

Winter Storm Atlas no Match for 21st West River History Conference Attendees

There's nothing like a good old-fashioned, ring-tailed blizzard.

History buffs who gather each fall for the West River History Conference understandably come to learn history and to share the fruits of their own research. But this is the first time that we have gathered to actually *make* history! Winter Storm Atlas, October 3-5 - the exact dates of our annual conference - was one for the record books.

Conference attendees who braved the torrential rains to attend the Thursday, Oct. 3, opening session were treated to an outstanding program of video interviews, stories and home movies of Watson Parker, the Dean of Black Hills historians, who passed away in January. The large crowd included three members of his immediate family. Wayne Paananen of Lead compiled the presentation from Parker family movies and the archives of his company, Historical Footprints. Much of the crowd were local residents and made it home safely, but after a night punctuated by thunder-snow, "no travel" advisories were being issued, and few returned.

However, most out of town attendees had already checked into the hotel and were ready for a history conference! Friday morning arrivals were welcomed and we settled in for the duration. Although many of our speakers were unable to reach the hotel, there was no shortage of fill-in speakers and the hundreds of stranded motorists (including three bus loads of tourists) also staying at the hotel, soon discovered us and joined regular conference attendees from near and far. (Nothing like a captive audience!)

The windows of the hotel were soon completely obscured by thick, wet snow and howling winds sent papers flying every time someone entered or exited through the one working exterior door. "Working" is a relative term, since someone had to manually wrestle the door closed after each use. The electricity went out early Friday afternoon and 48 hours later was still not restored.

Friday sessions were accompanied by the crashing of large chunks of snow slipping or being blown off the roof. Only one of our conference rooms had windows, and by Saturday morning flashlight batteries were giving out, so we abandoned any pretense of holding concurrent sessions, and ran the remaining sessions end to end in the (now) sunny room.

While three of the four scheduled keynote presenters were snowbound around the Hills (including the popular Deadwood Express Bluegrass Band), volunteers stepped into the breach. Noted Black Hills historian, author, and long time conference supporter, Dave Strain, presented an impromptu talk on the 1902 Roundup, which more or less marked the end of the old open range, at the Friday awards luncheon. (See 2012 awards listing elsewhere in this issue.)

In addition to the lack of power and heat, by Saturday morning the hotel was rationing food, so we saluted “Old Joe” without the traditional Westerners breakfast and listened to Paul Higbee, Spearfish historian and contributor to South Dakota Magazine, deliver an excellent talk about the life of South Dakota’s first state historian, Doane Robinson.

Even with those lucky enough to have rooms generously sharing their space, there were simply not enough to go around, and many attendees were obliged to sleep on lounge chairs, banquettes and the floor of one conference room on Friday and Saturday nights. High marks must be given to the hotel staff, who - it must be noted - were also stranded away from their families and creature comforts, but nevertheless stayed on duty round the clock, performing duties not listed in the hospitality manual such as bringing extra blankets to those “camping out” in the public areas in the middle of the night, and going without food themselves so their guests could have something to eat, however meager.

After nearly three days of such inconveniences one would expect patience to wear thin and tempers to flare. But conference veteran, Vern Davis set the perfect tone on Saturday morning with his “imaginary power point”, laying out the scene of the last Indian attack of a Black Hills wagon train on the darkened screen and pointing out the spots on the blank canvas of particular interest. He brought the house down! Papers proceeded with the audience and presenters alike bundled in coats, gloves, scarves and blankets, engaged and asking questions, sharing and personifying the pioneer spirit of our forebears.

Presenters who were scheduled in this year’s program but couldn’t get here are invited to attend and present those papers next year. *Only those papers which were actually presented will be published in the 2013 compiled papers.*

Our sincere thanks to everyone who participated or tried to participate. Please join us again next year!

For the Record:

- worst October snowstorm in Black Hills recorded history, registering 23.5 inches in Rapid City itself. 61 inches in Lead.
- wind gusts up to 60 mph
- “No Travel” order for duration of the conference (and beyond)
- 38,000 customers in Rapid City (representing 1/3 of all BH Power & Light customers) were without power
- 90% of West River Electric customers lost power (Pennington & Meade Counties)
- thousands of trees downed
- loss of livestock throughout West River uncounted at this time

Be sure to read the conference evaluations listed elsewhere in this issue.