

**STURGIS
&
MEADE
COUNTY
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

Newsletter, May 2019, Vol. 4, Issue 2



Photo Courtesy of Bob Davis

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President’s Report ... *Mark Rambow*

Historic Collection Begins to Grow

Organizations, just like people, have periods of growth. The Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society is currently undergoing one. We are fortunate, through the generous spirit of our community, to begin to develop our historic collection of items, photos, documents, etc.

The Stensland House Museum of Faith generously contacted us to see if we would take their small yet impressive museum collection. They are no longer able to care for it, but wanted it to go to an organization that would keep it intact and cared for. We agreed, and are now in the process of transporting, cataloging and storing the various items in the collection. It is an impressive gathering of items, photographs and memorabilia, documenting the history of the Faith area over several decades.

To store our collection, the Meade County Commissioners unanimously voted to allow our organization the use of two classrooms in the old “Primary School Building.” Until we can find a permanent home, this space allows us to begin collecting and preserving items which are important to the history and culture of our community.

To document and track the items in our collection, the Society has recently purchased a dedicated computer, scanner, camera, and all the necessary software to meet this goal. Funds for this purchase were provided by generous donations from the Harland T. Hermann Sr. and Jean Hermann Memorial Fund, and will allow us to track all items being donated, including their individual significance and historic relevance to our area.

Lastly, we have a workspace which has been generously loaned to us by First Interstate Bank. This gives us a comfortable office to use as a workspace while we document and catalogue the various items we collect.

As you can see, it takes many community partners to make all of this work. We now need help from you and the other members of the community! With the space and technology available to us, we are now able to accept historically significant items, photos, documents, etc., which lend to our understanding and preservation of the history, culture and people of Sturgis and Meade County. Please contact me, or another board member if you have items that may be of significance. Items don’t have to be extremely old or valuable to be significant. History is always happening and reflects in the simplest item or photograph.

What an exciting time! We are all looking forward to what comes next! Please be a part of that and help us to save our history for the coming generations.

Now that the space is available, we can begin receiving items, photos, documents, etc., which are relevant to the history and culture of our area. We are also developing standards and policies necessary to determine what items we will accept and how best to conserve them.

As 2019 progresses, we are excited to see what the future holds. It already promises that the Society is continuing to grow and move ahead in our mission, and we are excited to have you all along as partners in this journey!

**TIM VELDER
TO SPEAK AT
HISTORY DAY**

*

Well known local historian, Tim Velder, will give two presentations as part of the 5th Annual History Day “Celebrating the 130th Anniversary of Meade County.”

On Saturday, June 15, at 11 a.m. Mr. Velder’s presentation will be:

“Remember the Titans: Cold War on the Plains”

Velder will return at 1 p.m. for a presentation titled:

“Abandoned Towns of Eastern Butte and Central Meade Counties”

Both presentations will be held at The Local, located at 1064 Main Street in Sturgis.

2019 MARTIN C. BEUG FRIEND OF HISTORY AWARD

The Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society Board of Directors have announced the winners of the 2019 MARTIN C. BEUG FRIEND OF HISTORY AWARD. Noting that this year there were two very worthy nominations for this award, the Board voted to give both the Erskine Court House Building and The Hotel Sturgis this prestigious award.



Erskine Court House Building

In preserving and redesigning this school building, Meade County has allowed the community at large to continue enjoying the beauty and dignity of this historic structure, while repurposing it to a modern audience and need, guaranteeing its future relevance and significance. The community will continue to have this historic structure for many years to come. The outstanding vision and investment of the Meade County Commission, and the people of Meade County, in preserving this landmark structure, meets the goals of the Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society's mission to "preserve, protect, and promote" the history of Sturgis and Meade County.



The Hotel Sturgis

The Hotel Sturgis development is working to renovate a major Main Street landmark building in Sturgis to both honor the history of the facility and renovate it. In so doing, they are contributing a new and exciting addition to the Sturgis Main Street. This is an outstanding example of "preserving, protecting, and promoting Sturgis and Meade County History." The vision, investment and hard work of the Bradley Family in developing The Hotel Sturgis has definitely fulfilled the spirit of the "preserve, protect, and promote" goals of the Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society and the criteria for selecting annual recipients of the Martin C. Beug Friend of History Award.

