



The Carnegie Courier

Newsletter of

The Mitchell Area Historical Society (MAHS)

& The Mitchell Area Genealogical Society (MAGS)

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Winter 2023

The Cassem Family

Introduction

My name is Geraldine (Cassem) Minor and I was born in Mitchell, South Dakota on August 12, 1929. My family moved from Mitchell when I was five years old, but I have fond memories of the short time that I lived at 208 W. 12th Ave. I am the second of two daughters of Randall Nelson and Maria (Keen) Cassem, the granddaughter of Oscar E. and Dora (Krom) Cassem, and the great-granddaughter of Nels O. and Margaret (Fritz) Cassem. Oscar, Dora, and Randall were pioneers of Mitchell.

Nels O. Cassem

(June 5, 1829 - August 20, 1904)

My great-grandfather, Nels O. Cassem, was born in Strand, Rogaland, Norway, and came here in 1849 at the age of twenty. Without the benefit of knowing the English language, he managed to settle in Kendall County, Illinois and soon found employment, entering into contracts for grading the bed of the Rock Island railroad. Entirely self-educated, never having attended school, Nels possessed common sense, natural ability, and a strong body with great power and physical endurance. He knew how to work. Upon the completion of his railroad contracts, Nels purchased twelve hundred acres of land in Kendall County at the government price of one dollar and twenty-five cents per



Nels O. Cassem (Nils Olsen in Norway), emigrated in the summer of 1849.

acre. He continued purchasing more land, eventually owning estates in Fox, Kendall, Grundy, LaSalle, and Livingston Counties, totaling more than four thousand acres. All the farms on his land were improved and ranked among the best in the state. He gave great attention to raising stock for the markets and resided on his old homestead where he lived for more than half a century. Possessing keen business instincts and indomitable perseverance, Nels accumulated great wealth and was known for miles around as a leader of the community. He was sometimes referred to by community members as the "King of the Norwegians" of Kendall County.

Oscar E. Cassem

(March 18, 1857 - June 25, 1933)

My grandfather, Oscar E. Cassem, was one of six children born to Nels O. and Margaret (Fritz) Cassem, and the family lived in Fox County, Illinois. After the passing of his mother on August 28, 1872, Oscar left home at the age of fifteen. He attended Northwestern College at Naperville, Illinois. In 1882 he borrowed money from his father and purchased a half interest in a drug store. This was the first of many investments. Later he purchased the entire drug store and bought an interest in a wholesale drug business in Chicago.

In the early days of the Dakota



Randall Cassem in front of his harvester during 1930 wheat harvest. In the background are his parents, Oscar, holding Gerry, and Dora, holding Dora Nell. Randall's wife, Maria, took the photograph.



Oscar E. and Dora (Krom) Cassem - Married: May 6, 1885, Mitchell, SD.

Territory, Oscar, like his father, purchased land for farming. He developed his land, which was in the James River area, for breeding and raising livestock. In addition to farming, he spent much of his adulthood investing in the business world. Many of his investments proved profitable.

