

History Notebook by Jim Harris. Originally published in the Lovington Daily Leader, Lovington, New Mexico on August 27, 2013

In History of Lea, Words and Language Remain Keys to Personal and County Stories

Listening to Texas country music icon Billy Joe Shaver talk and sing about his life made me go back and examine several Lea County historical narratives that have found their way into print and that have passed along the county story over the last century.

Here's what I found: Despite the proliferation of popular alternate histories, such as film, video, still photography, and television, words continue to be the communication vehicles that carry the most weight with us when it comes to the authenticity and durability of our stories of the past. It's as if our faith in language to tell our truths is much stronger than it has ever been.

The reason that Shaver's life story has reached millions of popular music lovers has to do with a number of factors, but the most important is the quality of the singer's language. He is a good writer, Willie Nelson saying that Shaver is without question the best song writer in Texas history.

Similarly, the reason that certain of Lea County's personal and regional accounts remain as part of the county's traditional story has to do with the quality of the writing found in those stories.

As an example, I went back to one of the first books published by the Lea County Museum Press, "Love, Death, and the Plains: Historical Narratives of Lea County," and I reread the stories told by several of the authors, including V.H. Whitlock, Minnie Hobbs Byers, Hazel Berry, Bob Beverly, Bess Yearwood, and Mettie Jordan.

In each of their writings, I found examples of language that made you feel like I was in the presence of a physical object, something I could see and touch, making me feel as if I had been taken back in time to another era.

Whitlock, known in his life as "Ol' Waddy," wrote of his experiences growing up in the home of Lea County's first rancher, the ex-buffalo hunter George Causey. Here is a passage from Whitlock's book "Cowboy Life on the Llano Estacado" in which Whitlock tells of coming back for a visit to Lea County in the 1960s and visiting with old friends here:

"We saw only two of the old waddies I had known and had worked with fifty-five to sixty years before. They drove down to the open house from their homes in Tatum. One was Dick Miller, the LFD windmill man in his nineties, who repaired the windmills at the LFD watering places over the range for many years. The other was Harve Harris, with whom I punched cattle for the LFD. He was well up in his eighties.

"We had quite a bull session, reminiscing of days on the open range. I learned that all ten sons of the two Beal families who ranched in New Mexico and Texas had 'cashed in their chips.'

"Miller told us he was with the Jones Ranch in northern Lea County. 'I'm too old to climb windmills now,' he said, 'but I can still tell others what to do to keep them running. I've been thinking for several years about retiring, but can't make up my mind to do so.'

"Harris talked about fine cattle and sheep, irrigated farms, and oil (with which Lea County is saturated). 'You remember when we used to have our own mount of cow ponies in the remuda when we worked the range?' he asked. 'Well, nowadays we punch cattle on foot or in pickup trucks. There's no more real cowhands.'"

Whitlock had some editorial help, as all writers should have, before his words were turned into a book, but the quality of his writing is what made the University of Oklahoma Press publish the book, and it is Whitlock's skills--his dialogue rendition and character development--as a writer that have made the book stand the test of time and keep the work in print for three generations.

Other than Gil Hinshaw's history of Lea County, there is no more important book than Whitlock's in telling of life in the early days in this corner of the state, and it is easy to see in Whitlock's handling of character and dialogue what a good writer Ole Waddy is.

Good writing lasts. Bad writing that, for instance, concentrates on genealogical listings, ends up lost in Aunt Sarah's scrapbook or in trash cans.

Good writing can be found in many different settings, and as one other example of memorable Lea County writing I've picked a portion of an article that appeared in the Lovington Press "Parade of Progress" in 1958 written by Bess Yearwood, the daughter of J.S. and Rose Eaves. This was a section of the paper celebrating the 50th anniversary of the founding of Lovington.

Yearwood wrote, "To say that living conditions on the New Mexico ranch in the early 1900s were primitive would be a gross understatement. Although my father had told mother that the life she had chosen to share with him was 'No life for a lady,' I

doubt that she was entirely prepared for the living conditions presented in her new home.

"Heat, which was entirely inadequate in winter, was provided by a wood burning stove that all too frequently smoked, and seemed always to be full of ashes. The wood was mesquite roots which were laboriously dug or 'grubbed' by my father or some of the laborers on the ranch.

"During the summer, this same stove which was necessary for cooking purposes made the house almost unbearably hot. Water for drinking and household needs was carried in buckets from the windmill which was some distance from the house. Light was provided by kerosene lamps and lanterns. The nearest post office was Monument, which was about eighteen miles from the ranch....

"The nearest doctor also lived in Monument. If he were needed, it meant that someone must drive the distance of eighteen miles in a buggy or wagon and bring him back to the ranch. This doctor, by the way, was Dr. A.A. Dearduff, beloved by all of the old timers in Lovington and the surrounding areas."

Many folks today worry that books will fade in importance as technologies offer us alternatives in ways we can learn. The form in which books come to us may change radically, and in some instances they already have.

But it is my opinion, humbly offered, that books will become even more important than they have been in the past as the good ones flesh out the details of Lea's past that can only be glimpsed in other historical works, such as photographs. The Whitlock and Yearwood examples used in this History Notebook will remain a part of Lea's history because of

the quality of the writing; they are engaging and informative.

To conclude, I'll say one more thing about Billy Joe Shaver, the writer of many great county music songs who performed here on Saturday, Aug. 17.

I had more than one person ask me if Billy Joe was a bit tipsy when he was singing. He wasn't, and I know this because I was around him in the afternoon before his show and into the night following his performance.

In fact, Billy Joe has been clean and sober for several years after he struggled with more than one addiction during his life.

I think he may have sounded tipsy because he has spent so many years singing

before crowds of drunks that he's started to sound like his audiences.

Shaver's concert and dance was one of the best that we have had in the several years we have put on the summer events. One of the reasons it was so good is that each song he sang was one he had written.

He's a good writer, and his music will survive because of the quality of the language he uses in the telling of his life story in songs.

Stop in at the museum, and I will give you copies of the lyrics to some of his songs. Or better yet, come by and we'll listen to one of his CD's and pay attention to the poetry in them.