



Nebraska History posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Leigh DeLay (1915-1985)

Full Citation: Marvin F Kivett and Clarke Davis, "Leigh DeLay (1915-1985)," *Nebraska History* 66 (1985): 314-317

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1985DeLay.pdf>

Date: 3/04/2014

Article Summary: Kivett provides an account of DeLay's work as historian at the Nebraska State Historical Society. Davis presents personal memories of an earlier period in DeLay's life when he was a newspaper printer.

Cataloging Information:

Books Edited by DeLay: *The Great Platte River Road*
From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake
Conquering the Great American Desert: Nebraska
Perkey's Nebraska Place Names
Index-Guide, Nebraska History, 1959-1979
Publications in Anthropology

Leigh DeLay (1915-1985)

*By Marvin F. Kivett, Executive Director,
Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation*

Leigh G. DeLay, who died in Lincoln on June 5, 1985, had served in the position of Historian for the Nebraska State Historical Society since October of 1968. Leigh was selected for the job largely on the recommendations of the late Charles C. Osborne of Hastings and present Society Executive Board member Arthur Carmody of Trenton. The three became friends through their mutual interest in the history of western Kansas and southwest Nebraska. Leigh was on the staff of the *Oakley (Kansas) Graphic* but devoted a great deal of effort to research on Fort Wallace and its past. He had had wide experience in newspaper work in Kansas and Missouri, which provided an opportunity to pursue his great interest in local history. At one point in his career he was associated with the Branson (Missouri) *White River Leader* when John G. Neihardt was raising his family and writing in Branson. He was a graduate of Pittsburg (Kansas) College (now Pittsburg State University) with advanced studies in history at the University of Kansas.

Leigh had a distinguished career during World War II with the 180th Infantry, 45th Division. As a staff sergeant he was selected for Officers Candidate School in Georgia and was graduated as a 2nd lieutenant. While in European combat service he was promoted to the rank of 1st lieutenant. Leigh was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for heroic achievement in action on March 18, 1945, near Alschbach, Germany.

The position of Historian on the Society staff is primarily that of editor for *Nebraska History* as well as other Society publications, including the special publications series and technical studies in archeology. Perhaps I first became aware of his unusual ability as an editor and historian with his work on the award-winning book *The Great Platte River Road* by Merrill J. Mattes. After submission of the manuscript to at

least two scholarly presses, the consensus seemed to be that it would require drastic revision before publication. Leigh disagreed with these evaluations and encouraged its publication much in the form produced by the author. After Society Board review and approval, it was published in 1969 by the Society Foundation as Volume XXV in the *Publications* series. The series had become largely dormant with only one number, Volume XXIV, an index, published since the death of Addison E. Sheldon in 1943. *The Great Platte River Road*, today considered a classic, received three national awards: the Silver Spur, awarded by the Western Writers of America; Award of Merit by the American Association for State and Local History; and a Wrangler Award from the Heritage Foundation of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City.

The Mattes work was followed by Volume XXVI, *From the Missouri to the Great Salt Lake* (1972) by William E. Lass; Volume XXVII, *Conquering the Great American Desert: Nebraska* (1975) by Everett Dick; Volume XXVIII, *Perkey's Nebraska Place Names* (1982) by Elton A. Perkey; and Volume XXIX, *Index-Guide, Nebraska History, 1959-1979* (1984) compiled by Betty L. Loudon. All were published with financial assistance from the Woods Charitable Fund Inc. and the Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation. I cite this impressive list only to indicate that Leigh carried a very heavy load in addition to the normal duties of editing *Nebraska History*.

In addition Leigh was the editor for eight volumes of the series *Publications in Anthropology*, technical reports primarily concerned with archeological research by the Society. Leigh and Assistant Editor Pat Gaster also edited or assisted in many other publications including *Iron Eye's Family* (1969) by Norma Kidd Green and *Bartlett Richards, Nebraska Sandhills Cattleman* (1980) by Bartlett Richards Jr. with Ruth Van Ackeren. The latter, published by the Society Foundation, also received a Wrangler Award from the Cowboy Hall of Fame, which judged it the best nonfiction publication dealing with the cattle industry in 1980.

Leigh as an individual was down to earth. Despite his long tenure on the staff, he was not well known to Society members. He had great humility and cared little for publicity or personal recognition. Totally devoted to historical research

and the furthering of publications related to Nebraska history, he was never too busy to assist local historical organizations with their publication programs. He spent many hours of his own time assisting local writers and researchers. Leigh was fortunate to have a supportive helpmate in his wife, Edith. She joined him in his expeditions to seek out local history.

Leigh DeLay was a gentleman, a scholar, and a good friend. His services in the interpretation of Nebraska and western history will be greatly missed.

Clarke Davis, editor of the Valley Falls (Kansas) Vindicator, was a friend and colleague of Leigh DeLay during their Kansas newspaper years. Davis's memories of DeLay appeared in his June 13, 1985, "Town Crier" column, a regular Vindicator feature.

An old soldier has been stilled and lies resting at Fort McPherson National Cemetery on the western Nebraska plain.

It was not as a soldier that we knew him but as a printer. Leigh DeLay had stoked the fires first in the *Altamont Journal* pressroom in 1927. He worked for the *Junction City Union* after the war and while teaching school at Salina. He owned the *Eureka Messenger* for a short time and was shop foreman at the *Oakley Graphic*. . . .

It was in the back shop of a newspaper that I observed this unique man at work. His hours were filled with operating the Linotype, casting mats, filling chases, and meeting deadlines; but this was all secondary to what was actually taking place. He was teaching.

He had been to the university and had acquired the degrees, and he knew that that was a paltry place to find hard workers and common sense. I suppose that's why he invested so much in the likes of Robert [Wilson, co-publisher of the *Vindicator*] and me, a couple of farm boys looking for work.

We crossed paths with Leigh at different times, years apart, but he gave us a vocation that brought us together in a partnership that has spanned 17 years. In Robert's case, he told him to sweep the floor and several years later told him that if he hadn't done a good job he wouldn't still be working there. I admired fast cars and played the music loud. With me his task was more difficult. It was opined that those who drive fast, work slow. I took the hint.

Leigh taught spelling from an ink-stained dictionary. He taught responsibility by his own example. He taught charity by what he did for deserving people. His daughter said it was hard to remember a Saturday afternoon when he was not helping some widow keep alive a struggling newspaper.

I remember the late hours when his storytelling (his primary teaching method) reached its zenith. His hands, busy at the keyboard or stringing galleys of type, never slowed except for an occasional outward wave to punctuate his statements. The lessons were spiced with hearty laughter, but he had a fierce way of clenching his teeth when remembering some injustice.

He would be shocked over the smallest indiscretion of his fellow man and would appear incredulous when telling about someone who failed to pull his weight and, worse, left the unfinished job for someone else (usually him) to do. This was mostly show but impressive to the listener.

There was not much said about running the world and trying to answer the great questions of the universe. Although during the early civil rights struggle in the 1960s he said the blacks had waited 100 years since the Civil War for freedom, and that was long enough. He sent \$10 on occasion to the NAACP. He taught Sunday school also but didn't go to church much. He said they wouldn't let him talk there.

He rather seemed determined to insure that all around him, those things he could have an effect on, were in proper order. And maybe if his bailiwick was in order, things would be made right elsewhere like the expanding concentric ripples on a pond.

In physical appearance he could have doubled for Gregory Peck, and his character was exemplified in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*. In a sense Leigh was always a soldier — a man on guard duty — always filling in for those who couldn't finish the job.

He deserves a rest.