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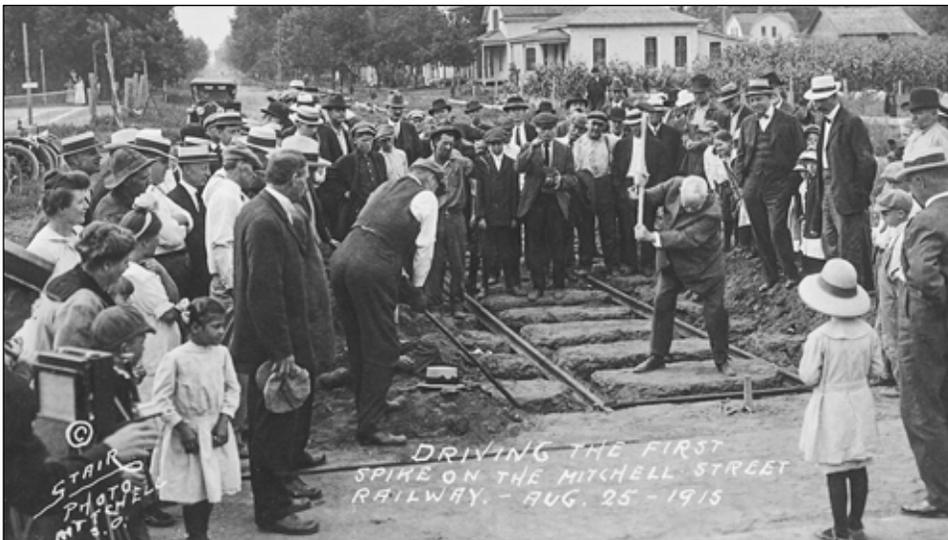
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The Oscar E. Cassem Farm, located 3 miles East of Mitchell, SD.



Oscar Edwin & Dora (Krom) Cassem Family Portrait - Children: Loren Clement (top left), Thelma Doreen, Randall Nelson, and Oscar Edwin Jr. (between parents).



August 25, 1915 - Postmaster, Tom Ball, is driving the symbolic first spike on the Mitchell Street Railway that was to run down Rowley Street from 1st to 12th Ave. Oscar "Squire" Cassem (far right edge of photo with white hat).



The 1913 Cassem Hotel building, built by Oscar E. Cassem (photo taken June 15, 2023, by Bob Minor, great-grandson of Oscar E. Cassem). Originally a 6-8 room hotel (on 2nd floor), currently 6 apartments.

In 1885 Oscar married Dora Krom, the second child of Solomon and Theresa (McSwain) Krom, the former German and the latter Scottish. Over time they became the parents of four children: Randall Nelson (September 3, 1886), Loren Clement (July 17, 1891), Thelma Doreen (October 13, 1897), and Oscar Edwin (July 13, 1902).

In 1905 my grandparents moved to Mitchell. My grandfather became interested in the banking business, and served as president of the Western National Bank (corner of 3rd and Main) which was chartered in 1904. About this time he purchased land in the area of Capitol and Elmswood which had recently been added to the city of Mitchell. He developed this land by building houses, paving streets, and planting trees. He was also the mastermind for building the Mitchell Street and Interurban Railroad (trolley line) that ran down Rowley Street from 1st to 12th Ave. The line was built to connect the Milwaukee and Omaha depots and

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The Cassem home located at 305 N. Rowley Street. Oscar and Dora Cassem stand at the front steps, their oldest son, Randall, sits on the grass near the driveway.



Dora Nell and Gerry with Grandma Cassem's big cookies. They're standing on the driveway of the Cassem house, 305 N. Rowley Street (1930)

served by transporting passengers and cargo between them. Oscar later extended the trolley line farther north in hopes of creating a market for more of his land. As automobiles grew in popularity, there was less demand for the trolley which led to its demise in less than three years. For several years, he was a board member of Dakota Wesleyan University and was also involved in the founding of the Methodist Church at Riverside. Oscar had an interest in several local industries such as the Erion Packing company, Mitchell Wholesale Fruit and Grocery, and Educator School Supply company. In 1913 he built a small hotel at 122 S. Main Street (rooms on 2nd floor, store on 1st floor), a half block north of the Milwaukee depot. Its location was convenient for travelers needing a place



Dora Nell Cassem in buggy in front of piles of corn cobs on the Randall Cassem farm outside Mitchell, South Dakota (1928).

to sleep. "Cassem 1913" is set into the brick facade. Furthermore, Oscar was also a member of the local chapter of the Elks lodge and later in life was considered a "most substantial citizen" of Mitchell and surrounding areas.

