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Treasure chest

• Trunk found at YMCA yields historic documents, buffalo coat that once belonged to E.A. Whitney

By Pat Blair

Senior staff reporter

Passports, steamboat and railroad tickets, bank ledgers, receipts from around the world, and a buffalo coat belonging to Edward Whitney — whose will established Whitney Benefits Inc. — are among the finds in a steamer trunk-size crate that lay partially concealed in a storage room at Sheridan's YMCA until last year.

"Mr. Whitney kept everything," said Whitney Benefits trustee and historian Sam Street who, along with Mary Ellen McWilliams, began going through the materials around the first of January.

McWilliams said she and Street have met every Monday at the Whitney offices to pore over the materials, and they have only scratched the surface.

"We will be looking through

this for months," she said.

McWilliams said Jay McGinnis, executive director of the YMCA, originally found the wooden crate "in a storage room way back in the Y." The crate had the name "E.A. Whitney" written on it.

"Jay called me," said McWilliams, a Sheridan County Historical Society member and member of the Whitney Benefits board at that time.

After a cursory examination of the crate and its contents, McWilliams contacted Whitney board President Tom Kinnison, who asked for the materials to be taken to Whitney offices in the Whitney Community Center on Broadway. That was about eight months ago.

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The Sheridan Press/Alan Carroll

A photograph labeled "Madrid 1869" shows E.A. Whitney wearing what is believed to be the buffalo overcoat found in his crate of belongings. The photograph was one of many items inside the crate.





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"I got an archivist from the (University of Wyoming) American Heritage Center," McWilliams said. "She spent a day with (the crate). She gave us a lot of help," including helping obtain acid-free containers and acid-free clear plastic envelopes for storage of documents, some of which date back to 1886.

"Basically," Kinnison said, "Mary Ellen called me and said, 'I found all this stuff.' We have trustees that have been on the board for years — one has been on the board for 30 years — and no one knew this stuff existed."

The "stuff" includes the 1886 memorandum of agreement between Whitney and John Loucks, founder of Sheridan, for Whitney to purchase the Mandel cabin at the intersection of Loucks and Main streets.

Purchase price was 40 head of 2-year-old heifers from West Union, Iowa, where Whitney lived before coming to Sheridan.

"I wonder how he got (the cows) here," McWilliams said. "Everything we find raises more questions."

She said Loucks acquired the Mandel cabin — reported to be the first building in Sheridan — and moved it to the Main and Loucks location for a post office and store.

After Whitney acquired it, he

converted it to the Bank of Sheridan — the town's first bank. Many papers found so far in the crate relate to the Sheridan Banking Co., including the Bank of Sheridan organization agreement.

"We've got boxes and boxes and boxes of materials," McWilliams said. "It was a big (crate)."

The buffalo coat was lying on top of the contents when the crate was opened. Whitney Benefits has a photo of Whitney wearing what appears to be the same coat in 1869 in Madrid.

He would have been about 24 at the time, McWilliams said.

The coat was last cleaned in 1945 — which offers some clue as to when the crate was closed and placed in storage. Whitney died in 1917.

Also in the crate were an umbrella, a hat bearing the label of "Stevens-Fryberger, the New York Store" and a cigar box containing miscellaneous items including a matchbox.

McWilliams said the crate has been thrown away, adding it was in too poor condition to keep.

The disposition of the crate's contents has not yet been decided, McWilliams said. She added, "First, we'll have to see what's here."



Mary Ellen McWilliams

Sheridan Historical Society