Stensland House Museum Collection Readied For Move ... *Jim Holland*

The packers did their jobs. Now, it's up to the movers to bring the historic contents of Stensland House Museum from its longtime home in Faith to a future home in Sturgis.

Eight members of the Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society made the 90-mile jaunt to Faith on April 13 to box up many of the eclectic items in the house to await the final transport, via professional movers, sometime in the coming weeks.



Making the trip were board president Mark Rambow, vice-president Ross Lamphere, treasurer Jan Lundgren, Mary Wood Fossen, Becky Porter-Watson, Kathi Schneider, Duane Boy and Jim Holland.

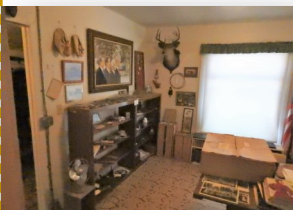
The decision to accept the historical items came more than a year after museum board member Arlyce Krause of Faith contacted Rambow with an offer of the contents of the museum.

Krause said their board no longer had the resources to maintain the museum. The frame home, dating to 1910, was also falling into disrepair.

There just isn't the support to continue to operate the museum, but they wanted to keep the collection together. That was their main point. They wanted someone who would respect it as a collection, for its historical value," Rambow said.

Becky Porter-Watson made an initial foray to Faith last summer to document the museum. After more consideration and planning, the board decided to take on the collection.

However, the week preceding packing day produced yet another early spring blizzard, which brought most of the state to a halt mid-week. Yet, by Saturday, skies and roads were clear.



First order of business upon arrival in Faith was to dig a path through up to three feet of hard-packed snow to gain entrance to the house.

Some of the more interesting finds included photographs, reference books, posters, hand-painted marionettes, a railroad lantern, an early television, an even older radio console, militaria, and taxidermy.

Other artifacts included clothing, quilts, vintage kitchen and laundry room wares, and a wealth of old Faith Independent and other regional newspapers.

Rambow was impressed with the museum's level of organization.

"It wasn't just a bunch of old junk piled up in this building. Everything was segmented by which room it was in, whether it was household goods or bathroom goods, sewing room or whatever. Everything was in its place and pretty comprehensive for the time," Rambow said.



About three hours of concerted effort had a majority of the items boxed and ready to move. Before heading back to Sturgis, the executive board treated the packing crew to lunch at the Triple R Bar & Grill.

For now, the Stensland Collection will find a new home in cold storage at the former Primary School Building or in the Society's basement office space at First Interstate Bank.

A fleet of horse-drawn farm implements lined up on the museum grounds will also find its way to Sturgis for storage, for now at least, at the Black Hills Steam & Threshing Bee grounds.



"History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future."

- Robert Penn Warren



Description of Events for 5th Annual History Day and 130th Birthday Celebration of Meade County, June 14-15, 2019 ... *Kris Hubbard*

In recognition of the formation of Meade County in 1889, this year's Sturgis and Meade County Historical Society's 5th Annual History Day on Friday and Saturday, June 14-15, will celebrate the 130th anniversary of Meade County and its early post offices and towns.

History Day kicks off Friday with a social from 4:30-7 p.m. at the Sturgis City Auditorium.

Booths with information about early Meade County post offices and communities, many of which no longer exist, will be open to the public during the Friday social. Area residents with a connection to these communities will share photographs and stories.

The booths at City Auditorium will again be open to the public from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday. Also scheduled for Saturday is a parade, beginning at 10 a.m. down Sturgis Main Street.

Following the parade, two historical talks by Newell native and former Black Hills area newspaper reporter and editor Tim Velder will be held at 'The Local,' 1064 Main Street in Sturgis. His 11 a.m. presentation is titled "Remember the Titans: Cold War on the Plains." According to Velder, the United States was defended in the late 1950s and early 1960s by the Titan missile which was prior to the development of the Minuteman Missile Program. Sites were built in Sturgis, Hermosa and Wicksville, on a fast and expensive schedule, but lasted only a short time before they were removed from service.

