

Museum Minute

High Tea Brings Elk Mountain History to Life Through Forgotten Teacher's Story

By Angie Hobbs

Director, Elk Mountain Museum

On March 7, the Elk Mountain Museum hosted its 4th Annual History and High Tea. It is a much anticipated event and this year's was the best yet. We can't thank Christine Neel and her staff enough for making the gorgeous dining room in the exquisite Historic Elk Mountain Hotel available for us to use.

In addition to having an elegant afternoon tea, we also give a little history presentation about some of the amazing people who helped make Elk Mountain what it is today. This year, we learned about Dorothea Smith. Her name would have been lost to time had her husband not reached out to the postmistress in the spring of 1988 to share Dorothea's manuscript with the town. If not, this precious and enlightening bit of Elk Mountain history would have been lost forever and none of us would know the name Dorothea Smith.

Dorothea Smith came and taught at the brand-new Elk Mountain school for the 1941-1942 school year. Years later, she was writing a manuscript of her adventures as a new teacher in the small town of Elk Mountain, Wyoming. She intended to publish it but she passed away before it was completed. After her passing, her husband sent the manuscript and a few other documents to the postmistress here. What was sent is priceless.

It was the summer of 1941. Dorothea was a UW student from Garfield, Kansas. She was finishing up her third degree, a master's degree, and was a little depressed because even after all that, she had no job and no prospect of a job and all of \$12 to her name. She wandered down to the student union building and found

out that a fellow student of hers had just landed a job as the superintendent of a new school and that he needed teachers. Particularly, one teacher to teach high school English, History and Music... exactly what her three degrees were in, so she landed the job. She then thought to ask where it was that she'd be teaching. That was the first time she'd ever heard of Elk Mountain, Wyoming. She signed a contract to teach all three of those subjects for \$90 a month. A week later, she caught a train to Hanna and her description is spot on.

"The train ground to a halt. I staggered out and was helped onto the ground by the conductor. It was like walking into a brick wall. There was a wind blowing, a stiff wind. I braced myself, tightened my grip on my luggage, prayed my hat would stay on, assumed the proper angle with respect to the wind, and slanted myself toward the station. This was my first meeting with that wind, which always blew in that part of Wyoming. It blew without ceasing. One day, when it did, I came out of a building prepared for the wind and almost fell on my face when I met no resistance."

No one came for her at the station, so she ended up catching a ride to Elk Mountain with Si, the large Scandinavian mailman. Si drove her into town as far as the Trading Post and she had to figure it out from there. After a tough day of traveling, these were her thoughts upon seeing the town of Elk Mountain for the first time.

"It wasn't until I unloaded my stiffening frame from the uncomfortable truck that I saw that the road was gone. It just wasn't there anymore. Then I could have wept, torn my hair, and gnashed my teeth. I had a vision of myself

walking a tightrope, fifty feet in the air, above a track of dust just like the one I was standing in, maintaining my balance by waving my three degrees in one hand, and my contract for nine months at ninety dollars a month in the other."

She then talks about finding a place to live in town.

"House hunting in Elk Mountain was a problem. It wasn't that there was a shortage of houses or of places to live. The problem was adjusting one's standards."

After a few weeks of staying at the superintendent's house with his family and staying at the hotel, which was boarding a few other teachers as well as students, she did find a place of her own. She landed in one of Mr. Garretson's cabins... which we believe to be one of the Elk Mountain Cabins. She ended up renting Number 1 for \$8.00 a month. The numbering system was how many bedrooms it had. Number 1 had no running water or electricity and was not insulated all that well either.

She tells how the town did not have electricity in the year 1941. She named the few buildings in town that had electricity because they had their own power plant. The Hotel, the Trading Post, The Odd Fellows Hall, The Bar and a handful of homes. (including her landlord's) Notice the school was not on that list. They couldn't hold events at the school after dark because there wasn't electricity.

This business of not having running water or electricity made for some of her more wild adventures here in Elk Mountain. She became well acquainted with the nuances and dangers of both Kerosine and Gas powered lanterns and she provided vivid

Angie Hobbs shares the story of early Elk Mountain history during the museum's annual History and High Tea event, highlighting the life and experiences of teacher Dorothea Smith.



descriptions of both. Her description of the effort and struggle it was to do something as seemingly simple as take a warm bath privately in her own little house is so hilarious, but she insisted on having her own private bath. In her words it was "sort of Englishman-dressing-for-dinner-in-the-jungle thing."

