

***Bert Hansen: Montanan***

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When the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commission released its list of ninety-one projects, it offered many intriguing ideas for commemorating the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial. The Whitehall (Montana) Chamber of Commerce was one of many small communities interested in presenting “outdoor historic drama” based on the expedition. Among the numerous items on their wish list was a \$30,000 request for script development.

Luckily for Whitehall, and others, the script had already been written and successfully performed to the applause of thousands. The man who wrote it also drew a road map for Montanans on how to reach the target audience which, he steadfastly maintained, is ourselves.

Bert Hansen, arguably one of the great directors of his time, was also a teacher, a playwright, a producer, and a prominent member of the controversial Montana Study. His life and career instruct us on many levels. He respected and accorded dignity to men of all colors, religions, and occupations. He saw the value of people working together to tell their community’s story, warts and all. Bert Hansen made the people of Montana’s cities and towns realize they had much to be proud of and much to hold in trust for the future.

Bert Benjamin Hansen was born to Paul and Mary Hansen of Viborg, South Dakota, on April 12,

1895. His father worked as a farm implement dealer in Sioux Falls. Bert remembered his father reading to him and his three siblings, and the pride he, especially, took in owning a complete collection of Horatio Alger books. In 1914 Hansen attended the University of Michigan as a chemistry major, but as with many of his classmates, World War I interrupted his plans. He served as a medic in France for sixteen months, later recalling that he spent much of his off-time contemplating the futility of war.<sup>1</sup>

After his return to the states and a brief stint as a high-school principal and drama instructor in Roslyn, Washington, Hansen set off for Shanghai, China, where he taught English at the Shanghai American School. While in China, Hansen began writing plays. His repugnance at a sign posted at a local park caused him to embark on a mission to communicate the message that racial discrimination was morally wrong. The sign read, “No Chinese or Dogs Allowed.”<sup>2</sup>

For his graduate studies, Hansen headed home to America and the Yale School of Fine Arts. While at Yale, Hansen received instruction from one of the preeminent professors of drama in America, George Pierce Baker, whose talented students included Frederick H. Koch and Eugene O’Neill.

Hansen credited Professor Baker with teaching him the basics of playwriting, acting, directing, stage design, lighting, and dramatic criticism.<sup>3</sup> After

completing his graduate studies at the University of Washington, Bert began his teaching career in Bozeman at the Montana State College in 1929. He taught English, drama, and speech. Perhaps more important to his life's work, he made many of the acquaintances who later would participate in his historical pageants across Montana. He directed twenty-seven plays in his sixteen years at MSU, and he managed to travel to Hollywood several times during the Depression to study the studio techniques of motion-picture production. Hansen later told an interviewer that he applied the motion-picture techniques he learned in Los Angeles to the production of his historical pageants.<sup>4</sup>

In 1945, at a convention for English teachers in Butte, Hansen met philosophy professor Baker Brownell, director of the newly commissioned Montana Study. Brownell asked Bert if he would be interested in taking a sabbatical and working with him on the new project. The meeting would change Bert's life and make the celebration of community history in Montana more interesting, for years to come.

During the war years, the "Montana Study" came about at the request of Montana State University Chancellor Ernest O. Melby. He wanted a community-centered educational program in the humanities to improve the quality of living in Montana. In 1944 the two-part Study was devised and implemented in a

dozen communities. The plan called for an activated research program exploring the human resources of a small community, designed to develop a pattern for community self-improvement. Initially the Study, projected to last three years, secured funding from a \$25,500 Rockefeller Foundation grant.<sup>5</sup>

Along with Professor Brownell and Chancellor Melby, the study was conducted by a former director of the Tennessee Valley Authority, Arthur E. Morgan. The founders of the Study shared a belief that a better future for mankind relied on the preservation and cultivation of the human values intrinsic to a small community.<sup>6</sup>

First, community members assembled in a series of ten weekly meetings to discuss common problems and work toward their solution. A study guide, "Life in Montana," prepared by former newspaper editor and author Joseph Kinsey Howard and sociologist from Northwestern University, Paul Meadows, aided the study members in their discussions and understanding of their relations to the community, state, region, and country.

