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**HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO THE
SHERIDAN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OUR FIRST HALF CENTURY**

by Mary Ellen McWilliams

As we come to the end of the 50th year since the SCHS was established, it is a revelation to look back and see what was done then and who was doing it. We have clippings kept by Myrna "Mac" Grimm, who joined the SCHS in 1962 and served as Secretary/Treasurer, President and Board member. The information below is from her scrapbooks and extensive records of meeting minutes, lists of attendees, correspondence, and feature stories on major events, housed in the Wyoming Room at the Sheridan County Fulmer Public Library.

Prelude to our Story

In 1951, nine years before our SCHS founding, a group of well-known citizens met to establish a museum. The effort was an outgrowth of a committee appointed by the Sheridan County Chamber of Commerce to undertake the construction and furnishing of an area museum in Sheridan. The organization was incorporated as the Historical Museum Association of Northern Wyoming and Southern Montana on October 29, 1951, and the museum was to be called "Absaroka Museum". It was to encompass an area including the watersheds of the Powder, Tongue, and Little Big Horn defined by Fort Phil Kearny post commander's wife, Margaret Carrington, as the "Land of the Crows". (Editor's note: Absaroka is spelled Absaraka by Mrs. Carrington and by Sam Morton in his book *Where the Rivers Run North*.)

Temporary officers were Mrs. Doris Kooi Reynolds, chairman; James C. Reynolds, vice-chairman; F.H. "Neckyoke Jones" Sinclair, secretary; Wilbur L. Wright, Treasurer; Bernard P. Thomas and Fred Hilman, custodians of exhibits; Claude Gettys, procurator; and Henry A. Burgess, attorney.

Our records jump then to the formation of the Sheridan County Historical Society in 1960, and without a tour through the old newspapers in the library, we do not know what happened to that 1951 effort. However, our group's experiences, then and today, indicate that their scope would have been very difficult to fulfill. Still, it was an ambitious effort, which helped set the stage for the need for a museum to preserve our history and all that has come since.

SCHS – The Formative Years

On January 18, 1960, twenty-three people met in the Hospitality Room of the Bank of Commerce. Robert Helvey, of Big Horn, defined the purpose of the organization to be to collect



Doris Kooi Reynolds. Photo from the Sheridan County Museum/SCHS Collection.

continued from cover page

From a 1951 issue of The Sheridan Press:

The committee urges that all Sheridan, Johnson and Campbell county residents as well as those in Big Horn, Rosebud and Powder River counties of Montana who have any items of historical value, artifacts, typical utensils and other specimens which they desire to have preserved for the enlightenment and education of posterity should communicate with Claude Gettys who will conduct the survey.

There are undoubtedly many costumes, relics and objects of value and interest in attics and stored in out of the way places [by] residents of the area which may be lost or so damaged as to be worthless for museum purposes, officials point out.

A safe fireproof temporary depository has been arranged for and exhibits will be called for and placed in storage, receipted for and properly marked with identification tags until permanent displays are set up.

Historical books, documents, letters, printed material are desired. These will be carefully stored until a later date when they will be treated with preservatives, which will keep them in their present state indefinitely.

A later article in the Press indicates considerable interest in the project as evidenced by a growing number of exhibits that has been accumulated including items from Congressman and Mrs. William Henry Harrison, the latter being a direct descendant of President William Henry Harrison and President Benjamin Harrison. In addition, a site on Beaver street, opposite the south boundary of Pioneer park (now Kendrick Park) was leased to the Association by the city for 99 years.

and preserve historic data and artifacts and to cooperate with the state society in its goals, which are primarily the same as at the county level. Helvey was elected President; Clarence Meyer, Vice President; Dan Ingraham, Secretary/Treasurer; and Hans Kleiber, Historian. Initially four committees were established – museum, program, membership, and publicity. At the second meeting, the Constitution and By-Laws were approved. The charter from the Wyoming State Historical Society was issued on September 24th of the same year.

