

Transcribing a resonating life

BY LOIS BELL
SHERIDAN SENIOR CENTER

"I don't think they would ever print anything from my diary if they found it somewhere a hundred years hence." ~ Elsa Byron Spear

Born in Big Horn in 1896, Spear grew up in Sheridan and on the families' ranches at the beginning of the 20th century. In the photographic community, Spear is known for her photographic work.

"Anyone who knows photography knows of Elsa Spear," said Sheridan resident Mona Brown.

Brown is a member of a team of four women who will showcase another dimension to Spear's diaries. The team is transcribing the diaries from her handwritten journals into typed format for the years 1906 to 1922.

Brown finds Spear fascinating even as early as age 10 when Spear began journaling in 1906.

If Spear did not think anyone would read her diaries, why did she keep

journals for so many years?

"I don't know," said Brown. "Probably because the Spear family was all diarists. The Wyoming Room was just given a diary from the Buffalo Library from Virginia Belle Benton Spear who was Elsa's mother. The diary was discovered at a yard sale."

Spear's stories resonate with Brown.

"I've been able to relate to a lot of things Elsa did because of the way I lived," said Brown who grew up on the Coates Ranch south of Big Horn.

Spear writes of moving and working the cattle, branding and gathering the roundup wagon on the family's ranches in Clearmont, Big Horn, Dutch Creek and the Crow Reservation. She writes of riding the train.

"I used to ride the train a lot growing up," said Brown. "Elsa writes of she and her family riding the No. 41 and 42 trains."

Spear wrote about everything: where she went, what she saw, who was there, what books she read and

their authors. Her entries speak of trips, going to church, Sunday school, theaters, Baptist organizations, cleaning house and washing dishes, moving the herd, and making candy or some treat. These are the details of everyday living that historians devour.

"I can't tell you what draws me to this project but I love the history part of this," Brown said. "If there was a dance, Elsa would list everybody there."

Her family and friends went to the Grand, the Orpheum, the Electric and the Pastime for entertainment.

"I assumed they were theaters but her diary doesn't say," Brown said. "She does mention silent films of the times."

There are details that Spear omits.

"She would list people at an event with their first name and last initial," said Brown. "Then we have to research who that person was. She writes of making Wyoming Prairie Dog as a teenager. We think it was a treat but we have no idea what it is."

Spear also writes of trips to Washington, D.C., and Omaha but does not always share why they were traveling.

Brown has worked on the Elsa Project since November 2010. The project scope is to scan, transcribe and publish Spear's diaries. Brown has scanned many of the diary pages.

"It would take days to

scan one book," Brown said. "Elsa included programs, photos and news articles. Sometimes we would come across pressed flowers."

Now Brown is transcribing the pages she scanned into a typed format. Other project members are Judy Slack, Sandi Ziler and Mary Dailey. Brown has transcribed diaries for the period 1906-1911, 1913 and is now working on 1920, 1921 and 1922.

Grant funding from the Nickerson Family Trust has been key to allowing transcriptionists such as Brown to continue on this project.

"We have been given donations from the Nickersons for years for this project and worked on it through the years from The Wyoming Room," said Brown.

When Slack retired as manager of The Wyoming Room on Dec. 15, the position to procure grants for the projects was vacated. Prior to her retirement, Slack had procured funding to continue the work in 2016. The Big Horn City Historical Society and Coffeen Historical Information Education Foundation, Inc. funneled Nickerson funding to support continuation of the Elsa Project. Team members work from home.

What does Brown find most fulfilling about the Elsa Project?

"Getting the story down. It's extremely interesting



COURTESY PHOTO | LOIS BELL

Raised in Big Horn, Sheridan resident Mona Brown finds connection to pioneer Elsa Byron Spear through transcribing Spear's handwritten diaries. Both women were raised on area ranches. Brown is a member of a team that is bringing to 21st century readers Spear's stories from the years 1906 to 1922.

reading," Brown said.

