



DAWSON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MUSEUM

BANNER

Vol.42 No.1

A Fresh Look at Our History

JANUARY 2020

Back in MY Day . . .

Crystal Werger

I often hear my 16-year-old son start a sentence with "Back in the day". It amuses me because he's usually talking about something he remembers from when he was a kid, which was 10 years ago at the most. However, sometimes he is actually referring to how something was done when his grandparents were young, or something they recently talked about in history class. I think we all use that phrase in some form or another. I remember my Grandparents telling me "back in their day" they didn't have fancy gadgets, and how we were so fortunate to have things like dishwashers and air conditioners. Honestly, my children have no idea what life was like before those appliances and they have no idea just how easy life has become for them. Which made me think – that and a funny message Cheri sent me about respecting your parents because they made it through school without *Google* – kids today have no idea how people researched and wrote papers before computers and the internet, or how to clean a carpet without a vacuum cleaner, or even how to dial a rotary telephone!

So, during the year 2020 the Dawson County Historical Museum's theme will be **Back in My Day**. We will be exhibiting items that show how things were done before the wonderful innovations we all take for granted today. We will have special exhibits in the art gallery and the main gallery comparing one generation's "My Day" to another. We will also draw attention to items we have on exhibit year-round that reflect this year's theme.

We would love to hear your "Back in My Day" stories so please stop by the museum and share them with us! If you can't stop by, then email them to me at crystalwerger@gmail.com. Everyone has at least one story. If nothing immediately comes to mind, just spend some time with your kids or grandkids. In no time you'll hear those words coming out of your mouth, "Back in MY day. . . ."

Looking Forward

We have a couple of exhibits coming up this year that need a few more items.
Can you help us with any of these things?

Child-sized Mannequins and/or Dress Forms
Overton High School Yearbooks

Graduation-Themed Items & Stories
Anything Farnam

----- FEBRUARY ART EXHIBIT -----

From Where I Stand Sheldon Museum of Art

The Dawson County Historical Museum is starting off the new year with a traveling exhibit from the Sheldon Museum of Art in Lincoln. *From Where I Stand* presents works by fourteen diverse artists who explore the relationships people have with the places they inhabit. The Lexington Community Foundation is the local sponsor of this exhibition. *From Where I Stand* will be on display in the DCHS Art Gallery through March 2nd.

----- SATURDAYS IN FEBRUARY -----

Saturday, February 22nd 1:30 Barb in Alaska & Germany



The Dawson County Museum will be hosting the Nebraska IFYE organization meeting in the morning.

Barb Batie will be presenting a program open to the public at 1:30PM.

Barb will report and show photos from The World IFYE Conference Cruise to Alaska and her trip with Governor Rickett's Trade Mission to Germany.

Saturday, February 29th 1:00 From Our Front Porch

The Dawson County Historical Society Annual Meeting will be held on February 29th.

We will be serving soup and rolls at 1:00PM.

The program will be the first of our 2020 *From Our Front Porch* series:

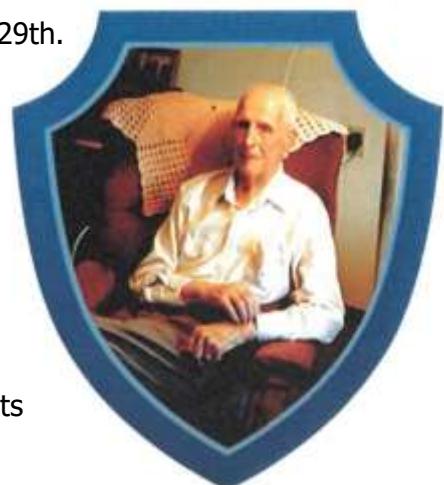
THE STORY OF SERGEANT EDDY, NEBRASKA'S LAST DOUGHBOY.

Loomis native Craig Larson will share his own story of visiting with Sgt. Jess Edmisten from Lexington. Larson is a public speaker & storyteller and former CEO of the Nebraska Rural Radio Association.

There will be a short business update on the museum.

We know it's always risky to plan events during Nebraska winters, but who wants to stay home all winter? Listen to KRVN for weather updates!

Come for lunch and enjoy the WWI Doughboy Story!



OLGA (NIELSEN) SHELDON DCHS CHARTER MEMBER

The bride is a native-born daughter of Dawson County, is a charming and accomplished young lady and has a large circle of friends in Dawson County. The groom is a young Lexington businessman engaged in the lumber and coal trade, and is very popular among his associates. Mr. & Mrs. Sheldon left for the west on No. 11 at noon, and will visit the principal cities on the Pacific coast, returning in about three weeks. Their residence, of course, will be in Lexington.

Dawson County Pioneer: Friday, May 11, 1917

Olga Nielsen was born in Lexington August 25, 1897. She was the fourth of nine children born to Hans Peter and Karen (Frandsen) Nielsen. Their home was an acreage in the Lexington Heights area along 13th Street. Both of Olga's parents were immigrants from Denmark. They married in Minden in 1891, and then made their home in Lexington. HP ran a grain and farm implement business. In 1909 he was elected Mayor of Lexington. Olga recalled a pleasant childhood in a large house on the Heights. She said that her father fondly remembered the gymnasiums in Denmark, so he made sure there were "two tennis courts, parallel bars to chin ourselves on, and other equipment for all of us to use".