We Are Indebted to Those Who Served

The roster for the initial meetings included a list of some of the Sheridan area's most active and effective citizens. Besides Helvey, Meyer, Ingraham and

Kleiber, they were: Elsa Spear Byron, Mr. and Mrs. Vernon Griffith, Porter Kennedy, Dorothy and Nancy Burns, Arthur and Bly Dickson, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Hilman, Hila Gilbert, Byron Elmgren, Bud Campbell, Glenn Sweem, Mr. and Mrs. Tris Colket, George Ostrom, H.F. "Neckyoke Jones" Sinclair, Mr. and Mrs. D.O. Geier, Alma Grimes, Mrs. W.P. Peters, Mrs. Fred Yonkee, Charles Erlanson, Gertrude Spomer, and Frank and Lida Campbell.

Others who attended those early years were Robert Skinner, Mrs. R.T. Helvey, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Coffeen, Grace Coffeen, Mrs. James Birchby, John and Harriet Gillespie, Don Grey, Ernestine Barker, and Vie Willits Garber. (Please note there are a few names, which were unreadable.). Their exceptional efforts set a standard for us today and provide

a wealth of ideas for projects, activities, and programs for us to pursue.

In Search of a Museum Location

Efforts began immediately to find a building for a historical museum. Porter Kennedy was Chairman of the Museum Committee. The old weather bureau building was considered, as was the Bradford Brinton home – for artifact storage at least – and the old telephone building. Talks, in fact, began as early as 1961 with Manville Kendrick about the possibility of having Trail End as a county museum.

With Glenn Sweem and Elsa Spear Byron involved, it should be no surprise that much of the early interest included archaeology and the not-so-long-ago "Indian Wars" in the area. The Society considered the possibility of purchasing the Fort Phil Kearny site from D.O. Geier. However, Geier believed any excavation would do no good because most of the land had been under cultivation for 60 years. The Society actually contacted the family of General Phil Kearny, who requested that we please spell Kearny without the "ey" to correspond with the actual family name. Years later, Mac Grimm, as part of the Fort Phil Kearny Board, made their bank redo the checks because they had spelled Kearny as Kearney. Don Grey stated it would take approximately \$500 to excavate the site. (Editor's note: The Fort Phil Kearny sites today, from a later effort, include over 1000 acres of State and Fort Phil Kearny/Bozeman Trail Association purchased land, which has been partially excavated.)

The Society instead moved to begin work marking other historic sites. In 1960, Lola Homsher, Director of the State Archives and Historical Department reported that 23 historical markers – one per county – as funded by the state legislature in 1959, were being prepared at the state penitentiary.

The first eight, in counties along the Pony Express Route, would be in place for the Pony Express Centennial beginning in 1961. Sights in Sheridan County included the Sibley Fight in the Big Horns, the Sawyers' Battle between Dayton and Ranchester, and the Connor Battlefield near Ranchester, as well as Crook's Camp at Sheridan. Bob Helvey was asked by the State to write the interpretive signage for across the road from the Fetterman Battle Monument. Sweem appealed to the Society to work to protect these historic sites from vandalism.

The interest in these sites would reach a crescendo in July of 1963 with an Emigrant Trail Trek sponsored by the Sheridan County, the Johnson County, and the Wyoming State Historical Societies marking the 100th anniversary of the historic Bozeman Trail.

Sadly, Robert T. Helvey died in early 1964. His legacy, and those of his fellow historians, is still being built upon today. ♦

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car door on Grimm's daughter Norla's finger. Mari asked for an aspirin and fixed up an "aspirin pack" to put on Norla's finger, which felt much better soon. Mari said that she always got her fingers caught in New York taxicab doors and used the packs so she could go on typing when she got home.

In addition to her historical interests, Mac also had a career. She did typing and mimeographing at home and worked in the office at the Sheridan Commercial Feed Mill, which she had to leave in the 1970s because the dust aggravated her asthma. Then she clerked at J.M. McDonalds and Stevens Fryberger, retiring in 1994 when Stevens Fryberger closed.

Today Mac remains busy. She is a member of the FPK/BT Association and Big Horn City Historical Society as well as the SCHS/WSHS and the Sheridan County Museum. She serves as chapter historian and has created several scrapbooks containing the history of the SCHS. In addition, she is active with her church and is historian, keeping, of course, scrapbooks for the woman's group there. Family history interests Mac, and she does some genealogy but mostly collects obits and family photos and makes scrapbooks of both Bill's and her side of the family. Mac and Bill have a son and a daughter in Big Sky, MT, a son in Kansas, and five grandchildren. ♦

DOES ANYONE REMEMBER SHERCOCHA TRAIL?

