



THE CENTER FOR WESTERN STUDIES

November 2, 2022

Kevin Kuchenbecker
Historic Preservation Officer
City of Deadwood
108 Sherman Street
Deadwood, South Dakota 57732

RE: Funding support for the 55th Dakota Conference on “The Outlaw Plains,” April 27-28, 2023

Dear Mr. Kuchenbecker:

First, I would like to update the Historic Preservation Commission on the former scheduling conflict with the South Dakota State Historical Society’s History Conference. Working with the Society’s new Director, Dr. Ben Jones, we have been holding our respective history conferences during different weeks for the past two years and plan to continue to do so.

Our Dakota Conference last received funding support from the Historic Preservation Commission in 2020, but the pandemic intervened and we returned the \$250 grant. We think the upcoming conference theme of “The Outlaw Plains” might be especially attractive to the Deadwood Commission and are requesting \$1,000 in funding support. We would be delighted to restore the Commission’s sponsorship of the Trail Breakfast or apply the funding to another segment of the conference, as the Commission wishes.

The year 2023 marks the centennial of the disclosure of Wyoming’s sensational Teapot Dome Scandal, which started under President Harding and blew up under President Coolidge in the early 1920s. Perhaps the most infamous presidential scandal until Watergate, Teapot Dome involved kickbacks from secret oil reserves in Wyoming and California and landed the Secretary of the Interior in prison.

The 55th Dakota Conference will examine past and recent criminal activity and community responses in the hope of learning what the future holds for residents of the Northern Plains/West. The Center for Western Studies is charged by its constitution “to serve as a study and research center concerned with **problems** of South Dakota and the contiguous states.”

PAST AND PRESENT CRIMES

The Northern Plains/West has had its share of misdeeds and unsavory characters: Jack McCall and the murder of Wild Bill Hickok; Jessie and Frank James and the Minnesota bank robbery; Henry Livingston and the Indian Ring; fraud and coverup in building the First Transcontinental Railroad; the Wounded Knee Massacre; and child abuse at Indian boarding schools.

More recently, the Jerusalem artichoke debacle, which originated in South Dakota, bankrupted farmers across the plains, contributing to the 1980s Farm Crisis. The murders of two Minnesota bankers by a debt-ridden farmer and his son, and the killings of two US Marshals by North Dakotans Gordon Kahl and Scott Faul, members of the armed vigilante group Posse Comitatus, brought national attention to the region in 1983.

The Enron natural gas securities fraud, arising from the merger of Omaha-based InterNorth and Houston Natural Gas, resulted in the world’s biggest corporate bankruptcy in 2001 and sent numerous company officials to jail. In 2010 the Iowa commodity futures company PFGBest caused the loss of over \$200 million in clients’ money, for which the chief executive received a 50-year prison sentence for fraud and embezzlement. A South

Dakota feedlot operator was sentenced in 2021 to seven years for swindling his neighbors out of millions of dollars in a Ponzi scheme.

A North Dakota man was sentenced in 2021 to multiple life prison terms for the stabbing deaths of four individuals, considered “one of the most gruesome crimes in the state’s history.” Two Iowa teens were charged in 2021 with stalking, ambushing, and murdering their high school teacher. A Minnesota farmer in 2022 was charged with a \$46 million organic grain fraud scheme.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO CRIME

Churches, the courts, and law enforcement have traditionally served as the moral arbiters in communities, but the uptick in dastardly deeds in high and low places has motivated regional news organizations and even universities to join in that effort.

Founded in 2017 as an independent watch-dog, South Dakota News Watch has published over 250 investigative news stories. In 2021 the *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader* began its investigative initiative, “100 Eyes on South Dakota,” to encourage readers to submit news tips about wrongdoing. On television, the series “KELOLAND Investigates” has focused on cold cases, including missing or murdered Indigenous persons.

Concern about the increasing level of fraud in South Dakota led to the creation by four public universities of the Center for Understanding and Disrupting the Illicit Economy in 2021. Funded with a \$4 million state grant, the universities are partnering to help law enforcement combat criminal networks.

A grant of \$1,000 from the Commission would be used to match ongoing support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and a grant from the Augustana Mellon Fund for the Humanities. We would, of course, acknowledge your gift in the conference program and *CWS News*. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Harry F. Thompson

Harry F. Thompson, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Trustee, South Dakota State Historical Society (1989-2004)
and Vice President (2002-2004)

Link: <https://www.augie.edu/campus-community/center-western-studies/events-conferences/dakota-conference>