The Nielsen children attended East Ward School, located between 6th & 7th Streets and Jefferson & Tyler. Olga remembered cutting across lots all the way to school. They walked through blocks where family cows were picketed, where in the spring wildflowers grew in profusion. They grew up in a town of great spaces—where children had space to play on empty lots, and a trip by train or horse & buggy was a great event.



Olga graduated with the Class of 1914. That summer she took the exam for a temporary teacher's certificate. She taught the 1914/15 year at a rural school west of Elwood. She lived with one of the school families for the year. After a heavy snowstorm, school was cancelled for three weeks, so she decided to spend the time in Lexington. It was 15 miles as the crow flies, but it took her three days. She rode horse into Elwood and caught the first train to Holdrege - riding in the caboose of a freight train. She had to stay overnight in Holdrege, then caught a ride to Kearney. After staying there another night, she took the train back to Lexington.

Convinced she was not a teacher Olga spent the next couple of years working in the office of her father's grain business. Her father introduced her to a young man who ran one of the lumberyards in town, Bromley Sheldon. The Sheldon family had roots in Vermont, but Bromley and his sister Frances grew up in Lincoln. He was an active youth who raced bicycles and played baseball. After a bobsledding accident he developed rheumatic fever. That limited his aspirations as a baseball player, but not his enthusiasm. He was an avid fan of Lincoln's minor league teams and followed the major leagues closely. Bromley graduated Valedictorian of his class at Lincoln High. For two years he attended prep school at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. Then he enrolled in Civil Engineering at UNL but did not finish. Instead Bromley convinced his father to partner with him in the lumber business. In 1910 they purchased lumberyards in Lexington, Darr and Cozad. Bromley moved to Lexington to manage the businesses. He was persuasive. He & Olga married at her parents' home in May 1917.

Bromley and Olga settled into a busy life in Lexington. They built a modest house in the 600 block of N Madison. Bromley enlisted in the US Army in October of 1918 and was discharged the next spring. He relished the challenges of business and invested in farmland. Olga organized a group of Camp Fire Girls. She was President of the Women's Club in 1926 and PEO Chapter AN in 1930. She was part of the Lexington Musicale, and she sang in the Presbyterian choir for many years. She belonged to the Art Group, Humane Society and the Library Board. In 1937 Olga wrote "A Short History of Plum Creek" which was published in the *Lexington Clipper*.

Olga and Bromley made time to enjoy life together. In a letter to his parents, Bromley describes a car trip they made one Sunday in 1925. They left Lexington at 10:30am and arrived in North Platte around 1:00pm. They had packed a lunch, but were so hungry, they decided to eat at a restaurant and save the lunch for the drive home. They played a round of golf. Then they stopped at Hotel McCabe to write the letter and post it before heading back to Lexington.

Bromley traveled frequently for business. Since they had no children Olga was often free to go along, so they combined business and pleasure. Their common mode of travel was by train. Since his parents and sister lived in Lincoln, they made that trip regularly. Olga remembered eastbound was very efficient, but westbound took longer, so they often chose to make an overnight stay in Grand Island.

Bromley's sister Frances was five years younger than he. She was also blessed with business acumen. She worked alongside their father in banking and investments, managing the business after his death in 1936. The siblings were very close; and when Olga joined the family, the three of them actively pursued common interests. Frances and Bromley were amateur naturalists and Olga was an avid bird watcher, so they enjoyed hiking and exploring. Bromley liked to hunt for fossils. He once discovered a prehistoric bison quarry which was later excavated by UNL scientists.



Frances Sheldon



Adams Bromley Sheldon



Olga Sheldon

All three Sheldons were passionate about theater. They would do Shakespeare readings at home, reading aloud and taking on the characters. Their interests were broad – from serious drama to vaudeville to movies. Olga recalled seeing great performances by the Barrymores, John Gielgud and Laurence Olivier, and vaudeville favorites WC Fields, Eddie Foy and Lew Dockstader. Often it was merely a train ride to Lincoln or Omaha to see a play or concert, but they sometimes traveled much farther.

They once followed British comedienne Beatrice Lillie on a tour through the Midwest. Olga told the story, "Frances saw her first in Kansas City and called us to join her. We followed Miss Lillie to St. Louis, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Chicago, and oh, about seven cities. We didn't see just one show at each place; we planned it so we saw two night performances and a matinee at each." Bromley preferred to sit in the front row, so after a few shows the orchestra recognized them. One night in Des Moines, a young musician introduced himself and started a conversation. Over the next few shows that acquaintance led to an introduction to Miss Lillie and a friendship with her that continued for years.