In 1983, Linda Prill started a newsletter for the Society. In May, she announced a newsletter-naming contest. Three members submitted the name *Smoke Signals* and one member submitted *Shercocha Trail* for [Sheridan County Chapter](#). The newsletter became *Smoke Signals Along the Shercocha Trail*. Linda continued with the newsletter until Mary Ellen McWilliams took it over sometime in the 1990s. When the name was dropped isn't recalled.



The SCHS logo, in use since 1964, is a sketch by Lyle Compton. Compton was born in 1900 and came to this area from Chicago where he learned to cowboy by penning cattle at the Chicago Stockyards. Exactly when or why he came here is unknown. He worked for area ranches including Benny Binion at Parkman and Mibra and Mary Lloyd at Otter, MT. He drew the Lloyd's family Christmas cards for many years. He was a dedicated cowboy and always had something else to do when it was time to put up hay or repair fence.

Known as "Comp", he never married, and lore has it that he had a sweetheart who was killed. He could drive but, never owning a car, would catch a ride to town with the mailman or someone else going his way. Usually he wintered in Sheridan where he enjoyed playing the drum in the Sheridan Drum and Bugle Corps.

Comp served in WWI as a horse medic and could draw a skeleton of a horse and name every bone. He didn't use a camera and sketched on-site or from memory. A contemporary of Bernard Thomas, they spent some time trading artistic ideas and techniques.

He was proud of his saddle, which had belonged to Will James at one time. He had silver spurs and a silver bit and always took pride in his tack. Time meant nothing to Comp. He cut his own hair, liked to sing, and cut both ends off cigarette butts and put the remaining tobacco in his Bull Durham sack to use for his own cigarettes.

Comp inherited a cabin in Absarokee, MT, from his mother. That is where he passed away at the age of 80.



MEMBERSHIP & DONATION INFORMATION

SHERIDAN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY/ WYOMING STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The SCHS/WSHS membership includes membership in SCHS and WSHS. It includes receiving copies of the *Annals of Wyoming*, the state historical society newsletter *Wyoming History News* and the SCHS newsletter *The Log* as well as meeting and special events notices for \$31 single and \$43 household.



SHERIDAN COUNTY MUSEUM

The memberships are structured by four levels*:

- Level 1** \$30 for single adults and
\$25 for single seniors (aged 60 or over)

- Level 2** \$50 for family

- Level 3** \$100 for business or individual

- Level 4** \$500 for corporate or business

Each level carries various passes to the museum, discounts at the Merc, a subscription to the museum newsletter *The Log* and special events notices.

*Museum memberships at all levels are discounted \$5 for single SCHS members and \$10 for household SCHS members at Levels 2, 3, or 4.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

SHERIDAN COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP

- New Membership Renewal
- \$31 Single Dues \$43 Household Dues

SHERIDAN COUNTY MUSEUM MEMBERSHIP

- Level 1 \$30 Adult Level 3 \$100 Business or Individual
- Level 1 \$25 Senior Level 4 \$500 Corporate or Business
- Level 2 \$50 Family

THE LOG NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTION

- \$15 One year (3 regular issues, plus any supplemental issues)

THE LOG NEWSLETTER DONATION

- \$_____ Additional donation to help defray publication costs. Suggested \$5 for individuals and \$10 for households/businesses.

DONATION TO SUPPORT THE SHERIDAN COUNTY MUSEUM

- \$_____ The Sheridan County Museum is pleased to accept donations of any amount to support our mission - *to preserve and share the history of our area with present and future generations.*
- I would like a member of the SCHS Board to contact me concerning a donation.

\$_____ **TOTAL**

Name _____

Address _____

Seasonal Address _____

Seasonal Dates: Start _____ End _____

Phone _____

Email _____

Mail check and form to:
Sheridan County Historical Society & Museum
P.O. Box 73, Sheridan, WY 82801