The second part of the Montana Study, and the part in which Bert Hansen played the most vital role, was to furnish activities, such as historical pageants, which would enrich the cultural life of the community. As Hansen would write in an article for the journal *Sociatry*, "The work was grounded in the belief that as long as the people of American communities will work

together as neighbors, the democratic way of life will endure.” After study members completed the first ten-week segment, a bibliographic outline of integrated activities and the basic outline for the pageant eventually developed with assistance from Hansen.

The first test of this theory for Bert and other members of the Montana Study came in September 1945, in the little town of Darby in a pageant entitled “Darby Looks at Itself.” According to an account of the Study, *Small Town Renaissance*, “It was a kind of modern morality show depicting the conflict between traditional practices of wastefully exploiting natural resources, and the moderns [sic] scientific use of resources by careful planning.” The drama included 125 of Darby’s 500 residents. The cast ranged from three-year-old children to seventy-nine-year-old grandparents. It was so large that the actors had to sit in the audience when they were off-stage.<sup>7</sup>

Everyone involved found the production tremendously rewarding. The overwhelming success of “Darby Looks at Itself” sparked Hansen to develop and publish his own theories on pageantry as “sociodrama,” a term he borrowed from Dr. J. L. Moreno, one of the first to use drama as a means of restoring mental health.<sup>8</sup> Bert identified the plays of the Montana Study as “rehearsed sociodramas.” Professor Hansen felt that all sociodramas had one common aspect—drama was never an end in itself. It was always a means to an end:

the improvement of the community through integrated activity.

Of course, Montana in the mid-1940s might seem a strange place to be expounding theories on drama as it relates to solving the problems of society. One visitor to a Study group in Stevensville heard Hansen speaking about socialism and could not contain his anger, “I knew it! I knew it all the time! Socialism! That’s what you are promoting! And the very word sociodrama proves it!” With that, the outraged visitor stormed out of the meeting.<sup>9</sup> Eventually the term “sociodrama” evolved into the more popular reference of “historical pageants” which Hansen would continue to develop for decades after the Montana Study was completed.

While a speech teacher at the Montana State University (1948–1965), Hansen liked his students to call him “Bert,” and he offered them excellent advice on how to tell a story. One student remembers Bert telling her, “A writer must introduce conflict to stimulate interest and produce contrast. If conflict is already there, he exaggerates it. If there is none, he manufactures it. Unless one is a celebrity, his diary isn’t interesting to anyone but himself and his relatives. Any other life story must be rearranged and embellished to make good reading.” He also felt that “It’s just as foolish to write a book without an outline in mind as it is to climb St. Mary’s Peak as the crow flies. You’ll get there quicker and safer if you follow the blazed trail.”<sup>10</sup>

In his next production, Stevensville's "A Tale of the Bitter Root," Hansen tackled even thornier issues. His careful guidance helped the people of Stevensville, and members of the Salish and Kootenai tribes, who traveled fifty miles to participate, come to grips with the town's complex history. In developing the pageant, committee members scrutinized histories, diaries, records, and newspaper files and interviewed a number of "old timers." The narrators included, "two Protestant ministers and the Catholic priest, and what was considered a triumph of unity, the secretary-treasurer of the Farmer's Union and the Master of the Grange. The writing and research committee comprised, among others, a Harvard graduate, a day laborer, a college student, and the wife of a cattle-ranch foreman. A dude rancher and his wife did the make-up, and a grand old lady whose youth dated back to the nineties had charge of the costumes."<sup>11</sup> Stevensville residents had never, publicly, acknowledged, together with the Native people, the intricacies of their forefathers' relations. This time the injustice of the Salish people's story of forced removal from the homeland came to life, and the Salish, along with the audience, heard the farewell speech of their Chief Charlot and stood respectfully as the pageant performers left the arena.

According to Hansen, "It was a drama of willful aggression, the tragedy of a minority people first frustrated, then demoralized in order that the aggressor

might take over their lands. This was the pageant the Stevensville people had the courage to conceive, to write, to produce, to see, and to let others see. They were fully aware, of course, that it was not without contemporary parallel." The effect was remarkable. "Many, not only among the 2,500 of the audience but among the older Indians, wept, for the scene was one which many of the older people had lived through when the Indians left Stevensville on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1891."

