

## In Memory of James D. McLaird, 1940–2017

Historian, author, and educator James (“Jim”) David McLaird died on 31 August 2017 in Mitchell, South Dakota. A friend of *South Dakota History* from its inception, he most recently served on the journal’s board of editors.

James McLaird was born 11 December 1940 at Lake Benton, Minnesota. His family relocated to Miller, South Dakota, where he graduated from high school in 1958. In 1961, he married Donna Hillman in Faulkton, and the couple had two sons, John and Steven.

McLaird received a B.A. in psychology from Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell in 1962 and an M.A. in history from the University of Wyoming at Laramie in 1966. He also completed graduate courses at Boston University School of Theology, South Dakota State University, Utah State University, and the University of Wyoming. In 1967, McLaird took a post at Dakota Wesleyan University, where he taught history until his retirement in 2004. He received an honorary doctorate from Dakota Wesleyan in 2005 and served as professor emeritus of history until his death.

In addition to his academic career, McLaird was an avid book collector and longtime contributor to *South Dakota History*, with a special interest in Black Hills topics. He was also an award-winning book author. *Calamity Jane: The Woman and the Legend* was named “Best Non-Fiction Book” by Westerners International in 2005. Among McLaird’s other works are *Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane: Deadwood Legends* and *Hugh Glass: Grizzly Survivor*, both published by the South Dakota Historical Society Press, and *The Dakota Wesleyan University Memory Book, 1885–2010* published by the university.

In 2012, the South Dakota State Historical Society honored McLaird with the Robinson Award for a lifetime of dedicated and distinguished service to the preservation of the history of South Dakota.

As a scholar of South Dakota and the American West, McLaird was a gifted researcher who gave remarkable attention to detail. As an instructor and mentor, he had a unique compassion for others, seeking to know the personal history of each person he met. McLaird's accomplishments reveal his devotion to the stories of the people and places he loved most.



Jim McLaird appears here in the McGovern Library at Dakota Wesleyan University, where he did much of his research. (Photograph by Mari Olson)

AMY C. NOVAK

## Remembering Jim McLaird

*Amy C. Novak, president of Dakota Wesleyan University, delivered the following tribute to James McLaird at his funeral service, held 6 September 2017 at First United Methodist Church in Mitchell.*

In 2013, Professor Jim McLaird stopped into my office with a gift for my inauguration as president of Dakota Wesleyan University (DWU). On the inside of a copy of his *Dakota Wesleyan University Memory Book, 1885–2010*, he had written the following inscription, “What is past is prologue.” The phrase is taken from Shakespeare’s play, *The Tempest*, and it is an apt reminder that the past is a preface to the future and that we ought never forget the powerful lessons of history as we make decisions about today.

Today, we celebrate the life of a man whose past has forever shaped our collective future. That is to say that the countless interactions Professor McLaird had with students, faculty, staff, community members, and scholars has shaped the people we each became, the institution our university became, and the future we hold collectively together.

One of my earliest interactions with Jim came as a young high-school student. I was part of a debate team with Jim and Donna’s son, Steve. We had all gone to see Kevin Costner’s film, *Dances with Wolves*. As we came out of the theater, Jim immediately began to make historical corrections to the film. I remember him saying, “First of all, Amy, the Lakota Chief called Ten Bears was actually a Southern Plains Yamparika Comanche chief. Second, the real Kicking Bird was not a ‘medicine man’ but a chief in another Southern Plains tribe called the Kiowa. And finally, the year of the winter campaign launched by the United States Army in search of Dances with Wolves and Ten Bears’s band occurred in 1864, but let me tell you something, no United States Army winter campaigns were launched against any American Indians until

November 1868.” To put the icing on the cake of historical credibility, Jim remarked, “And the apple that Kevin Costner is seen eating is a Red Delicious—a variety that did not exist until well after the Civil War.”

It was this incredible attention to detail that marked the genius of Jim McLaird as a top-notch historian of the American West and a top-notch storyteller of the Dakota Wesleyan story. Arguably more important than either of these notable credentials was that Professor McLaird’s meticulous attention to detail made him a remarkable teacher, mentor, and colleague. Some may argue that Jim’s greatest contribution was in the books he wrote—and these books were outstanding. His work on Calamity Jane, for example, dissected her mythic qualities and revealed her true background, motivations, and actions—the true story, as Jim would say, that HBO’s *Deadwood* failed to capture.

Jim gave countless well-researched presentations often disputing the mythology of the American West, and he wrote the remarkable memory book of DWU that brought to life countless alumni whose contributions have shaped who we became as a university, as a community, as a nation, and as a world. But one might reasonably assert that Jim’s great genius was in his remarkable memory for his students and the lives he touched through his countless interactions with each of them. On sharing the news of Jim’s passing, countless alumni reached out to offer condolences and share memories, and every single one of them remarked about his ability to be as interested in each of them, in their stories, as he was in the remarkable history he was regaling them with in class lectures. Yes, these alumni remarked about how Jim’s passion for understanding history reshaped their view of the world. They learned to think more critically, analyze more thoroughly, ask more thoughtfully, and investigate with a broader lens. Jim’s classes forced students to reconsider their previous assumptions, question the myths that characterized their initial understanding of the American West, and rethink larger questions like, “Did slavery cause racism or did racism lead to the institutionalization of slavery?”

Students also commended Professor McLaird for more than teaching history. One former student remarked, “He was a friend and mentor. . . . He spent hours listening to me share my struggles with my fa-

ther.” In another case, the former student said, “He was the first person who believed I could do something with my life. . . . Today I’m teaching history and have been forever changed by Jim’s genuine kindness.”

The spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once shared a story about a colleague who was a theology professor. The theology professor said: “I spent years working on a book and I always thought this would be the greatest contribution I could make to this world, . . . but then I realized, the book was good, but my greatest contribution was in the interactions and the interruptions I experienced with my students. . . . My greatest work was their work.” This, friends, is truly the story of Jim McLaird.

This past Thursday, the day he passed away, Jim was sitting in the DWU library. As typically happened, he would raise his finger and gently call me over. He was reading a biography of Adolf Hitler and giving me his take on the author’s perspective, but he was also sharing news about his son Steven’s new girlfriend, about John and Rachel and their children, and about the family dogs. He delighted in the accomplishments of his family and appreciated all that Donna had done for him.

When the next history book of DWU is written, Jim McLaird will have a page. And we will carefully, with great attention to detail, capture the story of a professor whose humble ways, whose passing conversations, whose relentless pursuit of the details, shaped generations of Wesleyan doctors, lawyers, teachers, business persons, pastors, and community advocates.

Professor Jim McLaird, you have helped write the story of the American West, you have helped DWU write its story, and you have helped each of us write our own stories. Today, we honor your story—your generosity of spirit, your kind and listening ear, your passion for learning, your commitment to helping each of us understand the best version of ourselves, and your unrelenting pursuit of the details that make our past indeed our prologue.

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*On the cover:* Built in 1907 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Ann M. Carr sod house in Bison, South Dakota, served as both a residence and the town's first post office. In this issue, Molly P. Rozum details the ways in which homesteaders in northwestern South Dakota constructed buildings with the materials at hand and, in some cases, adapted and used them for decades.

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