

M From the Society

An Extraordinary Record of an Ordinary Life The Florence Story Diary

by Jodie Foley



Courtesy, Joel Story

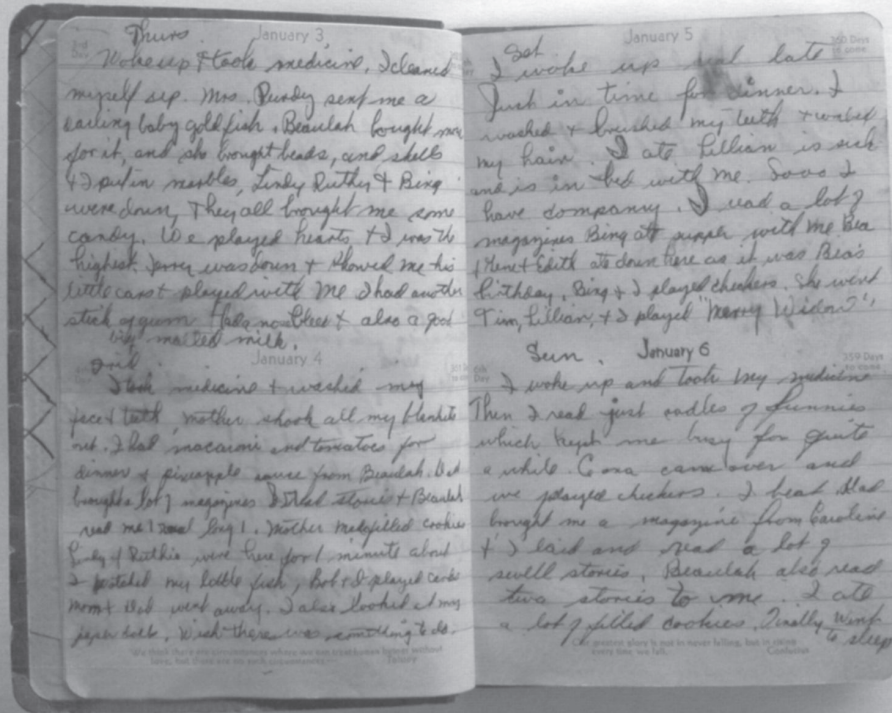
Florence Story, 1935

Destitute farm families, blinding dust storms, and urban soup lines have long defined the Great Depression in the United States. More recently, however, historians have widened their study of the period to look at the entertainment and leisure activities of the 1930s. In the collection of the Montana Historical Society (MHS), there are many rich sources that provide delightful glimpses into the social and cultural lives of depression-era families.

One of these sources is the diary kept by teenager Florence Story that chronicles her life in Minot, North Dakota, from January to April 1935. Although only a hundred pages in length, the diary delivers an emotional wallop while also revealing how a young woman and her family coped with depression-era difficulties, including Florence's devastating illness, with the help of loyal friends, service groups, a good radio, and a few chocolate bars.

Florence was an average sixteen-year-old sophomore at Minot High School—she joined the Girl Reserves (a YWCA club for high school-age girls), gained confirmation into the Lutheran Church, and enjoyed spending time with “the gang.” In her diary she comments on family, friends, movie stars, food, and school. Florence does not address the deprivations of those years, but neither does she dwell on her own daily challenges, though they were considerable. At the age of ten Florence was diagnosed with a heart ailment that caused high fevers, fatigue, and severe back pain.

Although Florence was often confined to her bed, she was rarely alone. Schoolmates visited and brought homework almost daily. On January 8, for example, “Bing came & helped me with geometry. Linda told me about Caesar, biology & literature.” Another day Florence recorded that “Gladys Roland, Helen Jessen, & Marie Steinmetz were here. . . . We listened to the tournament between Minot and Wappeton. Wappeton won. Heck.” Teachers, friends from the Girl Reserves, and members of the Lutheran Church also stopped by regularly, bringing small gifts, including hard-to-find items such as the “silk stockings from the aid [Lutheran Ladies Aid Society].”¹



MHS Archives, Helena, Montana

Sixteen-year-old Florence Story chronicled her life from January to April 1935, revealing how she and her family coped with depression-era difficulties, including the illness that kept her at home or in the hospital for the duration of her diary keeping.