The celebration of the Lewis and Clark Expedition's Sesquicentennial in 1955 afforded Hansen plenty of opportunity to put his sociodrama theories to work and to expand on his earlier pageants performed in the area. He emphasized that such settings provided, "the opportunity to perform the story as a living, realistic drama . . . against a background of nature, in the actual setting of the events enacted, so that the story seemed to be the truth it was, and not the whimsical display of theatrical affectations such as we have come to associate with the word, pageant."<sup>12</sup> In keeping with his standards of historical accuracy, Hansen required the inclusion of more than fifty Salish Indians from Arlee and the involvement of all segments of the Three Forks/Manhattan community.

By the time of the Sesquicentennial, Hansen had directed twenty-five plays—including three using the theme of Lewis and Clark and the same natural amphitheater site (near the Missouri Headwaters

State Park). Nevertheless his pageant, “Outward Bound,” represented an extremely ambitious undertaking. The program read, “This outdoor drama is written and produced by the citizens of Three Forks under the supervision of Bert Hansen whose services are made available through the courtesy of MSU.” The show began at 6:30 each evening from July 23 through the 26<sup>th</sup>. The elaborate method of staging the two-hour costumed pageant, with the use of authentic props such as tents, canoes, and horses, called for a man of many talents, and Bert Hansen fit the bill. Bert took the cast of hundreds of local folks and combined it with trained narrators and actors who—with the aid of five microphones and a public-address system hidden from view—supplied the voices of the characters out on the stage. The actors performed their parts gesticulating and moving in synchronized harmony with the voices of their counterparts who spoke through the microphones.<sup>13</sup> He achieved this illusion so convincingly that many in the audience swore the voices were coming from the field and not from somewhere off stage.

True to his theories on sociodrama, Hansen liked to include everyone in his productions. In some cases entire towns took part in the pageants. His outreach efforts did not go unrecognized by his colleagues at the University. University of Montana Dean of Students Andrew Cogswell repeated a familiar sentiment in his

letter of October 2, 1964, included in a book of such tributes and presented to Bert upon his retirement from UM:

You took the University to the tipi, to the town hall, to the school house and to the best pastures and fringes of our towns. You blended the efforts of bartenders, bankers, janitors, teachers, housewives, farmers, cowpokes, and miners, in programs that gave them pride in their community’s past and hope for its future. You introduced them to the Indian as an individual and helped them build a mutual respect for one another.

Certainly, Hansen was a genius at getting people together. The 1955 cast of “Outward Bound” included not only the fifty Salish Indians and an infant on a cradle board but also their encampment of lodgepole tepees at the west end of Three Forks. Many had appeared in previous years’ pageants. They performed colorful ceremonial dances nightly at the conclusion of the pageant. These dances—including the buffalo, scalp, war, prayer, owl, and blacktail—were introduced by Chief Eneas Granjo, who also answered questions from the audience. The Salish offered handmade moccasins for sale and taught their gambling stick game to interested onlookers.<sup>14</sup>

Newspaper clippings from the week of the celebration highlight Hansen's talents at public relations and in getting the Indians the treatment they deserved as respected cast members and fellow Montanans. He also made sure that they received reimbursement for their services and travel costs.<sup>15</sup> His friend Walter McDonald perhaps stated it best, writing on September 24, 1964, in his capacity as Chairman of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, "I only hope the one who may take your place will have the interest in the Indian people that you had. As real pioneers, you knew their names and they knew yours, and you were faithful to them as they were to you."

A letter from the Montana Automobile Association attests that it too appreciated Bert's efforts to draw people to and from far-flung communities. Albert Erickson, assistant manager for the MAA, wrote of Bert, "I don't know if Bert is a native Montanan. If not, somebody should dig up a spurious birth certificate and make him a lifelong resident of the Treasure State. He deserves it. He is the most Montana Montanan I know because he believes in bringing our past to the present and making us understand what pioneering is all about."<sup>16</sup>

As usual, when the reviews for "Outward Bound" came in, Hansen was a hero. The town of Three Forks came away rejuvenated and full of pride. Each night's show drew thousands including, "descendents

of the original expedition's members from Canada and California." After one Three Forks pageant, the *Chronicle* stated, "KOPR radio technicians of Butte who located at the pageant site said it was magnificent. They said the portrayal of the character parts was magnificent and the entire performance was worthy of a town twenty times the size of Three Forks."<sup>17</sup>

Often Bert relied on the same core group of performers and supporters in a given community. For example he used Three Forks electrician Edwin Bellach five times to portray Captain William Clark. Bellach's account of Bert's patient, yet persistent, directing skills reveals some of the challenges Hansen faced in putting on a pageant.