Velder's 1 p.m. presentation is about abandoned towns of Eastern Butte and Central Meade Counties. "During the final homesteading land rush of the Great Plains, many communities sprung up on the prairies north of the Black Hills," he said. "These included postal stations, stores, saloons, schools and other businesses." Those attending will learn more about some of these communities, from Acme to Zeona, and the people who worked to put them on the map.

History Day is possible due, in part, to the following Historical Society sponsors: Arby's, City of Sturgis, Da Bus, Davenport Family Real Estate, Elk Creek Steakhouse, First Interstate Bank, First National Bank, Grocery Mart, The HomeSlice Group, Jambonz Grill & Pub, KBHB Radio, The Knuckle Saloon, La Risa Mexican Cuisine, Loud American Roadhouse, Meade County Commissioners, The Oasis Bar, Papa John's, Sidehack Saloon, Sturgis Photo & Gifts, Wanda's Kitchen and Weimer's Diner & Donuts.

History Day: Celebrating the 130th Anniversary of Meade County Early Day Post Offices ... *Janice Lundgren*

Did you know there used to be between 40 to 50 post offices in Meade County? The vast majority of these post offices no longer exist and neither do the towns where they were located. Some of these towns were bustling communities in their day. Come to History Day, June 14th from 4:30 to 7 and June 15th from 9 to 3 at the Sturgis City Auditorium on Main Street to find out some of the history about these communities. Why did some survive and others die? Did the railroads pass them by? Did the main roads go another way? Did the Deadwood Bismark Trail outlive its usefulness? Did you know that the Bear Butte Breezes school paper, that so many of us read and enjoyed and is still going strong today, got its first printing press from Chalk Butte when their town newspaper folded? Come see the pictures and listen to the stories from people who have connections to these little communities. Some were raised in them, some had relatives that were the post master or post mistress of these communities, some just have what is left of these towns in their pasture. Hope to see you in June!

5th ANNUAL HISTORY DAY

Celebrating the 130th Anniversary of Meade County And It's Early Post Offices And Towns Friday and Saturday, June 14-15, 2019

Presented by Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society

Friday, June 14

4:30-7 p.m. – Community social, Sturgis City Auditorium, Main Street

4:30-7 p.m. – Booths featuring information, photos and oral history of early Meade County post offices and communities, Sturgis City Auditorium, Main Street

Saturday, June 15

9 a.m. – Booths featuring information, photos and oral history of early Meade County post offices and communities, Sturgis City Auditorium, Main Street

10 a.m. – Parade down Main Street

11 a.m. – “Remember the Titans: Cold War on the Plains” talk by Tim Velder, at “The Local,” 1064 Main Street

Noon– Lunch at local restaurants

1 p.m. – “Abandoned Towns of Eastern Butte and Central Meade Counties” talk by Tim Velder, at “The Local,” 1064 Main Street



Come Join The Parade!



At 10 a.m. on Saturday, June 15 the Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society will host a parade in downtown Sturgis as part of the 5th Annual History Day, “Celebrating the 130th Anniversary of Meade County.” Everyone is invited to enter the parade with a vehicle, float, animals, walkers, musical entry, etc. Your entry can be as simple or as elaborate as you would like. All you have to do to enter is to contact Leona Schroeder (as shown below) and then show up at the Vet’s Club at 868 Main Street in Sturgis, on Saturday, June 15, at 9:00 a.m.

To schedule an entry contact:

Leona Schroeder

Email: leonags@aol.com

Phone: 605-939-9979

And ... don’t forget...even if you don’t have an entry in the parade, come downtown and join in the fun of the exhibits at the auditorium, listen to Tim Velder’s presentations on local history at “The Local,” and enjoy watching the parade!

YOUR MEMBERSHIP DUES ARE PAYABLE ON JUNE 15!

As a result of a change to our by-laws made by the Board, all dues are payable on June 15 each year. This means that no matter when you joined, your annual dues are now due on June 15 each year.

