



## *Parked in the Past*

*Willia Hamilton Johnson, Alma miner's wife*

Messages from her diary 1920-1924

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*Editor's note: The Flume is pleased to bring back Ms. Van Dusen's popular "Parked in the Past" column. We appreciate all of your letters and phone calls in support of continuing this feature, which will now run bi-monthly – in the last issue of the month.*

In a small red diary Willia Hamilton Johnson recorded her day-to-day life and innermost thoughts for five years, from Jan. 1, 1920 to Dec. 31, 1924. With space on the page for only a few lines a day, she captured the routine and the remarkable, and inadvertently gave future generations a look at life in Alma's early years.

She may have been an ordinary woman for her time, but Willia seems far from ordinary when compared to women of today. She was as much at home trapping animals for their fur as she was using her sewing machine. She mastered cake baking in Alma's two-mile-high altitude and enjoyed fishing at Antero Reservoir and Sacramento Creek.

She went "Kodaking," which in 1920s slang meant taking photos, originally

coined by those using a Kodak camera. Willia also developed the film and printed photos from the negatives.

Willia was an author. A well-written booklet containing stories and poems about her life, "The Call of the Mines and Other Stories," was published in 1974 when Willia was 90 years old.

She rarely worked outside the home, and she and her husband Bob Johnson moved often as he searched for work – in the mines, in an auto repair shop, and on a farm in southwestern Colorado.

Bob much preferred working in mines and he worked in some of Colorado's famous ones – the Tomboy near Telluride, the Climax in Lake County, and the May Day near Durango – as well as some of Alma's prominent mines – the North and South London, the Dolly Varden and the Sweet Home.

On Jan. 1, 1920, when Willia was 36 years old and Bob was 45, they lived in a one-room cabin at the gold-producing London Mine. It wasn't an easy life.

The U.S. economy during the 1920s was booming. During that decade, before the stock market crash in 1929, America became the wealthiest country in the world and no other nation came close to taking the title. But the Johnsons weren't wealthy.

On Jan. 14, 1920, Bob was given notice from mine manager Charles Aicher that he would be laid off soon. When it happened two days later, Willia cried.

She wondered if they would ever have a home of their own. She wrote that she didn't know what she and Bob would do or where they would go and that it was the "same old story," the couple would have to move again.

They moved to the Singleton home in Alma for few days and later to a rental home owned by the Weber family. They talked about moving away from Alma, and in the meantime Bob Johnson found temporary work cutting firewood. He also worked on the flivver (1920s slang for a small, inexpensive old car that usually gave a rough ride) to try to get it running in case he couldn't find work and he and Willia had to move away. Bob got the car running and he found work; he started at the Dolly Varden Mine on Mount Bross on Feb. 1, 1920. It was one of the three richest silver producers in Alma during its prime in the late 1800s.

The same day that Bob went to work up the hill, Willia probably could have used his help at home – she fell and sprained her wrist, nearly breaking it, and the stovepipe fell down.

Bob wasn't overly fond of the Dolly. His complaints, according to Willia's diary, were that all of the water used by the miners and the mine came from melted snow and that Bob was always inside, either in the house, the shed or the mine.

But Bob stuck it out at the Dolly while Willia stayed home alone. It took several hours to walk or ride a horse to and from the mine. Bob typically worked for a week or so at a time before he came home for a break. Their communication was through letters and the telephone.

While Bob was away, Willia kept busy. She was an accomplished fur trapper and in her traps she caught a variety of the wildlife that roamed around Alma.

Muskrat, badger, rabbit, weasel, coyote and fox were mentioned in the diary. Once she wrote about trapping "a fine mink" that earned her \$15 [about \$175 in 2014 dollars].

She sewed an apron and mailed it to her mother on her birthday. She made many of her own clothes, including a gray silk dress, "surely a hard job as material was scarce," she wrote.

She rode horses, often to check animal traps, with her good friend whom she called Mrs. Sheldon in the diary and never once by her first name, Mable. She also attended functions at the Ladies Aid Hall in Alma. When Bob was home they got together with other couples for dinner before playing cards or listening to the radio.

### **Bad times**

Bob and Willia seemed to get along most of the time, but Willia mentioned days when Bob "ranted" about things she did.

Such as on April 2, 1923. Bob came down from the mine and Bill and Mable Sheldon and a man named John came over for dinner and to play cards. John was part of the reason for Bob and Willia's fight the next day.

Bob accused Willia of having company at their home all the time when he was away, and that the company was eating

all of their food. He said she was seeing too much of their friend John, that she shouldn't have quit her job (as a cook at the Sweet Home Mine), and that if he couldn't have any fun (because he was working), Willia shouldn't either.

After the fight Willia went to the store for milk. When she returned, Bob was gone. She fixed dinner "and waited and waited" for him. A neighbor later told her Bob took off on his horse headed back to the mine. Two days later Bob finally phoned Willia.

After that argument she wrote that "maybe there was to be no future with him" and that henceforth she would go day by day until something happened.