I recall your weeks of instructing the group of local townspeople and businessmen, all amateurs, and most of whom had never seen a pageant of this type, let alone taken part in one. And how evening after evening only part of the cast showed up for practice and each evening it was a different group missing. But you still carried on, never giving up, even though you told us each evening that you couldn't see how we could possibly appear before a crowd with no more complete practices than we had been able to have. However, when the final evening came

and the pageant was over, we could always look forward to your big smile and kind compliments on how well we had done.<sup>18</sup>

Inevitably Hansen's talent took him away from Montana, to produce and direct some fifty historical pageants across four states (Montana, Colorado, Kansas, and Wyoming). His involvement in pageants commemorating the establishment of Yellowstone Park (1957–1963) and in the fiftieth anniversary celebration of Glacier National Park (1960) testify to his nationally recognized prominence in the field of historical pageantry. In addition he wrote numerous articles on sociodrama and several books of poetry.

Bert Hansen died in Missoula in December 1970 at the age of seventy-five. He was survived by his wife Margaret and two sons, Paul and Larry. Remembering his friend and colleague University of Montana Professor of Education Kenneth V. Lottich wrote, "One may argue well that local history and incident, the lives and fortunes of the frequently unheralded and unmarked—this is the real story and not the stereotyped and sometimes pedestrian account that forms the basis for chapters in the dry and dusty

volumes of antiquarianism. Professor Hansen knew this well and his works reflected this feeling for humanity and for the individual conscience."

And finally, from a fellow professor at the university concerning Hansen's abilities: "To get people to meet together, to work together, to accomplish a constructive worthwhile goal together, and to appreciate each other in the process. There can be no greater tribute to any man than to say he helped people to love one another."<sup>19</sup>

Those of us who wish to commemorate our shared past would do well to follow the trail blazed by Bert Hansen. He showed the way by making sure the stories he told were accurate—not based on popular mythology—and included the traditionally overlooked members of a community. Bert Hansen was a man ahead of his time. Certainly he set the standard for commemorating history in Montana.

The power of pageants, in Hansen's own words, is that, "the people from all around will know that drama can exist without the fabulous trimmings of a motion picture story. They will know that their living has been interesting, if not to the multitudes, at least to themselves."

*Notes*

1. Maurice Foss Lokensgard, "Bert Hansen's Use of the Historical Pageant as a Form of Persuasion." Unpublished dissertation, Southern Illinois University, August 1969. Personal interview with Bert Hansen.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Richard Waverly Poston, *Small Town Renaissance: A Story of the Montana Study* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).
6. Arthur Ernest Morgan, *The Small Community: Foundation of Democratic Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942)
7. Poston, *Small Town Renaissance*, 55
8. Lokensgard, "Bert Hansen's Use of the Historical Pageant."
9. Ibid., Hansen interview.
10. Mildred A. Walker, *Testimonial Letters to Bert Hansen*, vol. 1 (Missoula: Montana State University Press, 1964). Undated letter.
11. Bert B. Hansen, "A Tale of the Bitter Root: Pageantry as Sociodrama," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 23, No. 2, April 1947.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, July 29, 1950.
15. Miscellaneous Papers of Bert Hansen, Archives, Montana State University, Bozeman.
16. Albert Erickson, *Testimonial Letters to Bert Hansen*, vol. 1. Letter dated September 28, 1964.
17. *Bozeman Daily Chronicle*, August 3, 1950, 1.
18. Edwin Bellach, *Testimonial Letters*, vol. 1. Letter dated September 26, 1964.
19. Ralph Y. McGinnis, *Testimonial Letters*, vol. 1. Letter dated September 30, 1964.