Oscar and Dora Cassem's home was the large house that is at 305 N. Rowley Street. Sadly, the house has long since been divided into multiple apartment units, and its wrap-around porch removed. I have only a few memories of my grandparents from the times we visited them at their home. Very often Grandpa Cassem sat in the den at his big rolltop desk. He was always dressed in a suit with a vest, and his watch chain hung at his side. I remember the smell of cigar smoke when it filled the air

within his den. Unfortunately, recollections of my grandmother just don't come to mind, but I was told, and photos reveal, that she always had a big cookie ready for us when we visited.

Randall Nelson Cassem

(September 3, 1886 - June 15, 1964)

My father, Randall Cassem, was the oldest of Oscar and Dora (Krom) Cassem's four children. He lived in Mitchell into adulthood and ran one of the farms belonging to his father. When he became engaged to Maria Keen, his parents built the couple a house for a wedding gift. The house is located at 208 W. 12th Ave. and was one of the first houses built on the land my grandfather had purchased and was developing. This gift made it possi



Randall Nelson Cassem and Maria Eliza (Keen) Cassem.



The home of Randall and Maria Cassem at 208 W. 12th Ave., Mitchell, S.D. The house was a wedding gift from Oscar E. and Dora Cassem.

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The Cassem Family ...

ble for my parents to move from the farm into the city, and this relocation made my mother's life more comfortable. My sister, Dora Nell, was born April 14, 1928 while my parents were still living on the farm. The farm house had no indoor plumbing, and an outhouse served as the only restroom. I was born in 1929 just as the 12th Ave. house was completed. Surely my mother had a much easier time caring for her family with two young children than she would have if they remained on the farm.

As I've mentioned, I was born in August of 1929, two months prior to the stock market crash known as Black Tuesday and the beginning of the Great Depression. This soon became known as the darkest time in the history of our country. With financial institutions in ruin and so much unemployment, the situation in the Midwest was made even worse with the Great Dust Bowl of the 1930s and 1940s. Farmers couldn't plant crops and make a living off the land.



The Cassem headstone in Graceland Cemetery, Mitchell, S.D.

The drought was so bad that over 400,000 people migrated to other parts of the United States in search of a better life. My parents would soon make the same decision to relocate our family.

On a personal level, our immediate family received another devastating blow when my grandfather, Oscar Cassem, passed away from an appendicitis attack in 1933. He refused to be taken to the hospital until it was too late to save his life. My mother once said that the family felt he didn't want to live any longer. The financial ruin of his professional life as a land-

holder and banker in Mitchell was difficult, and he didn't cope well. Two years later, with Oscar's estate resolved and the Dust Bowl raging, my parents decided the best thing for us was to join my mother's family in California. My grandmother continued to live with her daughter, Thelma, in their home on Rowley Street until she passed away on April 3, 1942.

My Childhood Memories

Although short, my five years in Mitchell were enough time for me to develop lasting memories of my early childhood in that part of South Dakota. Most of my memories are pleasant, but a few I wouldn't want to experience again. One of those times was when my sister and I contracted smallpox just before my family moved to California in 1935. A quarantine sign was posted on our front door, and we couldn't leave for the West until the quarantine was lifted. I was left with two pox marks on my face as proof. Before that, we caught whooping cough. The spasms were so violent, I thought I would surely die.

In the winter there is very little sunshine in South Dakota. The sun provides Vitamin D, which is important for good health, but we unfortunately had to take cod liver oil for our Vitamin D. Every morning, my sister and I stood at the kitchen sink and received our spoonful of cod liver oil that tasted perfectly awful! Immediately after swallowing the oil, we were handed a slice of orange to get rid of the terrible taste left in our



Lake Mitchell frozen over in winter. Randall would ice skate across the ice, pulling Dora Nell and Gerry on a sled.

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mouth. Oranges were very expensive and that was the only time, in my memory, that we tasted oranges until we moved to California. That was one good reason to move to the Golden State.

