

Historian Juanita Brooks left a legacy of influence

BY BRIAN PASSEY

Looking at the history of Southern Utah, few women were as influential as the late Juanita Brooks. She was a teacher, historian and author, best known for her historical accounts of the Mountain Meadows Massacre and one of its principal players, John D. Lee.

Yet Brooks was also a wife and mother, a woman known for her kindness and teachings within her own family. To better understand that Juanita Brooks, St. George Magazine sat down with her only daughter, St. George resident Willa Derrick, and Willa's only daughter, St. George resident Dana Moody, who knew Brooks as a grandmother. Also joining the discussion is 18-year-old EmRee Moody, Dana's daughter, who never knew her great-grandmother but has felt the historian's influence in her life.

In fact, one of the aspects of Brooks' life that stands out most to her great-granddaughter EmRee was Brooks' humble beginning in Bunkerville, Nevada. EmRee says she finds it interesting that her great-grandmother could come from a place so small and rural but eventually make her way to Columbia University in New York City as a young widow. EmRee sees Brooks as particularly ambitious for her time — the kind of woman who went after things that others didn't.

Willa agrees with her granddaughter: "She was a very unusual woman. She was ahead of her time."

When Willa talks of her mother's perseverance she becomes somewhat emotional. Going off to Columbia was monu-



Historian Juanita Brooks is known for her writings on the Mountain Meadows Massacre. Photo Submitted

mental for a young widow who had never been out of the Intermountain West. And when she arrived in New York City, having left her infant son behind, it seemed like a daunting task. Yet when she arrived on campus she heard the carillon bells playing the hymn "Lead, Kindly Light." Willa

says that at that point, her mother knew everything would be OK.

She made it through her year at Columbia, obtained her master's degree and returned to make history in Southern Utah. Later, still touched by that hymn that gave her the strength and resolve to continue, Brooks would donate the first set of bells to the institution now known as Dixie State University.

History and family

Brooks was born in Bunkerville in 1898, a descendant of the prominent Leavitt and Hafen pioneer families of southwest Utah. In 1919, she married Ernest Pulsipher, who died when their only child, a son, was still an infant.

Still, she managed to obtain a bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University and a master's degree from Columbia. This led to a job as an English instructor and dean of women at Dixie College before she married Will Brooks, a widower with four sons. In addition to her own son, Brooks and her new husband eventually added a daughter — Willa — and three sons to the family, for a total of nine children.

"She was really remarkable," Willa says of her mother. "She was a good mother besides being a good historian."

Brooks liked to joke that she was able to raise eight sons and a daughter by having "one blind eye and one deaf ear." Yet many of her children rose to achieve great things. One son became an accomplished scientist while another, Karl Brooks, served as vice president of Dixie State College and mayor of St. George for 12 years, presiding over the city during a time of major growth.

While Brooks' health had declined somewhat by the time Dana was old enough to have memories of her grandmother, she does remember visiting Brooks' home and being bored because the historian had so many books and no television. Now Dana respects her grandmother for the same thing, calling her a "kindred spirit."

Dana says she has always been amazed at Brooks' intellect and tenacity to do things that were difficult. She also remembers her grandmother as "fiery and feisty."

These traits likely helped as she pursued her two most prominent works: "The Mountain Meadows Massacre" (1950) and "John Doyle Lee: Zealot, Pioneer Builder,



Willa Derrick, daughter of Juanita Brooks, talks with her daughter Dana Moody, and granddaughter EmRee Moody. | Photo by Chris Caldwell SGM

Scapegoat" (1961). Yet they were only two of Brooks' 15 books, leading Willa to call her mother the "most prominent Mormon woman historian ever."

Willa credits her father's support of his wife's historical research for making it all possible, even as Brooks would take a night bus to California for research projects. They built family vacations around her research. He would watch the children play on library lawns while his wife did her research inside.

"He really was a mainstay in all she did," Willa says.

Although Brooks devoted significant time to her work, Willa says they never felt neglected as kids. Part of this was because her mother would save much of her writing until after the children had gone to bed. Willa still remembers falling asleep to the "clacking" of her mother's typewriter.

Her old manual typewriter was always set up on the ironing board in the kitchen, ready to use in between her motherly duties. It also provided a handy hiding place for an instrument of potential contention.

"If anyone came in she would cover it up with laundry and pretend she was ironing," Willa says. "It was a very controversial subject. The people in the church — the general authorities — did not want it done. ... She was blocked at every turn."

While modern LDS leaders have been significantly more forthcoming in regard to the massacre — even opening up church archives to a recent book on the subject — the topic was still taboo among LDS faithful as Brooks was writing about it.

Brooks understood its controversial nature, but Willa says her mother felt the tragic event merited thorough research. When "The Mountain Meadow Massacre" was published to positive critical acclaim, Willa says her mother was vindicated.

Yet concern remained among church hierarchy. After the book's publication, Brooks was called to meet with one of the top church leaders in Salt Lake City and was "chastised," Willa says. When Brooks asked the leader if he had actually read the book, he replied that he had not. Despite the concern, Brooks never faced church discipline for her work, though Willa says her mother often felt as if some people in her own St. George congregation didn't accept her.

The legacy of Juanita Brooks

For her many works, Brooks was recognized with honorary doctorates from three Utah schools: Southern Utah University, Utah State University and the University of Utah.

Her research has been praised by contemporary historians, who have said it



Juanita Brooks went back to school as a young widow to obtain her master's degree. | Photo Submitted

stands the test of time. She was also known as a champion of historic preservation, even going so far as once having a tree in her front yard declared "historic" to prevent the city from cutting it down.

She worked for many years in preserving pioneer diaries for the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s and the Huntington Library in the 1940s. Dana says those diaries represent a legacy that would have been lost without her grandmother's efforts.

And, of course, her own pioneering works about the massacre will continue to stand out as an enduring legacy for generations.

"She was always a champion for the truth," Willa says.

Yet her legacy with the massacre did not end with the publication of the books. Dana says her grandmother also helped heal wounds among the descendants of the Fancher party — the victims of the massacre. She surprised quite a

few people by attending a Fancher family reunion in Arkansas in an attempt to build bridges.

"In many ways she opened the dialogue with the Fancher family," Dana says. "Her courage is a great legacy."

She was also known to demand excellence from those she taught — both family members and students. Dana says Elder Jeffrey R. Holland and Elder Steven E. Snow — both St. George natives who now serve among the top leadership of the LDS Church — have mentioned Brooks' impact as a teacher.

Dana now uses examples from her grandmother's life to teach her own children. The latenight bus trips to California are especially poignant. She uses those trips to illustrate the tenacity of their great-grandmother.

"You just hop on the computer to do research," she tells her kids. "Juanita Brooks had to hop on a bus."

Those descendants themselves are also part of Brooks' legacy. She now has more than 100 direct descendants, not including the families of the stepsons she raised as her own.

Family is actually the first thing Willa mentions when asked about her mother's legacy. She simply points toward her own granddaughter, EmRee, as evidence. In July, EmRee was named the National Youth of the Year by the National Exchange Club. Part of EmRee's qualifications included extensive experience with community service. Dana says her teenage daughter's thoughtfulness is akin to the caring and generosity Brooks exhibited in her life.

Not only did Brooks spend considerable time and effort raising her own children and stepchildren, she also helped finance her sisters' education, bought musical instruments for her brothers and even purchased a couch for her parents. "She was so aware of people and their needs. She left a great legacy for all these young grandchildren that came along," Willa says. "She also believed in community service — that her children and grandchildren should do good things, like EmRee."