Apparently all that was too much effort for most folks because it is from her stories that we learn that most folks in town did their bathing either at the Finn Swim Sauna or at the Bar. She described both in great detail. The sauna is reasonably easy to understand ... a fire box with fire heated rocks, water is splashed on the rocks and everyone just steams. The Finns would then either roll in the snow after steaming or splash cold water on each other and then get

dressed, enjoy some homemade alcohol and cake and call it a day.

The bar, however, is an interesting place to bathe. She tells that the bar had a little room off the side with a large rectangle metal tub in it and the ability to run hot water. So the townsfolk would all show up at the bar on Saturday nights, families with kids included, with a bar of soap in their pocket and a towel over their shoulder to wait for their turn in the bathing room. There would be the usual bar activities happening with kids running around, watching poker games, shooting dice with the adults while they fortified themselves and whatever else goes on in a small-town Wyoming bar in the 1940's... while everyone took their turn at bathing.

Her description talks about an Elk >13

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A teapot rests atop a tea candle warmer beside a delicate cup, adding warmth to the Elk Mountain Museum's annual History and High Tea.



An elegant table setting awaits guests at the Elk Mountain Museum's annual History and High Tea, reflecting the charm and hospitality of the historic gathering.



Photos courtesy of Angie Hobbs

Mountain tradition that there were no adult parties or children's parties... there were just parties and everyone in attendance was expected to participate in whatever the activities were... be it pin the tail on the donkey for a child's birthday party or dancing with the adults at their gatherings... so having kids at the bar on a Saturday night wasn't unseemly to the Elk Mountain folks. She spoke of the many parties that Elk Mountain held. It would seem that any excuse for a party was a good enough reason and a shindig could be planned in 5 minutes or less. There was always a party or dance of some sort happening.

As you can well imagine, if bathing was a chore, laundry was also a huge chore. It was an all-day event to wash one's clothes by hand after hauling the water into the house and heating it on the stove one pan at a

time. Dorothea's landlord had his son and daughter in law and their young family living with him. She became good friends with that lady Eleanor. Remember The landlord's house was one with a power plant, so Eleanor had a washing machine! and in due course of time she offered Dorothea the opportunity to use it - For which Dorothea was so grateful. She said this about her friend Eleanor-

"Like other people in Elk Mountain, she felt that a convenience she owned was to be shared with those less fortunate."

If that statement doesn't describe the people of Elk Mountain and many other small Wyoming towns, I don't know what would.

Throughout her manuscript, she mentions all kinds of interesting history. Like her first experience with the smell of burning hair. Spring branding happened there in the corrals out

behind the school. She thought for sure one of the students was burning something in her classroom... and so that day, the students got to educate the teacher on cattle and branding and other such topics.

Remember the year was 1941 and 1942. World War II was raging and the United States entered the war in December of 1941 after Pearl Harbor was bombed. She was here in Elk Mountain as that became a reality for this nation. One month later on January 8, 1942, early on that Friday morning, a military bomber plane crashed at Murky Hollow... which is about half way between Elk Mountain and Hanna near Highway 72. Joe Evans found one of the 8 military guys from that plane being dragged by his parachute. He helped him get the parachute released and took him to the hospital thinking his back was broken. A huge search party was organized to find the other 7 Soldiers. Six were

found quite easily. The 8th and final soldier's body was found the following day. His parachute had apparently failed to fully open and he died in the incident. The rest of that Saturday was spent watching several army trucks come and carry away the wreckage of the bomber. She and her school newspaper troop reported on this and so much more.

Although not an ice-skater herself, she was always invited to go and was provided with skates to use. She talked of the town's fascination for and skill in ice skating. She divulged that the favorite spot was 6 bends upriver from the Hotel. The skaters would gather and promptly build a big fire right on the ice and skate all around it. Usually by the time the fire had burned out or burned its way through the ice, the skaters would head home, it being late at night sometimes.

The Elk Mountain School was brand new that school year. Parts

of the building were still unfinished. It was a small school that housed K-12. There were still ranch schools all around at the outlying ranches. Sometimes with only 1 student, but usually a handful of students. Teaching so many subjects to such small groups required all the teachers to be very creative and oftentimes unorthodox in their lesson plans. But she loved it. She loved the kids, loved the community and spoke to her husband often of the wonderful people she met here and the crazy adventure it was to live here. Her manuscript is a valuable insight into the culture and lifestyle of Elk Mountain at the time our nation entered WWII.

If you'd like to learn more about Dorothea's adventures, the manuscript that her husband shared with the town has many more crazy stories and historical tidbits to enjoy. Stop by and discover something new at the Elk Mountain Museum.

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