When done, the transcribed diaries will be published and sold to the public. Once published, Brown confesses to wanting to read the collection again.

"The books will be sold definitely through the Big

Horn City Historical Society. That's how we keep going and doing what we're doing," Brown said.

What does Brown see in her future after the project is completed?

"I could continue doing this forever," Brown said.



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SENIOR CENTER HAPPENINGS

Interested in a trip to Jackson Hole? The Senior Center is organizing a trip May 25-28. The itinerary includes a tour of Teton National Park, a tour of the Jackson Hole Winery, and the opening night of the 2016 season for the Bar J Wranglers. Price includes round-trip coach bus with Arrow Stage Lines, lodging, breakfasts, dinners, entrance to the Park, the Bar J Wrangler Show and dinner. The deadline to register with

payment is March 31. Discounts are available if you have a roommate, are registered with the Senior Center and pay in full by March 31. You can sign up at the front desk of the Senior Center at 211 Smith St. or sign up with a credit or debit card by phone. Call Lois Bell at 672-2240 for details and to sign up.

The second Healthy U! Chronic Disease Management class is now registering for its upcoming six-week

program April 7 through May 19 (no class on April 21). This session is being offered from 5:30-8 p.m. in the Community Room of the Sheridan Senior Center at 211 Smith St. There is no charge for the class but pre-registration is required as space is limited to 14 participants. Please pick up a registration form at the front desk of the Senior Center and return your registration to the front desk by April 1.

CENTER STAGE

Chronic disease? Consider this

A lot of people wonder why I have a walker but I'm afraid of falling because I have fallen and my balance is very bad. I also have high blood pressure. I've been very frustrated with my condition of high blood pressure and my equilibrium.

I found out about a Chronic Disease Management class that the Senior Center was offering. I saw it advertised in The Sheridan Press, on flyers at the Senior Center, and in the Senior Center's Center Stage newsletter. It was free and very easy to sign up.

When I signed up for the class, I was just hoping to find out tips on how I could cope with my condition.

I was surprised at the variety of conditions people in the class had. There is a maximum number of people one class can hold. It was a full class with 14 people plus two instructors.

People who came had a variety of conditions including high blood pressure, arthritis, depression, celiac and diabetes. Caregivers were also there to work on their health as they are under a lot of stress.

I was very surprised at the similarities among the participants. Most were under stress. Many have so much to do and can't do them when bad days sneak up on us.

We had a book to read, Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions. It's about 327 pages. I loved reading it. And the book was free with the class.

Each of us developed a weekly action plan and we were told to revise or modify it as we needed depending on our condition. Working on the action plan helped in good

decision making.

Some of the suggestions they came up with really surprised me. Today, some of those suggestions seem rather obvious like doing meditation. I don't think a lot of people would think of meditation as a coping mechanism but it does help.

I also learned how diet can help. Diet does affect my inner ear condition. I'm having to eat more often and not too much at one time. I didn't really change what I ate but when I ate. I also have GERD so I was already aware of what I could and couldn't eat.

I am also walking more with my walker. It really lifts your spirit to walk. Walking is wonderful. Before the class, I would walk once or twice weekly but now I'm walking four to five times a week. I use a pedometer to measure the steps I take in a week. I set a weekly goal so I can adjust for those days I'm too dizzy to walk or have migraines when I can't see well.

I enjoyed the class so much because you can get so many different suggestions on what you can do for your condition. They are all very encouraging.

The camaraderie was good and the instructors were excellent. The instructors really threw themselves into the class. Janet Korpela, one of the instructors, wanted to lose weight and I commented to her recently that I was seeing this in her. The other instructor, Dave Schwaiger, also set goals for himself as a result of the class. Dave is a nurse at the Senior Center.

I think the class helped everyone who completed it. I just loved this class and wish I could take it again. I highly recommend it for anyone.



DARLENE MCNAIR

DARLENE MCNAIR is a Sheridan resident. Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan Community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.

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