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Looking Back

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Looking Back

Comments and indices by Kathleen Gould.

WESTVIEW

The title of this piece is a bit of obviousness. Most of WESTVIEW is, and has been, made up of looks back to our pioneer past. When I proposed the compilation of an index for the first three years of WESTVIEW, I had in mind a simple clerical task. Then I got a bit more ambitious and proposed a brief commentary on the magazine's evolution over three years. Looking back on WESTVIEW has been rather like paging through a family album. One first notes physical changes, then meditates on more abstract measures of growth.

To the typical reader, the physical changes have seemed gradual. Creating this new magazine required commitment as much as skill to see the vision through to reality. The early issues saw much experimentation. Pat Lazelle, the first art director, called upon her art students to assist in the layout and illustration. The index notes those artistic efforts with "author" listings for illustrations and photographs. Present art director David Oldham has assumed most of the artistic duties, and although there are no author listings giving him official credit, his contribution here is no mere masthead formality. Other changes in format and layout which have improved the journal's appearance include integration of advertising throughout the body of the magazine, a streamlined title logo, and more conventional pagination (from side margin to lower margin). The premiere issue had 66 pages (counting covers), and the Spring, 1984 issue had 48 pages. There are more photographs and fewer drawings. Titles are more often typeset now. There is no doubt that the appearance of WESTVIEW has matured, but the young, sometimes tentative, yet earnest contributions to the early issues hold special memories not unlike the plaster handprint of the kindergartener's first Mother's Day gift.

The staff has changed in other areas, too. Donita Lucas Shields was so prolific and talented an early contributor, that she became an official staff writer. The editorial staff was stunned by the death of Ted Pyle, but Dr. Roger Bromert, from SOSU's Social Sciences department, took over those assistant-editor duties. The most recent change is the departure of Dr. Robin Montgomery as Publisher. The editorial staff determines the content of the magazine, but is, finally, wholly dependent on contributors. In his editor's foreword in each issue, Dr. Thomas reiterates the basic facts of a journal of this nature: WESTVIEW's existence depends on writers who write well, readers who are faithful even through the lean times — and revenues to pay the printer.

The physical facts and changes in WESTVIEW are one matter. But what of the content of this "Journal of Western Oklahoma"? After the titles and authors are dealt with, a "mere" clerical matter, indexing a magazine becomes a creative act in its own right. What *are* fit subjects for indexing? Towns and people are obvious choices when articles are about them, but what about isolated "mentions" such as the name of the first resident pastor of Peace Lutheran Church or the name of a ghost town in an article about Canute? One must keep in mind the needs of a potential, hypothetical researcher. Just how deep is this guy going to dig, anyway? When is a piece of information *too* esoteric? How does the indexer guard against slighting a small, but important, fact and negating the purpose of the index by giving equal weight to everything? I don't know. I just decided. So sue me.

I remember my mother once (*more* than once) cleaning out the hall closet only to get side-tracked reading an old magazine. There is a similar danger in my task. It was easy to get so caught up in re-reading that I forgot to make notes. In spite of those snags, I couldn't help but notice certain tendencies.

In the course of making my "subjective" decisions, I was struck by how many entries were, indeed, place names — 27, counting places that aren't towns. Cheyenne leads with four articles cited in some way. Are all these places more notable than others, or is it just that, so far, no writers have thought to focus on the fascinating events and people in other places? Is there some confusion or hesitancy about just what *are* the boundaries of "Western Oklahoma"?

Even from issues not specifically themed as such, there are numerous entries for *education* and *religion*. Articles that could be listed broadly under *pioneer life* have been distributed among more specific headings such as *homesteading*, *depression*, *oil*, *farming*, and the like. Fiction and poetry are mostly *not* indexed by subject because I felt either that I could not limit them in that way (they are so variously evocative) or that considerations of space precluded multiple cross-listings. It should be easy to see that a single poem could be listed under *nature*, *spring*, *school days*, and more.

There was one other difficulty (besides the awesome responsibility of the whole enterprise) which lay in the sometimes clouded distinction between fact and fiction. I was not always sure if a piece was one or the other, a dilemma which brings to mind a comment by comedienne Lily Tomlin, in the voice of her character Edith Ann, "Lady, I do not make up things. That is lies. Lies is not the truth. But the truth can be made up if you know how."¹ Most of the subject listings are people's names, of course, and those names are not always the "famous" ones. In the various tales of pioneer life, specific details vary little from one person or town to another, evoking, perhaps a reader's "so what?" Naturally, a writer with a lively style can raise one more catalogue of facts to a higher plane. History is constructed with two kinds of raw materials: the ordinary, nothing-special-about-us people and the visionary world-beaters. "Little people" history has gained ascendancy in academe. Writers, editors, and readers are constantly having to temper pride, lest it become inflated chauvinism, and modesty, lest it fade memories irrevocably.

Even the briefest of analyses discovers that "historical" articles have carried the weight in WESTVIEW. Although past thematic issues have naturally suggested looking back, the title of the journal does not limit us to recounting the past. Donita Lucas Shields has opened the way with several pieces featuring contemporary views of Western Oklahoma. There is, perhaps, a tendency to think that any current event worth noting is being covered by local newspapers and that a WESTVIEW of it would be redundant. Perhaps a WESTVIEW of it would be instead like a photograph from a different angle. I would have writers and readers remember that the sub-title is "A Journal of Western Oklahoma." A journal is not only a place for recollection of the past, but also a place for recording the present. Recall my comparison of WESTVIEW to a family album. The family must decide *in the present* what needs to be recorded *in the present*, what really describes the family best. Sometimes it is a group picture, sisters, brothers, children, and all, lined up on the sofa the year we were all home for Thanksgiving at once. Sometimes it is a sneak snapshot of Uncle Larry and Grandpa playing marathon cribbage at the kitchen table, perhaps an ordinary "so what?" but just as worthy of preservation.

¹Lily Tomlin, "And That's the Truth," Polydor Incorporated, 1972. Recording.