Options for paying your dues include:

- a) fill out the membership form below and drop it off at the membership table in the City Auditorium during History Day on June 14 or 15. We will accept your check or we can also now accept a credit card;
- b) fill out the membership form below and mail it with your check to the address listed on the form; or
- c) go online to the Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society, click on Membership and Donations, click on Membership, fill out the membership form (renewing members must also fill out a new form), and make your payment through PayPal using your credit card.

Thank you for your past membership, and we look forward to receiving your renewal. If you know of someone else who would like to join, please copy the form for them or invite them to stop by and join during History Day.

Leona Howe Schroeder
Membership Chairman

STURGIS & MEADE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP

Our goal is to preserve, protect and promote the history of Sturgis and Meade County. We cannot do this alone ... this is done through memberships, sponsorships and donations. The Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society is a 501©3 nonprofit organization. Therefore, sponsorships and donations are tax-deductible; membership dues are not tax deductible. New membership year starts June 15.

Registration Information

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Telephone: _____ E-mail: _____

Membership Level Desired

Individual: \$25.00
 Family: \$35.00
 Student: \$15.00
 Business Sponsorship: \$250.00
 Life Membership: \$5,000.00

Please send this form, accompanied by a check for your membership, to:

Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society
P.O. Box 221
Sturgis, SD 57785

You may also register, pay dues, and donate online with a credit card or PayPal at: www.SturgisHistory.org

“Crazy Like A Fox?” ... *Mark Rambow*

On Saturday morning, July 30, 1910, at about 10 a.m., the quiet of Main Street in Sturgis was disrupted when Mrs. Nellie McMahon, the recent widow of Sturgis attorney Michael McMahon, put a 32-caliber bullet through the forehead of her late-husband's law partner, David Thomas. Mrs. McMahon was arrested and held for murder. It should have been a very straightforward case, but it would vex the local community for four years.

The disagreement was over property. Mr. McMahon had died in May of 1910, less than a year after marrying the much younger Nellie. She inherited all his property and felt she had a right to the offices housing the law practice as well. When she asked Mr. Thomas to vacate the property, however, he had refused, saying that the law partnership allowed him to remain in the building. The disagreement lasted for several weeks, until that day when Nellie walked up to Thomas, seated in his chair, and demanded he vacate the property. Before he made a move, she shot him just above the left eye.

She initially said that he had physically threatened her and she was forced to shoot in self-defense. Witnesses, however, indicated that she had fired under no duress. She then claimed that she had not intended to shoot, but was startled by his sudden movement and did not realize the safety was off on the gun.

The community began to smell a rat. Nellie had first been married to George McPherson, a much older rancher east of town, whose health declined rapidly after their union. McPherson died of a sudden heart attack in November of 1907. At the time, some around the community felt he had been poisoned, or had poisoned himself due to some legal problems he was facing. Nonetheless, Nellie McPherson became a very comfortable widow. She then married McMahon who died less than a year later. Again, rumors were held that he had been poisoned, but no guilty party was named. Nellie was a more comfortable widow.

In light of the shooting, efforts were made to disinter the bodies of both men to see if there was any sign of poison. With no evidence to the claim, however, the investigation of that thread ended, and the dead remained buried.

When the trial commenced, the prosecution brought eight witnesses, two of whom were in the room when the shooting occurred. They had a very strong case for murder and laid out the case professionally. When the defense began their case, however, they took a unique approach, claiming a combination of self-defense, temporary insanity and accidental shooting. The widow McMahon took the stand and now said that she had been the victim of disturbing and inappropriate advances from Mr. Thomas. She said that he pressed her to marry him, saying that he would divorce his wife and leave his four young children, taking her to South America. She claimed that he would not take no for an answer and it caused her to fear for her safety. It was due to her fear that she began to carry a gun, and also caused her temporary insanity. It was in this state that she went to the office and, thinking the gun was on safety, accidentally shot him in the head. While the community was outraged by this, her third version of the events, the jury reached a different conclusion. On November 21, 1910, they found her not guilty due to temporary insanity.