Art was another common interest for the Sheldons. Both of their homes were filled with antiques and artwork. They visited many galleries and museums in cities when they traveled. In 1950 when Frances and Olga made their annual visit to the Nebraska Art Association Spring Exhibit at Morrill Hall, Frances commented that it was a "miserable place" to display art. At the time Frances knew she was terminally ill. She told Bromley that her estate was to go to the construction of a new museum at the University. They would hold the estate in a trust to be managed by Bromley until it reached an amount sufficient to realize the wish. She passed away that year and Bromley kept all his promises to her. Through some wise decisions he doubled the amount and decided he would add one-half of his estate to her trust. He died in 1957. So Olga was left with the task of working with UNL to bring the dream of her sister-in-law and brother to reality.

It took six years. Olga served on the committee to choose the architect and gave him the directive that the building was to be a work of art in itself. She traveled to Italy to help in the selection of the stone to be used in the structure. Olga had a hand in much of the planning and the dedication of the museum. She was so pleased when Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery was dedicated on May 16, 1963!

The entire week of the opening was a celebration for Olga. The Nebraska State Legislature adopted a resolution paying tribute to the Sheldons for their exceptional gift. Olga was there to accept the honor and speak to the assembly. Also, her family, the Nielsens, had a family reunion. All of her remaining siblings and their families made the trip to Lincoln, many coming from California.

Once Sheldon Gallery was up and running, Olga remained very involved. She and the director made many trips to big city galleries to look at possible acquisitions for the Gallery. Olga enjoyed a wide variety of art and was receptive to the work of artists of all kinds. Not only did she purchase art for the Museum, she also contributed to other activities of the Gallery. She paid for travel grants, training courses for staff members and an annual award of a gallery assistantship to a grad student in the University's Department of Art.

In 1969 the University conferred on Olga Sheldon an Honorary Degree – Doctor of Humane Letters. That year she also took an interesting trip to Russia. She got to visit the Hermitage, the Art Gallery in St Petersburg, second largest in the world.....but she got scolded for slipping away from the guide to explore on her own.

In 1970 the Sheldon Museum hosted an exhibition of Olga's personal collection from her home. One of the featured pieces was an oil portrait of John J. Cozad by his son Robert Henri. Her collection was eclectic, pieces by famous and unknown artists, various media and diverse styles, all tied together by the characteristic that they were "good to live with". That exhibit was on display from January 20-February 15, 1970, so exactly fifty years ago Olga took her collection from her home in Lexington for temporary display in Lincoln. This month the Sheldon is bringing a temporary exhibit from Lincoln for us to display here in Lexington, and six of the pieces were purchased with funds from the Olga Sheldon Trust.

In 1971 Olga Nielsen Sheldon was given the Distinguished Nebraskan Award from the Nebraska Society of Washington, DC. The Secretary of Agriculture presented her with the award at a dinner in her honor at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington. Olga was the ninth recipient of the award, the first woman ever to be acknowledged, and the first to be cited for activities in the arts. She was honored for her many contributions to the world of art, especially her role in the building of the Sheldon Museum of Art and its Sculpture Garden.

Ten years later Olga gave many pieces from her personal art collection to the Sheldon Museum. In 1982 she established the Olga Sheldon Trust of Acquisitions making it possible for the museum to keep adding pieces to their collections. Then she moved to Escondido, California to be near her family, where she died September 12, 1990.

Here at the Dawson County Museum we are grateful that while she was so involved in the Sheldon Museum in Lincoln, during those same years Olga Nielsen Sheldon was also giving her efforts and expertise to us. Olga was at the founding meetings of the Dawson Co Historical Society. She was a Charter Member who served as President and Secretary. She petitioned for a museum building and helped raise funds for it. She collected and donated artifacts to our museum. In a speech to the Lexington Women's Club in 1966, Olga expressed her passion for honoring the past and educating generations, not just by words, but through visual, tangible items.

It is important that we preserve records, furniture and memorabilia of earlier days as well as those of the present, so that our children and grandchildren may learn by observation how we and our forefathers have brought our county to be a place in which we are proud to live and be one of its citizens. Preserving our heritage is good citizenship.



*Olga & Sen. Roman Hruska
at Kennedy Center in Washington, DC*

DECKED HALLS

Christmas at the museum was so beautiful this year it was hard to finally take down all the Christmas trees. We left them up as long as we could, but eventually all good things must come to an end. It's time to start new things in a new year. But before everything is entirely packed away, we do want to thank everyone who took time out of their busy schedules to help us decorate for Christmas!

Town and County Garden Club
Goodwill
DAR Bonneville Chapter
Girl Scouts Lexington Troop #10
Multiple Choice Students
Recipe Club
Madeline's Café and Bakery
Dawson Public Power
Dorothy Bremer
Barb Batie
Home Federal Bank

Plum Creek Quilters Guild
Lexington Chamber of Commerce
Orthman Community YMCA
Avamere Residents
Lexington Academy
Golden Rod Car Club
Community Action Partnership of Mid-Nebraska
City of Lexington Parks and Recreation
Immigrant Legal Center
Nanette Beattie and her Grandchildren
Mac's Creek Winery and Brewery

We already have plans forming for next Christmas so if you're interested in decorating a tree again next year please let us know. We're going to change it up a bit. It will take a little more planning, but it's going to be a lot of fun, so I hope you'll join us again next year!