Winter was a fun time for us kids as we didn't share the worries of our parents, and my sister and I really had fun playing in the snow. But one day when I was all bundled up to go outside to play in the backyard, my mittens made it difficult to turn the doorknob and my hands slipped. I tumbled backwards down the cellar steps, and though I cried, no bones were broken and I recovered. At night the freezing temperatures left beautiful ice designs frosted on our windows. When we discovered them in the morning, we were told that Jack Frost had visited and had magically decorated our windows which were wonderful to see.

Some winter days were so very cold that we couldn't go outside to play. Instead, we invented ways to occupy ourselves in the basement. I remember riding a kiddy car or small tricycle around and around a very large post which served as the support for the first floor of the house. While we were having fun, my father was often busy at his work bench on the far side of the basement. Among other projects he did for the family, I recall him making little beds for our dolls and a table with chairs for me and my sister so we could have tea parties. On days when we could venture outdoors, our parents sometimes took us to the newly developed

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Lake Mitchell when it was frozen over with ice. Our father put on his ice skates and pulled us across the ice on a sled. I am sure our mother was with us, but all I can remember is the thrill of moving across the ice.

The Corn Palace in Mitchell is known for the beautiful murals that adorn the building. Each year the murals are created fresh from special corn in the region. The Corn Palace is pretty famous, but many may not realize that it is the center for a yearly harvest festival which is celebrated in various ways, such as concerts, trade shows, rodeos, sporting events and more. The tents and wagons used for the festival were visible from our house since much of the land a few blocks north of the Corn Palace was still open and undeveloped. In one such celebration, I vividly remember the stage fright I experienced as I walked onto the stage as a three year old. That particular year a number of us little girls were dressed in bright yellow dresses made of taffeta and netting tulle. We paraded onto the stage holding hands to represent little kernels of corn. We were probably quite cute, as little kids are, but if I hadn't been holding hands with other kids, I wouldn't have been able to move. I remember feeling frightened seeing so many people in the audience.

Because our house on 12th Ave. was built during the early stage of development of my grandfather's land, there were vacant lots surrounding the house. My father used the lot on the west side of the house to plant a vegetable garden. When he planted potatoes, my sister and I sometimes helped. He made a hole with a potato-planting tool which looked like two shovels hooked together that brought up dirt when closed. We would drop in a piece of potato bearing the necessary "eye" in order for it to grow. After covering it with dirt, we waited in anticipation for the new plants to sprout. I also vividly remember the beautiful sunflowers he grew in his gardens.

Summers in Mitchell are quite the

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Dora (L) and Gerry (R) playing house, corner of house, 208 W. 12th Ave. Dad (Randall) made all of the furniture in the basement workshop (1934?)



Dora (L) and Gerry (R) in buggy in front of their home at 208 W. 12th Ave. The tents and rail cars in the background were for the "C.B.H. Good Roads" show and carnival held at the Corn Palace auditorium (Feb. 20, 1930).

opposite of its winters. They are very hot, and we spent a lot of time outside under the big trees in our front yard. At night it was fun to watch the fireflies light up with their little "lanterns." I also recall the fun of watching the many grasshoppers that took to the yard in the spring and summer, as well as the dry tumble-weeds that blew across the landscape.

One day while on a picnic at Lake Mitchell, we found ourselves packing things back into the car as fast as we could and returning home. A very dark cloud developed in the sky and this meant it was likely a tornado was headed our way. While my father closed the storm shutters on the windows, we ran into the house, and my mother took the kerosene lamp from the center of the dining room table and ushered me and my sister quick-

ly into the basement. The basement was our shelter where we waited out the storm, and I remember it had cots and blankets should our family ever need to spend the night below ground. It was also where we stored home-canned fruits and vegetables.

Move to California

My parents decided to relocate to Whittier, California in 1935 to live with my maternal grandparents, W. Scott and Nellie Keen. Besides the raging Dust Bowl, Grandma Keen was very ill and my mother was needed to help with her care. Later in life my father told me that he made the decision to move because he saw how miserable my mother was and he didn't want that kind of life for his two girls. Potentially, California was offering a better way of life. When we arrived in Whittier, many relatives greeted us. A huge dining room table was set for 20 people. Our mother was so happy to see her family, including her four sisters, and to be back in her parents' home, but I felt shy and a little afraid among all those strangers.