The law was not clear on the insanity defense, and the local judge was not able to simply send her to the state hospital in Yankton. It would be left for the local “insanity board” to meet and determine if she should be hospitalized. Several days after the verdict, the local insanity board did just that, ordering her removal to Yankton. Before they could take her away, however, her attorney appealed to a judge in Rapid City, who granted her freedom in January of 1911, stating that “the causes which had contributed to the insanity at the time of the killing had been removed and that the woman had recovered her normal condition.”

People were furious, and the state legislature acted immediately to redefine the law. A week after this ruling, a legislator from Meade County introduced a bill to allow a circuit judge the discretion to immediately sentence a person found not guilty by insanity to the state hospital. The new state law was too late for this case however.

In June 1911, the case returned to the spotlight when Nellie McMahon was sued by the wife and children of David Thomas. \$10,000 was awarded to the family, leading Nellie to file for bankruptcy in October of that year. It also led her to threaten the lives of the prosecuting attorney and others, leading the Meade County insanity board to, again, declare her insane and order her to the state hospital. She once again fought this action, but was unsuccessful this time and was handed over to the state in late November.

By August of 1912, Nellie was again in court, suing the Attorney General of South Dakota for her release. The case drug out for months and ended up before the state Supreme Court. During this time, testimony was made that Nellie had suffered a head injury in a buggy accident when she was 20 years old, and had, since that time, occasional fits of unbalance and temper, but would appear normal to most people. The doctor from the asylum in Yankton testified that she was a “moral imbecile,” not knowing right from wrong, but otherwise appearing very sane. In January 1913, the state Supreme Court denied her case, leaving her in the care of the state hospital.

... continued on following page

“Crazy Like A Fox” *(continued)*

That should have ended the case, but again, it did not. In September 1913, Nellie McMahan showed up in Sturgis. It seems that there was an obscure state rule that allowed the “incurably insane” to be released to the care of a family member. Nellie was released to the care of a sister in Chicago, but gave her brother-in-law the slip in Sioux City and headed back to Sturgis. Again, legal wrangling ensued. As she was released from the hospital to her sister, the hospital could not accept her back without a recommendation from the Meade County insanity board. While all of this was being worked out, Nellie managed to slip away. Nothing was heard of her until late June of 1914, when a telegram was received in Sturgis stating that Nellie had died of cancer in Greeley Colorado.

The newspaper that delivered this news stated that her body was to be shipped back to Sturgis for burial, but we know that it was not, as records show that she is buried in Greeley, Colorado. Had her body been returned, she could have been buried in Bear Butte Cemetery where the remains of George McPherson and David Thomas lie, or in St. Aloysius Cemetery where Michael McMahan is buried. Instead, she only leaves our community with a strange tale of a possible black-widow murderess, judged to be insane, who redefined the laws of our state.



David Thomas Grave
Bear Butte Cemetery



Nellie McMahan grave
Greeley CO

Sheriffs of Meade County ... *David Super*

Easy job, getting elected and serving as sheriff of Meade County?

Perhaps in the minds of some, but that does not count murder investigations, cattle rustling, domestic disturbances and the occasional brawl in a biker bar. And campaigning for office. During the Sturgis Library’s March 15 History At High Noon program, amateur historian David Super reviewed experiences from all the men who have served as county sheriff since 1889.

<p>Bruce A. Barnes Republican</p> <p>1925 - 1928 4 years in office</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on performance as County Sheriff, Gov. Green appoints Barnes as State Sheriff 1931 - 1932 As State Sheriff, organized “vigilantes” to help capture criminals First president of the SD Peace Officers Association 	
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Starting with W. L. Souter, a Deadwood lawman before being elected the county’s first sheriff, Super detailed how Souter and others campaigned and were elected to office. Across more than a century of voter-selected law enforcement, more Democrats have been elected than Republicans. The early sheriffs were term-limited to no more than two consecutive, two-year terms. That restriction was changed by a vote of all South Dakotans in 1954. Since then, just three men have held the office - John Egger, Floyd Cleland and current Sheriff Ron Merwin.

Early in the 20th century, sheriffs presided in two hangings that were solemnly conducted from gallows constructed beside the sandstone courthouse that was torn down in the early 1960s. Horse thieves were hauled back from Montana to face justice in Meade County. One sheriff and his buddies were injured by an explosion when they lowered a kerosene lantern into a well filled with gasses.

