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Life of a frontier justice to be featured at History Book Club meeting

PIERRE, S.D. – The life and trials of one of Dakota Territory’s first judges will be the subject of the November History and Heritage Book Club meeting.

Author Wayne Fanebust of Sioux Falls will discuss his book “Outlaw Dakota: The Murderous Times and Criminal Trials of Frontier Judge Peter C. Shannon” when the History and Heritage Book Club meets at 7 p.m. CST on Tuesday, Nov. 15, at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. Everyone is welcome to attend the free program.

“Shannon was one of the first chief justices of the Dakota Territory Supreme Court. The book is a biography of the judge, but it is also a study of crime and punishment on the Dakota frontier,” said Michael Lewis, president of the South Dakota Historical Society Foundation. The foundation is the nonprofit fundraising partner of the South Dakota State Historical Society and helps sponsor the book club.

Born in 1821 in Pennsylvania, Shannon launched a career as a lawyer and judge. He was appointed by President Ulysses S. Grant to the Dakota Territory Supreme Court in 1873 and reappointed by President Rutherford B. Hayes. Shannon was both a trial judge, presiding at the territorial capital at Yankton, and the chief justice of the territorial Supreme Court.

“He brought much-needed legal integrity and judicial skill to a system of justice that was inept and overly influenced by the lawlessness of the vast Dakota frontier,” Fanebust said.

During his tenure on the bench, Shannon presided over a large number of criminal trials featuring a variety of defendants, including illegal whiskey sellers, prostitutes, robbers, arsonists, horse thieves and murderers. He presided over the trial of Jack McCall for the killing of Wild Bill Hickok and gained national fame for presiding in the trial of Peter Wintermute, a Yankton banker who shot and killed the territorial secretary, Edwin McCook, as the result of a political argument.

Shannon was unsuccessful in his attempt to gain a third term as judge. He died in San Diego, Calif., in 1899.

Copies of “Outlaw Dakota, the Murderous times and Criminal Trials of Frontier Judge Peter C. Shannon” are available at the Heritage Stores at the Cultural Heritage Center and the Capitol.

Please call (605) 773-6006 for more information about the program.

About the South Dakota State Historical Society

The South Dakota State Historical Society is a division of the Department of Education. The State Historical Society, an Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society's world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.history.sd.gov for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.

About the South Dakota Historical Society Foundation

The South Dakota Historical Society Foundation is a private charitable nonprofit that seeks funding to assist the South Dakota State Historical Society in programming and projects to preserve South Dakota's history and heritage for future generations.