Neither was Florence deprived of other little luxuries, especially sweet treats. Although money was precious in those years, family and friends often bought candy for her. One day she “had part of a Snickers, two chocolate covered cherries & Lindy brought me a chocolate bar.” Some two weeks later “Mrs. Purdy came over and brought me candy and caramel rolls. Then she made some potato chips.”²²

Popular culture provided diversions, and Florence took full advantage of these distractions. She often describes reading the “funnies” and looking through popular magazines (including *Screen Romance* and *McCall's*). One particularly busy day, January 6, Florence read “just oodles of funnies today which kept me busy for quite a while. . . . Dad [her stepfather Andrew Togstad]

brought me a magazine . . . & I laid and read a lot a swell stories.” Movies, too, were a favorite. On February 7 she, her mother, and Beulah [a neighbor who often cared for her] “went to the State [Theater] to see ‘Imitation of a life’ with Claudette Colbert & Baby Jane.” Florence and her family also spent evenings listening to the radio, tapping their feet to fiddle music on the *WLS Barn Dance* or following the plot of a *Lux Radio Theatre Hour* production. She especially enjoyed the antics of Fish Face. She wrote on January 28 that she “went up to Beulah’s in the afternoon and listened to . . . Fish Face & sure did laugh.”²³

In addition to these entertainments, Florence pursued some of the other inexpensive hobbies that gained popularity in those years—playing with paper dolls cut from comics and newspaper and women’s magazine advertisements,

1. Florence Story Diary, January 8, March 23, 12, 1935, Small Collection 2339, Alma Togstad Papers, Montana Historical Society Archives, Helena (hereafter MHS).

2. *Ibid.*, January 8, 24, 1935.

3. *Ibid.*, January 6, 28, February 7, 1935.



Minot High School Library, Minot, North Dakota

In her diary Florence mentions friends who helped with her studies. Some of them may show up in these snapshots from her 1935 Minot High School yearbook.

working crosswords, entering magazine contests, sending in for fan club prizes, and putting together jigsaw puzzles.

Diary entries are dominated by descriptions of daily life, the human interactions and distracting entertainments she enjoyed with those who loved her. In March 1935 Florence's illness worsened. She was hospitalized for most of the month, but on March 27 doctors allowed her to go home. On April 27, 1935, surrounded by family and friends, she passed away, five months shy of her seventeenth birthday.

An extraordinary record of an ordinary life, Florence's diary was almost lost to history. Florence's mother, Alma Story Togstad, and later her son Joel Story, kept the diary and four others in a trunk. When Mr. Story moved to a smaller home, the diaries were accidentally thrown out along with some old books. A neighbor discovered them but did not know to whom they belonged. Since Mrs. Togstad had lived in Montana in the 1960s, the neighbor

4. Bertha Ballinger Aududell Reminiscence, Small Collection 352, MHS; Lula Martinez, interview by Laurie Mercier, Portland, Oregon, September 1987, Oral History 1017, *ibid*.



Florence spent time visiting with family and friends, going to movies, listening to the radio, and amusing herself with games, paper dolls, and reading. On March 8 she wrote, "Bing and Pud came. They brought me Shirley Temple paper dolls. I cut them out."

decided the collection belonged at the Montana Historical Society. MHS staff located Joel Story who generously completed the donation of the diaries.

The Florence Story diary compliments the Montana Historical Society's rich collection of diaries, letters, oral histories, and reminiscences. The collection includes descriptions of women's experiences from across the state and across time—from overland journey diaries written during the 1860s to oral histories of women serving in the Montana National Guard in the 1990s. These records reveal experiences as varied as those of a young homestead wife abandoned by her husband in Beaverhead County or the activist for migrant workers' rights who grew up in Butte during the 1930s.⁴

If you would like more information about the Florence Story diary, Montana life in the 1930s, or collections relating to women, please contact the Montana Historical Society Archives at (406) 444-6779 or email archives@state.mt.us.

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