But the marriage lasted. The two were together for more than 54 years until Bob's death in 1959.

### **Good times**

There were good times, too. Just a few days before the big fight, on March 27, Bob called from the mine and asked Willia to meet him. Willia borrowed a horse named Kit from Weber's livery and met Bob up on the mountain. She said she "enjoyed it so much."

Another time, Bob was working the day of his 49th birthday on March 22, 1923. He came home the next day and Willia had a cake ready for him. They attended a dance and bazaar at the "hall," (possibly the Ladies Aid Hall) and Bob went back up to the mine early the next morning.

### **Worst fears realized**

Beginning about the first of April 1923, and lasting for several months, Willia did not feel well. Her stomach hurt, she was nauseous and she had severe headaches.

By June she was feeling worse. In an entry on June 1 she said she was "not

well at all, just barely able to crawl around." And the next day it was worse, "I was so sick I thought I was going to die."

On her 39th birthday, June 5, Willia made a decision to call the doctor and on June 8, Bob and Willia went to see Dr. L. M. Gwinn in Fairplay. And that's the day Willia wrote in her diary, "My worst fears were all true."

She was pregnant. The doctor said he would take her to Salida the following Monday, June 11, for an operation to terminate the pregnancy.

In anticipation of the trip to Salida, Willia said she was "so nervous all day, [she] could hardly do anything."

But the doctor didn't take Willia to Salida. He called on Sunday to say the Salida doctor, George Curfman, would not operate until Willia consulted a specialist in Denver. Willia saw Dr. C. B. Ingraham on June 28.

### **Best day of life**

Even though she got sick in the car on the way to the city, Willia felt well enough to see a show with Bob the evening before her appointment. It was "Enemies of Women," a silent movie starring Lionel Barrymore. Willia said it was good.

After seeing the doctor, Willia wrote in her diary, "In some ways [this is] the greatest day of my life – if doctors can be depended upon."

Willia wrote that Dr. Ingraham thought that she had a good chance "to go through with it this time." The choice of words indicates she may have miscarried in the past. The pregnancy was progressing, but Willia didn't feel well for more than a few days at a time for the nine-month term.

Bob and Willia moved to Salida in November 1923 to live with her mother. Bob worked at the silver-producing Rawley Mine west of Villa Grove in the town of Bonanza until the mine shut down later that month.

Even with Bob out of work, the couple was happy. She wrote about her joy in pregnancy in a summary of the year 1923, "The biggest surprise of all was when I learned that I was to become a mother after nearly 20 years of married life and after doctors had told me it was impossible. I expected [the] stork Dec. 20th, but the year passed and nothing happened."

The last entry for the year was that "1923 closed leaving us all looking forward to the biggest event of our lives, the coming of the stork, and hoping and praying that it may come speedily."

### **Worst day**

On Jan. 7, 1924, Willia received a letter from her old friend Mrs. Sheldon, asking the question everyone back in Alma wanted to know, how Willia was doing. Perhaps Willia didn't answer her friend, but in her diary she wrote, "[I] haven't the heart to tell them."

On January 21, Dr. Curfman determined the baby was overdue. Willia met him the next day at midwife Kate Van Perryman's home. He induced labor, and on January 24, the baby boy, Robert Lee Johnson, was born. He died within minutes.

### **Son Charles**

Bob and Willia adopted their son Charles sometime between 1925, when he was born, and 1927, when the family moved to Ignacio, near Durango, and started farming.

A few years later, during the depression, the family was financially ruined.

They were back in Alma in 1932, where Bob worked repairing small engines. In 1936, they were part of the congregation that built Alma's Stone Church.

Willia's dream of owning a home of her own was finally realized when the Johnsons bought a home in Buena Vista in 1946.

She died in Salida in 1979 at age 95 and is buried next to Bob in Buena Vista's Mount Olivet Cemetery.

Sources for this story include the unpublished diary of Willia Vance Hamilton Johnson, 1920-1924, available at the Park County Local History Archives, and "The Call of the Mines and Other Stories" by Willa [Willia] V. Johnson, copyright 1974. Special thanks go to Sharon Amos, great-grandniece of Willia Johnson, for filling in the blanks.

See images next page.



## Marriage in 1904

Willia Vance Hamilton married Robert Joel Johnson on Oct. 1, 1904. It is believed by the descendants that this is their wedding photo. (Photo courtesy of Sharon Amos)



## Dolly Varden workers

Dolly Varden Mine workers pose outside its location on Mount Bross. Bob Johnson worked here in 1920. (Photo courtesy Park County Local History Archives, C. B. Chase photo, source: South Park Historical Foundation)



## Alma circa 1920s

Bob and Willia Johnson lived in Alma when this photo was taken. (Photo courtesy Park County Local History Archives, Sanborn post card, source: South Park Historical Foundation)



## Trappers

Mable Sheldon, left, and Willia Johnson showing their trapped pelts and inadvertently modeling 1920s fashion. (Photo from "The Call of the Mines and Other Stories," courtesy of Sharon Amos)