From 1935 to 1943, our home was Grandpa and Grandma Keen's big house at the corner of Milton Ave. and Beverly Blvd. in Whittier. Their house had four bedrooms upstairs, and I hoped that I would finally have a room to myself. However, I was disappointed when I learned I had to again share a room with my sister. One of the extra bedrooms was

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The Cassem Family ...



Dora Nell (L) & Gerry (R, looking at camera) sit at their small table in their front yard of 208 W. 12th Ave, Mitchell, S.D. The neighbor's house in the background was one of a very few in the young neighborhood. (1932)

for guests, and the smaller bedroom would be my father's music room. My father had once wanted to become a professional musician. He primarily played the cello, but he also had violins and guitars. My mother told us that this extra room would be special for him and important if he chose to play his instruments.

While living in Mitchell, my father completed two years of study at Dakota Wesleyan University, where he enjoyed making music with other students while attending school. Unfortunately, he hadn't always been free to enjoy his music at home when he was young because his father didn't approve of this interest. As children, he and his siblings liked to play their instruments together in their house on the corner of 3rd and Rowley (in Mitchell). However, they would stop playing and put their instruments away when they saw their father, Oscar, walking home from his bank on the corner of 3rd and Main, which was within view of their house. My grandfather wanted his sons to follow in his footsteps and work in the business world. He felt music was not a suitable profession for a man, even though it would be fine for his daughter, Thelma. This, of course, was a difficult situation for my father who wanted so much to make music his life's work.

After the move to California in 1935, employment proved difficult for my father. Unable to farm in California, he found work from time to



The home of maternal grandparents, W. Scott & Nellie Keen, Whittier, CA (1909-1943). Randall and Maria Cassem and their daughters lived with the Keens from 1935-1942 until Grandpa Scott Keen died in 1942.

time as a mechanic or machinist.

During the WWII years, he was able to work in the aircraft industry in El Segundo, California. The younger men had been drafted into the service, leaving work for the older men as well as women. Although there were some employment opportunities, overall my father found himself unemployed too much of the time. He made good use of our local library, and he always read the evening newspaper. He would read to my mother as she sat nearby crocheting or mending. They often discussed the nightly news which was filled with reports of the many problems the United States faced such as the Mafia, the after-effects of Prohibition, union disputes, unemployment, the Depression, the Dust Bowl, the Ku Klux Klan, and racial discrimination. These topics, along with the news about WWII, filled the headlines.

The move to California was necessary, but continued to be hard for my father. Although he found pleasure in many activities such as reading, painting, and playing his cello for his own pleasure, Randall struggled later in life with depression over hopes and dreams unrealized. After my mother passed away on April 7, 1959, he continued living by himself in Whittier, until about 1962. At that time, he moved to live with my sister's family in Fullerton, California. Two years later he became ill, and at age 78, passed away on June 15, 1964.

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I continued to live my life in Whittier until 1949 when, at the age of 20, I married my husband, Benton Minor, who became a well-known music educator in Southern California. Benton changed teaching jobs several times (all in Southern California), requiring us to move frequently in the early part of our marriage. We started in Santa Monica, then moved to San Diego, Pasadena, back to San Diego, and finally up to Anaheim where I currently reside. We raised 6 children, and have 8 grandchildren. I worked for several years as a word processor and computer operator, and since I retired I've been able to dedicate more of my time to my art (painting and drawing). I recently completed a photobook containing my lifetime of artwork. I have had a wonderful life.



Randall Cassem with his cello. He desired to be a musician, and this photo was most likely taken while at college where he completed two years of study (major unknown).



Randall Cassem playing in a string quartet, most likely taken while at college.



