeper, John Peyson, got himself elected mayor in May of 1888 and surrounded himself with his lackeys.¹⁹

15. William Huse, *History of Dixon County, Nebraska* (Norfolk, *Daily News*, 1896), 74-76; Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska*, 104.

16. Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska*, 77; *South Sioux City News*, January 20, 1888.

17. *Sioux City Journal*, February 3, 1888.

18. *Ibid.*, August 2, 1936, July 25, 1954 (City Centennial Edition).

19. *South Sioux City News*, March 9, April 6, 1888.

Shortly, six saloons and a beer-bottling works were in operation. The town boomed.²⁰ Peyson built a new saloon, the Tontine, hired a member of the town board as head bartender, and made himself kingpin of the town.²¹ Sunday, the big drinking day, saw his place wide open while his competitors were forced to close. Efforts by the Law and Order League to close him failed and only hurt other pubs in the county.²² Hence, Covington, from 1888 until its demise in 1893, was host to almost every type of criminal and undesirable element in the entire Midwest.

The population, 253 in 1887, reached 387 by January, 1889; but the floating population was much greater. Names of business places were misleading. A hotel to one was a house of prostitution to another; a restaurant to one was a saloon to some. One visitor saw six restaurants and three hotels while another saw one hotel, four houses of prostitution, and eighteen saloons. Covington was indeed getting a bad reputation.²³

An enemy to Covington's prosperity was the new town of South Sioux City. Incorporated January 4, 1887, it became a boom town overnight. Except for that part known as Stanton, it attracted more respectable people than its neighbor. It soon had a newspaper, a Presbyterian church, and a large number of business establishments. The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad built a bridge across the Missouri in 1888 and bypassed the older town. Prior to this, ferryboats had landed in Covington providing that town most of the trade. The rise of this new city helped spell the death knell for Covington, but not immediately.²⁴

One of the town's most colorful events took place in 1889 with the building of a pontoon wagon-and-foot toll bridge across the Missouri. The Nebraska end was in Stanton (now

20. *Ibid.*, May 11, 18, 1888.

21. *North Nebraska Eagle*, May 24, 1888.

22. *South Sioux City News*, May 25, June 1, August 3, 1888.

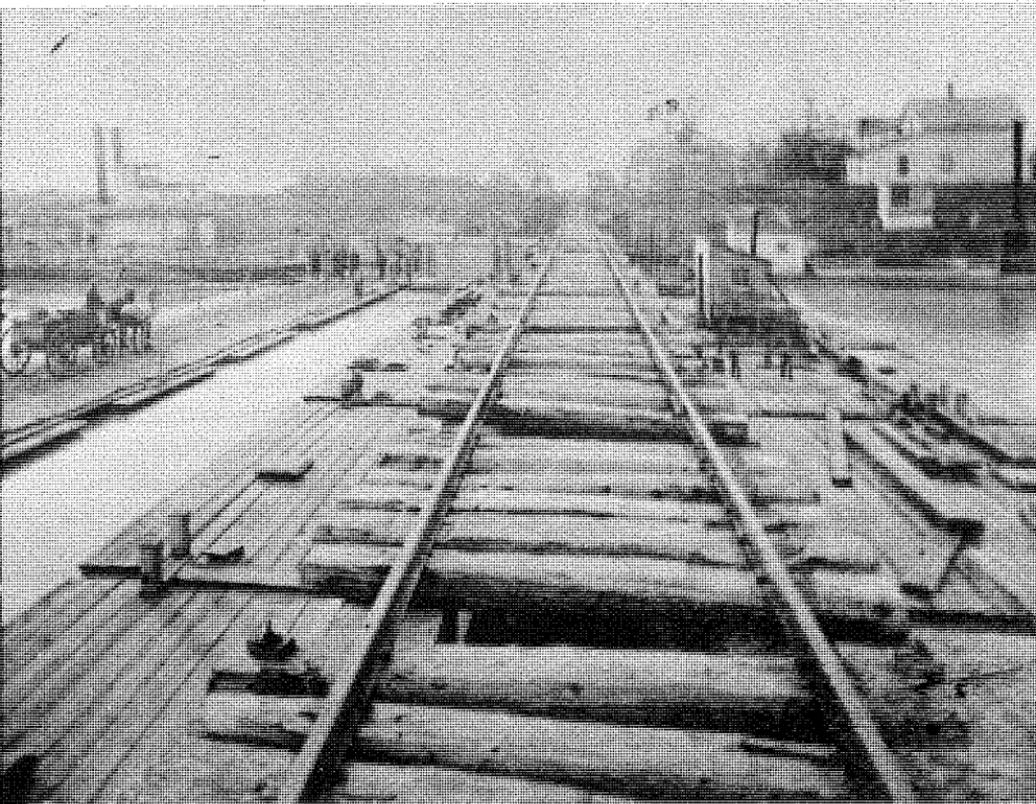
23. *Ibid.*, November 25, 1887; *North Nebraska Eagle*, January 10, 31, 1889.

24. Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska*, 92-93.

part of South Sioux City), and the Iowa approach was just west of the present-day municipal auditorium. The bridge was constructed on 185 boats anchored every fifty feet with two thousand pound granite blocks. The plank roadway was eighteen feet wide and the walkway four feet wide with a wire netting four feet high to protect pedestrians.²⁵

The opening of this bridge was cause for an impressive celebration. It is said that ten thousand people and six

25. *Sioux City Journal*, July 25, 1954. Information relative to transportation facilities—ferryboats, railroad bridge, and the pontoon bridge—was supplied by Mr. Forbes.