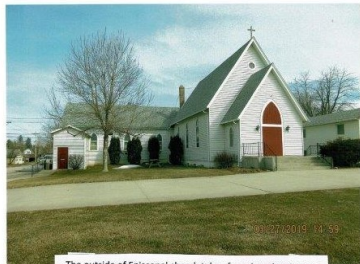


Today, Sheriff Merwin leads a force of 17 deputies who increasingly operate as suburban law enforcement officers across Meade County’s 3,500 square miles, populated by 30,000 residents.

<p>John F. Egger Democrat</p> <p>1955 - 1986 32 years in office</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1954 - Voters amend S.D. Constitution to permit sheriffs to serve unlimited terms Sheriff Egger won 13 consecutive elections, 10 for 2-year terms, three for 4-year terms “I believe in good law enforcement without unnecessary aggression” 1986 - Longtime Deputy Merlin Ehlers serves as Acting Sheriff during the last six months of Egger’s final term in office 	
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April Scoop of History Visit Report ... *Joan Bachmeier and Mary Fossen*

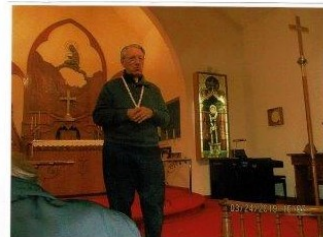
St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Sturgis, SD



The outside of Episcopal church taken from Junction Avenue

Attendees were welcomed into the Church by its minister, Father Bunker Hill. Fr. Hill spoke about his experience and how he got to Sturgis and then a bit about the Episcopal Church.

Fr. Hill then gave some history of the church building. The original building was built in 1889. In 1907, the west part was used as a gymnasium. This part was



Father Buster Hill, minister of the Episcopal Church, told about the church's doctrine and how it is different from the Catholic and Protestant church. He also told about the history of St. Thomas Episcopal Church.

used by the entire town. 45 years later, Freeman Steele, who was quite active in the church, bought a new organ, painted the ceilings and replaced broken windows and installed inside bathrooms. In 1965, a building with 7 rooms and an office was built next to the church and that is now the rectory. In 1979, the 90-year-old building was raised and a basement built. The building was insulated and carpeted, restrooms and showers were installed, custom cabinets were installed in the kitchen, and a comfortable parish hall was established.

Following Fr. Hill's presentation, Karen A. Moore talked about the document that is screwed to the wall in the entry which documents the Consecration of St. Thomas by Bishop Hare.

Next, Judy Hughes explained the Reredos behind the altar that represents the Davenport Dam and Sturgis Waterworks in memory of Jarvis and Janette Davenport. She also spoke of the stained glass windows that were procured from another church.

After these presentations, all were invited to the parish hall for cookies and coffee.

Thank you to the St. Thomas Episcopal Church members for this informative presentation!



The interior of the church after it was remodeled.

Calendar of Upcoming Events ... *Leona Schroeder*

Friday, May 17, Noon— **HISTORY AT HIGH NOON**, Community Center
‘Bob Lee Revisited’... read by David Super

Tuesday, May 21, 6:30 p.m.—**MONTHLY BOARD MEETING**, Chamber Office

Tuesday, June 11, 6:30 p.m.—**MONTHLY BOARD MEETING**, Chamber Office

Friday-Saturday, June 14-15—**5TH ANNUAL HISTORY DAY**
“CELEBRATING THE 130TH ANNIVERSARY OF MEADE COUNTY”

Sturgis Auditorium

Friday, June 14, 4:30-7 p.m.

Saturday, June 15, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.

Parade at 10 a.m. on Main Street

STURGIS & MEADE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 221, Sturgis, SD 57785



Board Officers

Mark Rambow, President, mark@sturgishistory.org

Ross Lamphere, Vice President

Rebecca Porter-Watson, Secretary

Janice Lundgren, Treasurer

On Line

Website: www.sturgishistory.org

Facebook: www.facebook.com/sturgishistory.org

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Sturgis & Meade County Historical Society

P. O. Box 221

Sturgis, SD 57785