The Cassem House (305 N. Rowley Street, Mitchell, SD). Pen & Ink Drawing by Gerry.



Randall N. Cassem (2nd from L) worked as a mechanic after arriving in California in 1935. During World War II he had employment with McDonald Douglas. Photo taken between 1937 and 1940.

Please Join Us for
Christmas At the Carnegie
December 14, 2023, at 7:00 p.m.

Featuring:

- *Carols by the Mitchell Barbershop
Harmony Chorus*
- *G. Bittner's Model Train Sets*
- *Martin's Department 56 Village*

*Cider and Christmas goodies will be served.
Admission is a cash donation or bag of
groceries for the benefit of the
Mitchell Food Pantry.*



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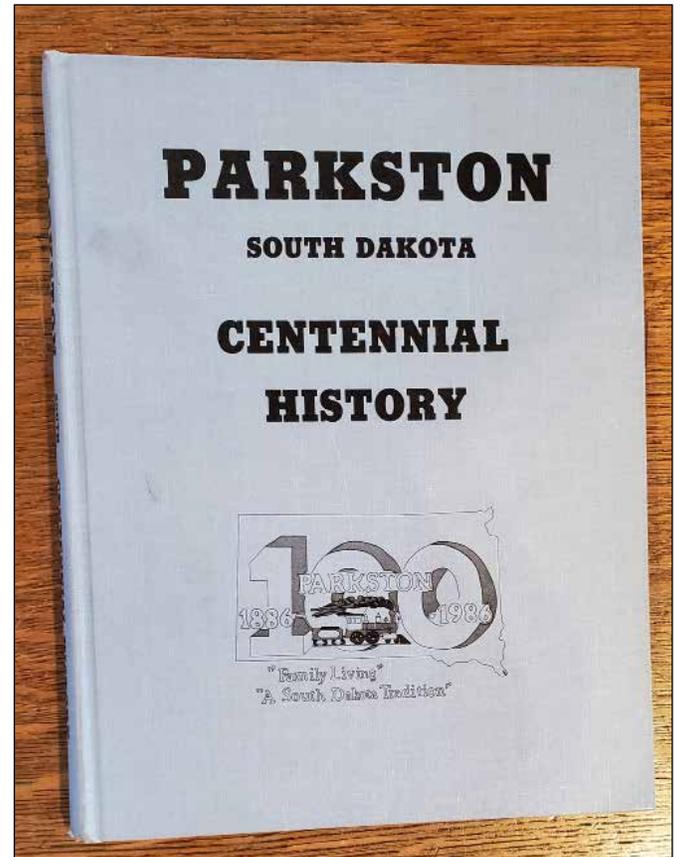
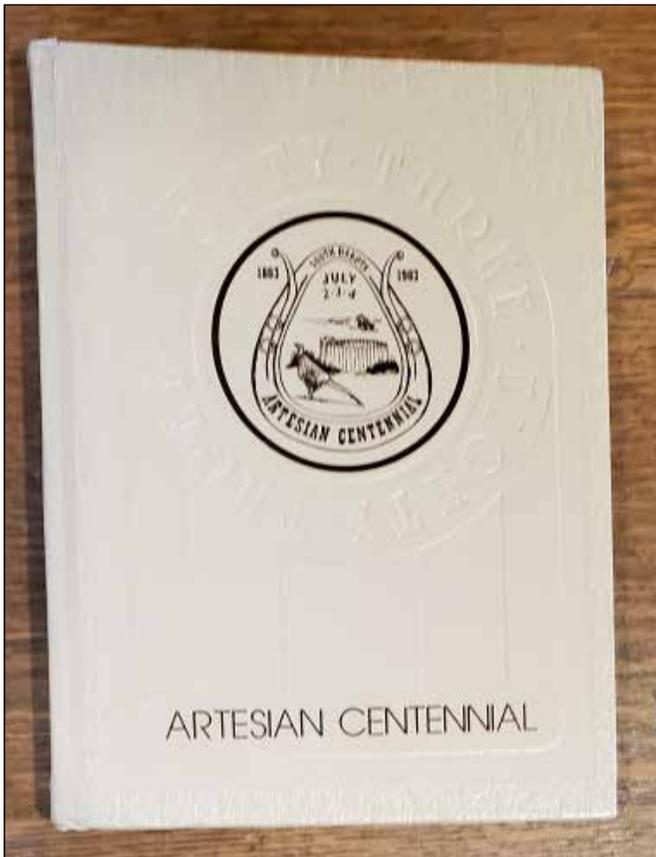
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Carnegie boasts many local history resources