Three types of river crossing—ferry, rail, or pontoon bridge visible on the left.—COURTESY MRS. ART MOSEMAN, SOUTH SIOUX CITY.

hundred teams crossed the first day.²⁶ There followed an exodus of disreputable citizens from Covington to Stanton, and more saloons opened there, making twenty all together. Prostitutes, gamblers, and other undesirables arrived in great numbers. Robbery and assault occurred daily, and the pontoon bridge served as a convenient disposal for victims.

A new railroad project, the Pacific Short Line, brought false new hopes to Covington. This road was to be a transcontinental line via Ogden, Utah.²⁷ Building started from Covington in the spring of 1889, ran north of Dakota City, and reached O'Neill in 1891. That was the end. The company started to build a bridge across the Missouri, but went bankrupt. Its assets were sold to the Burlington railroad. Sioux City voted a levy in 1894 to finish the span, and it was completed in 1896 as the combination bridge. The railroad proved to be of little value in reviving Covington's prosperity.²⁸

Relaxation of law enforcement in Sioux City drained Covington and Stanton of their lawless elements for a time. Then two fires in Stanton virtually destroyed that part of town, including seven saloons, and it was never rebuilt. Covington hung on a while longer. Between 1890 and 1893, the population of Covington advanced or receded depending upon the rigidity or laxity of law enforcement in Sioux City.²⁹ Raids prompted by the Iowa State Temperance League in the spring of 1891 brought the bad element back across the river, and the welcome mat was out for all the punks who came. A "funhouse," the Fashion Theatre, was built for "sports" and business was good. Soon fierce competition developed between the gamblers, saloonkeepers, and prostitutes. Now the arsonists got busy. The theatre was

26. Warner, *Warner's History of Dakota County, Nebraska*, 75; *North Nebraska Argus* (South Sioux City), May 31, 1889; *North Nebraska Eagle*, May 30, 1889.

27. E. N. Swett, *The South Sioux City Story* (Pamphlet, 1958). Mr. Swett, a retired superintendent of the South Sioux City public schools, is a recognized authority on the Lewis and Clark Expedition and local history of the Sioux City area.

28. *Sioux City Journal*, July 25, 1954.

29. *North Nebraska Argus*, December 13, 1889, January 31, May 23, 1890.

burned in January, 1892, and the Ferry House and a saloon near the ferry landing followed shortly.³⁰

This destruction did not, however, stymie the funmakers. The Fashion Theatre was rebuilt and the first performance was held on June 1 of that same year. The place proved to be very popular and all sorts of entertainment followed—stage shows, prize fights, cock fights, and other unusual events. Painted, dissipated feminine “stars” strutted their stuff. There were dirty-mouthed comedians and loud-toned singers on the programs. In one prize fight, a certain George Rowny was killed. The promoters were charged with murder, but were cleared.³¹

Violence and death were frequent in the saloons and houses of prostitution. It was dangerous and foolish to go unarmed or walk the streets alone. The newspapers publicized the wickedness and named names, but it apparently had little effect. Nell Johnson, who ran the Oak, was called a speckled half-breed who kept a den lower than the lowest. A young woman named Ida Stewart was killed by one of her “customers.” A well-liked young man, El Erwin from Sioux City, was stabbed to death for refusing to buy a man a drink. A Salvation Army group of sixteen men and three women were thrown in the 10 x 12 jail overnight on a charge of disturbing the peace. Town officials were no more honorable than the inhabitants. The town marshal was arrested and charged with robbery. Nothing came of it. Law enforcement was practically non-existent. When undesirables moved from Sioux City to Covington, they outnumbered the regular citizenry. The town was, indeed, a den of iniquity, an unfit place for respectable people to live.³²

But the gay life in Covington was near an end. Much of the town was destroyed by fire in 1892, probably of incendiary origin. The winter of 1892-1893 was a most destructive one.

30. *Dakota County Democrat* (South Sioux City), March 18, November 20, 1891, January 22, 1892; *North Nebraska Eagle*, January 7, 1892.

31. *Dakota County Democrat*, June 10, October 7, 1892.

32. *North Nebraska Eagle*, May 23, August 8, 22, December 19, 1889; *Sioux City Journal*, July 25, 1954.

Then, too, Sioux City had again relaxed its pressure on the lawless element, and South Sioux City was growing and attracting respectable people. However, just as significant, Mother Nature took a hand in the retrogression. The Missouri River was fast eroding its banks in Covington. By the spring of 1893, little was left of the town "business" district. The *Dakota County Democrat* made this report on March 28, 1893:

The site of the chiefest of the city's iniquities has disappeared. The street where stood the Red Light and vaudeville theatre has long since drifted downward to form bar and bluffs of sand and silt on the lower Missouri, and with it has vanished, almost, the memory of Billy Leach's and the Creole Row. There, too, where the river gurgles sullenly under its frozen surface, stood once the most cosmopolitan group of houses the United States ever saw. But all that is past. The 'Glory' of Covington has departed.³³

Early in February, 1893, representatives of Covington and South Sioux City held a conference and took initiatory steps to merge the two towns. A special election held April 4, 1893, resulted in eighty-three votes favoring annexation, twelve opposed, and twenty-one abstaining. The following day the trustees of South Sioux City approved the action.³⁴ So ended the legal existence of the sinful city of Covington, Nebraska.

33. *North Nebraska Eagle*, February 16, 1893.

34. *Ibid.*, Records of the City Clerk, South Sioux City, Nebraska.