

International Honorary Member

Dorothy Johnson

There once was an author who wrote such classic short stories as “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance” and “A Man Called Horse” and was praised for painstaking research that, aligned with such fluent prose, prompted critics to make comparisons to the work of Mark Twain.

But this weaver of great western tales was ahead of the times in many ways. This writer was a strong and independent woman from Montana. Her name was Dorothy Marie Johnson, and she proudly became an International Honorary Member of Beta Sigma Phi in 1963.

Dorothy was born in 1905 in Iowa, and moved shortly thereafter to Whitefish, Montana which became her inspiration for many of her stories, and where she would make her longtime home, penning some of the finest western prose ever written.

As a child she loved the freedom and toughness associated with the new west. In the “The Years and the Wind and the Rain - A Biography of Dorothy M. Johnson,” author Steve Smith recalls stories told by Dorothy of an uncle who had to wear a gun at all times because there were people who were looking for him, and the Whitefish police chief, George Tayler, who wore a gun under his suit at church and loved to blow up stumps, a skill in great demand when clearing the untouched land of Montana.

Sheriff Tayler was also very good at gardening, and introduced Dorothy to the world of produce. Smith’s book tells of Dorothy going door to door, selling her fresh wares. She disliked this enterprise, and would much rather be playing ball or shooting marbles, two skills at which she excelled. But these fun pursuits did not bring in the money as did the produce and one other venture she grew to dislike – selling horseradish!

Smith’s book tells of how Dorothy recalled how the pungent root had to be dug, scraped, chopped up, mixed with vinegar and put in jelly glasses, before being marketed at a local restaurant. He tells of how Dorothy came to hate this task, saying that scraping the peeling off the horseradish made her cry and adding that it also made it very hard to breathe.

She took on many activities that were usually carried out by fathers and sons, having lost her own father at age 13. Smith recalls how Dorothy said she didn’t mind feeding chickens or splitting wood, but cleaning out underneath the hen house was another matter!



She became a voracious reader as well, becoming the “personal editor” for the school newspaper. She also dabbled in politics, becoming class president. She also acted in plays and was on the debate team. She graduated second out of a class of 22, and wrote later that the girls had no fashion magazines to look at and had no idea what to wear so they wore middie blouses with different material for the seasons, and the only difference in style was whether you wore your blouse tight or let it hang. Dorothy wrote, in her usual humorous manner, that she wore hers loose, letting it hang, saying that came natural as she had been built along the general shape of a middie blouse in the first place.

All his time during both high school and before, Dorothy was thinking ahead to college and how she would pay for it. She took a job as a relief telephone operator in Whitefish to supplement her income, earning \$1.65 for an eight-hour shift.



She went into journalism at age 14, albeit surreptitiously. She became a reporter for the local paper, although the editor was under the impression that her Aunt Tillie was the one filing the stories. Dorothy said her reason for this job was a burning desire to buy a 22. rifle she saw in the window of the hardware store.

While she had become enamored with writing as a child, she entered Montana State College (now Montana State University) fully intending to become a doctor. But after finding out what some of the courses required, the “ick” factor got the best of Dorothy, and she turned her attention to English. She knew she had found her calling, although she had once loved writing poetry, she began to transition into writing prose.

When she was 21, she met George Peterkin, a soldier stationed at a nearby base. She soon secretly married him, much to her mother’s chagrin. He left soon after, eventually leaving the army, working odd jobs, all the time compiling sizable debts, which Dorothy was left to pay. He soon left for California and the marriage was over. The couple never saw each

other again, although Peterkin did call her 15 years later. Needless to say, Dorothy obtained a divorce and went back to using her maiden name.

Her first sale to a major market had come in 1930 when *The Saturday Evening Post* paid her \$400 for “Bonnie George Campbell.” She truly thought she had it made and that her future as a writer was assured. She was mistaken, and did not sell another story for 11 years.

Dorothy did not stay solely in Montana throughout her life. She lived in Washington and had a very successful career in New York City, as an editor of a national magazine. She served as secretary- manager for the Montana Press Association during the years of 1953 – 1967. These years the stories poured from her, as though she could not get them written quick enough. Her work ethic was prodigious, as was her talent. During those 14 years, she also taught for her alma mater as an assistant professor of journalism.

Three of her most read stories were made into successful motion pictures, “The Hanging Tree,” which starred fellow-Montanian Gary Cooper; “The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance,” a classic western that teamed John Wayne with Jimmy Stewart, and the uber-successful, “A Man Called Horse,” starring Richard Harris, which spawned many sequels. Her novels, “Buffalo Woman” and “All the Buffalo Returning”, captured the changes of both landscape and lifestyle that resulted from white settlement of the western United States.

Before her death in 1984, she was laden with much deserved honors. She received an honorary Doctor of Letters from the University of Montana, the Western Heritage Wrangle Award from the Cowboy Hall of Fame, and the Golden Saddleman Award of Western Writers of America.

We have provided you with only a sampling of the fascinating life of Dorothy Johnson, a person who can best be compared to America’s favorite son, Will Rogers. She possessed the same wit and alacrity at getting to the heart of the matter and his same love of people.

Those who knew her tell of her fondness for Beta Sigma Phi and our principals. After getting to know Dorothy through the wonderful book by Steve Smith, and other resources, this Beta Sigma Phi became very fond of Dorothy.

Resources: “The Years and the Wind and the Rain – A Biography of Dorothy M. Johnson” By Steve Smith (*Available on Amazon.com*) The University of Montana School of Journalism - Missoula