Here are a couple examples of the centennial books of towns that can be found at the Carnegie Resource Center.

From the Archives

Odd Fellows Social at Letcher.

The Odd Fellows of Letcher lodge gave a supper and dance Monday evening, some forty-two couple being present and participating. An elegant spread was served at the Letcher House, which was a credit to the fair caterers. It was near morning before the familiar strains of "Home sweet Home" sounded through the hall. Several parties attended from Mitchell, all report a most happy time, and the Odd Fellows of Letcher princely hosts.

Mitchell Daily Republican (Mitchell, South Dakota) 23 Feb 1892, Tue; Page 3.

THE SITE WAS ACCEPTED.

Library Building Located at Special Session of the Council Wednesday Evening

The question that has agitated the public mind for several weeks as to where the Carnegie Library building would be located has at last been settled. It will occupy the northwest corner of the block on Rowley and Third streets, fronting on the latter thoroughfare.

The Mitchell Capital (Mitchell, South Dakota) 28 Mar 1902, Fri Page 8

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The Plankinton Grain Palace.

The second annual exposition of the Plankinton, S. D., Grain Palace will open on September 28th and continue to October 8th. Plankinton is the original Grain Palace city of the state, having erected the first one last year which proved a grand success. This year the Palace will, in every particular, exceed the former one which in itself was no small advertisement of South Dakota's progress. Special features have been prepared for each day, notably a political tournament, at which the leading parties will be represented by the most eminent orators of the day. One fare for the round trip has been made and it will pay all who can to visit this grand harvest festival of rejoicing.

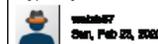
The Mitchell Capital (Mitchell, South Dakota); 09 Sep 1892, Fri; Page 8.

MITCHELL TO DEDICATE HIGH SCHOOL BUILDING

Mitchell, S. D., Jan. 5.—On January 7 will occur the dedication of the new Mitchell high school building, which, although not the largest, will be the most modern building of the kind in the state. The structure is thoroughly up to date and equipped with the modern appliances in heating, ventilation and furnishings. A fine program has been prepared for the dedication exercises which will embody music by the high school orchestra and glee club; presentation of the building by the president of the school board, O. T. Litchfield, and acceptance by Mayor A. E. Hitchcock; an address by Professor E. C. Perisho, of the state university at Vermillion; also in the evening another address will be given by Dr. Luther H. Gulick, director of physical training in the city schools of New York and one of the greatest authorities on school hygiene and athletics in the country.

The Mitchell Capital (Mitchell, South Dakota) 06 Jan 1910, Thu Page 1

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From the Archives

A BRAVE MOTHER.

She Lets Her Hand Burn Off Rather Than Risk Her Children's Lives.

