



1958-1959 Yearbook Cover

Shakespeare in the 'Wild West': A case study of the West Side Shakespeare Club of Butte, Montana



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Introduction:

The West Side Shakespeare Club (WSSC) was a women's literature study group that ran from 1899-1980 in the mining town of Butte, Montana, USA. Butte was a town noted for its large immigrant population and the control that the Anaconda Mining Company had over the town as a whole. Women's Shakespeare clubs were widespread in 19th and 20th century America and are understudied in academia, with the notable exception of Katherine West Scheil's ground-breaking study *She Hath Been Reading*. Meeting once a week at night to accommodate working women, WSSC members would review a piece of literature or present a paper on a topic they had researched, while the hosting member provided refreshments for a discussion and social hour following the presentation.

Aims/Methodology:

I set out to gain an understanding of how the women of the WSSC used literature to develop social/community bonds and engage with the changing world around them. A case study of the WSSC provides the chance to get a closer look at how one of these clubs functioned and find specific examples of the impact a Shakespeare Club had on both the members and their community. I was particularly interested in how people removed from cities and established cultural centres interacted with literature and intellectual pursuits. I carefully examined the collection of documents relating to the club at the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives. These included documents like Minutes books, oral history transcripts from the 1980s where members reflected back on their experiences in the club, the annual yearbooks, newspaper clippings, letters, and articles about the club from Montana journals. I also used census data to help determine common occupations for members.

Numerous letters from members who had moved away, speeches at the annual dinners, and member obituaries stressed how important the friendship ties formed were to the members. Club historian Olive Fowler remarked that she could not decide what had had a bigger impact on her life – the literary works discussed in the meetings or the friendships she had made through the club.

For instance, after reading the biography of a doctor working in Laos, the club raised regular donations to his charity for several years.

Results

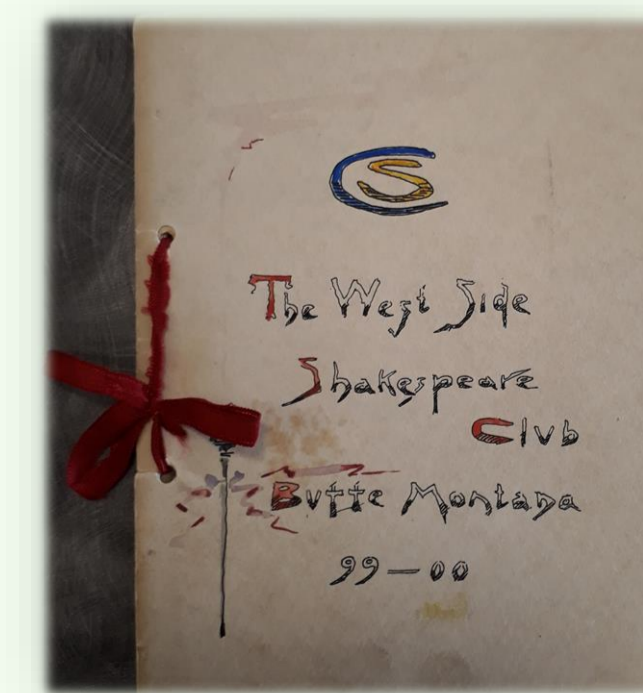
Despite frequent claims by members that the WSSC was 'just' a neighbourhood literature study group, I found evidence of an impressive legacy of intellectual, political, charitable, and civic contributions by the club members that related to their literary studies. The members came from a diverse set of backgrounds, ranging from housewives to school teachers and shop-girls, the wives of both mining administrators and miners.

During the 1920s, the club sought out and established connections with the English Literature professor at the University of Montana, and through this connection were able to host a public lecture by leading academic John Erskine on the importance of the liberal arts movement, raising the funds for his travel and speaking expenses.

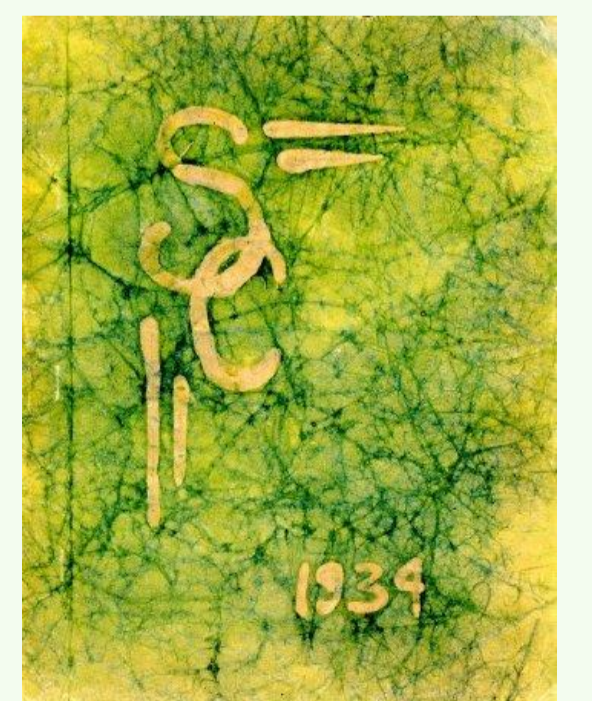
Discussion/Conclusion:

Although the parliamentary proceedings of the club meetings were carefully recorded in detail, the actual content of the literary works discussed in the meetings were rarely recorded other than a brief mention of how 'delightful' or 'intellectually interesting' the members found them. Despite this difficulty, by looking chronologically at what works were reviewed or researched in meetings and then what projects the club embarked on, the relationship between literature and the activities of the club can become clearer. Literature could inspire the club to try and improve the world outside the club, as in the case of the Laos donations, or their interactions with the community could lead to reviewing certain works of literature, as it did for the hygiene campaign and the Jane Addams book. These activities helped build strong ties of friendship among the women, who often celebrated these ties as deeply important to them. Literature provided the foundation for the women of Butte to actively engage with their community and with each other.

A successful campaign organised by the club to improve the public hygiene of Butte came was shortly followed by reading a book written by the famous Progressive activist Jane Addams, who urged women to become involved in their communities.



1899-1900 Yearbook Cover



1934-1935 Yearbook Cover

Acknowledgments: All photos courtesy of the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives. Funding from the Vacation Research Scholarship.

References: Collection OC009 at the Butte-Silver Bow Public Archives. Katherine West Scheil, *She Hath Been Reading: Women and Shakespeare Clubs in America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012). Ancestry.com's census collections.