Woonsocket News: A terrible accident happened to Mrs. R. A. Wheeler Monday evening that will probably render her a cripple for life. The lady was cooking supper over a gasoline stove and had set the tea kettle, partly filled with water, under the stove. In reaching over the stove, it seems that her dress in some way caught upon and turned one of the faucets or spindles, and a quantity of gasoline ran out and down into the tea kettle. She soon noticed the gasoline running and shut it off; but did not know that any had run into the tea kettle. She afterwards set the tea kettle on the stove, and when the water, with the dangerous oil on top, had almost reached the boiling point, she picked up the kettle and started to carry it into another room, and when only a few steps from the stove, the gasoline on top of the water exploded and the flames burst out. She ran to the door to open it and throw it out, but the door did not open easy, and the little children sat on the floor near by—to drop it was death to them. So this brave woman clung to the kettle, thinking only of her children, while her hand was being burned to a crisp, and carried the flaming vessel back to the gasoline stove. Had she dropped it, it is quite likely the children would have been immediately enveloped in the flames. The unfortunate lady's hand is badly burned, the flesh of the thumb and fore-finger being almost all consumed.

Mitchell Daily Republican (Mitchell, South Dakota) 09 Jan 1886,
Sat Page 3

Carnegie Courier

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Don't go alone when transcribing cemeteries!

A woman in KY, an avid cemetery hunter did what no gal should do. She had heard about a cemetery in the woods long sought after and went by herself. It was way off the beaten path. She found the cemetery and was getting ready to mark the names and dates down when she heard a click on either side of her. She was on her hands and knees. She looked up and saw a fellow on either side of her with a rifle, cocked. In her excitement, she had been pulling up grass and weeds to clear the stones. When she glanced down, she saw what she had been pulling ... their "crop" ready for harvesting - the illegal type of hemp! Thinking quickly (and likely praying a lot!) she turned on the tears and said "Oh, I hope I'm not trespassing ... I'm just so happy ... THERE'S GRANDPA!" "I've hunted for his grave for years (sob, sob), and there he is, oh Grandpa!" They took one look at her and just walked away. Never go cemetery hunting alone!!! By the way, she didn't have the foggiest idea of who was buried there, but bet her real grandpa was proud of her!

Author: Sandi Gorin

Upcoming Events

*Mitchell Area Genealogical Society (MAGS)
And Mitchell Area Historical Society (MAHS)*

2023

December 14 - Christmas at the Carnegie - 7 p.m.
December 25 - MERRY CHRISTMAS (Carnegie Closed)

2024

January 1 - HAPPY NEW YEAR (Carnegie Closed)
January 15 - 7 p.m. MAHS Business Meeting
January 22 - 6 p.m. MAGS Business Meeting
7 p.m. "How Did You Find That?"
Tips for Searching FamilySearch Records
(Kathryn Grant -BYU Webinar)
February 19 - 7 p.m. MAHS Business Meeting
February 26 - 6 p.m. MAGS Business Meeting
7 p.m. - Brick Wall Research Night
February 29 thru March 2 - Genealogy
Roots Tech at Salt Lake City, Utah
March 18 - 7 p.m. MAHS Business Meeting
March 25 - 6 p.m. MAGS Business Meeting
7 p.m. - Evidence Analysis: How to Become a
Genealogist Detective (Laura Lefler Webinar)

MAHS & MAGS Renewal Time!

We need your help!! It is time to renew your memberships for either or both organizations. We also GREATLY APPRECIATE donations to help cover the costs of keeping the building open. Heating and electric bill always seem to get higher. Please fill out the enclosed renewal form. You can drop it off or mail it to MAHS or MAGS at 119 W 3rd Ave, Mitchell, SD 57301.

2023 Update -- Thank you everyone who helps support us by purchasing caramel apples!! We've had a busy year at the Carnegie! We made repairs during Covid and since then we have been rearranging displays, setting up new displays, selling caramel apples, working hard on filing and organizing files. We thank our dedicated volunteers for all their time and effort doing projects and staffing in the afternoons. We need more volunteers that would be willing to cover staffing when others need to be gone or during vacations. Staffing primarily consists of answering the telephone and greeting guests. Stop down or call to get connected. MAHS and MAGS welcome you to their business meetings. We discuss bills and layout the future for the two organizations. We welcome any and all ideas!!!

Hope to see you there!

*Carnegie Resource
Center
119 West Third Avenue
Mitchell, S.D. 57301*

