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Cultural Heritage Center Program to feature South Dakota's first Senator

PIERRE, S.D. – One of South Dakota's most colorful politicians will be the subject of the May History and Heritage Book Club meeting.

Wayne Fanebust will tell about Richard Pettigrew at 7 p.m. CDT on Tuesday, May 9, at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The Sioux Falls man is the author of "Echoes of November: the Life and Times of Senator R.F. Pettigrew of South Dakota." The program is free and everyone is welcome.

"Pettigrew was a lawyer, surveyor, land developer and politician. He came to Dakota Territory in 1862 and was a founding father of Sioux Falls. He was one of the first two men to represent the new state of South Dakota in the United States Senate," 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 sponsors the History and Heritage Book Club.

Richard Pettigrew was born in Vermont in 1848. He came to Dakota Territory in 1869 as a member of a government surveying team. He moved to Sioux Falls the following year and promoted his adopted city throughout the rest of his life.

In 1872, as a Republican, Pettigrew was elected as a representative to the Dakota Territorial Legislature. The election was challenged.

"Pettigrew was thrown out of the legislature because of what became known as the 'Deuel County Fraud,' the first of many controversial political ventures," Fanebust said. Pettigrew was re-elected to the Territorial Legislature in 1876 and 1878 and was a hard-working legislator, Fanebust said.

In 1880, he successfully ran for the highest office in the territory, Delegate to Congress. He fought hard to bring statehood to Dakota Territory, but the move was opposed by the national Democratic Party.

Pettigrew's term as delegate was marred by a feud with the governor of Dakota Territory, Nehemiah Ordway. Pettigrew was against a ploy by Ordway to move the territorial capital from Yankton to Bismarck, a move that would benefit Ordway.

Pettigrew and G.C. Moody of Deadwood were elected by the state legislature as the state's first United States senators when South Dakota achieved statehood in 1889. He served two terms in Congress, promoting legislation that benefited the West.

Pettigrew was instrumental in the passage of the Forest Reserve Act of 1891, which authorized the president to create forest reserves from the public domain.

“The importance of this new law cannot be understated, for it saved America’s forests that had been under assault for many years. Thus Pettigrew can lay claim to starting the modern environmental movement,” Fanebust said.

Pettigrew left the Republican Party and allied himself with the People’s Party. He considered himself a Populist.

Pettigrew’s last years as senator were marked by his opposition to the Spanish American War. He also voiced his opposition to the United States’ involvement in what would become World War I.

He died on Oct. 5, 1926, in Sioux Falls and is buried in Woodlawn Cemetery, a cemetery that he and his friends created. Pettigrew’s home in Sioux Falls is maintained by the city as a museum. During the book club meeting, a PowerPoint of the Pettigrew Home & Museum will be shown so people can see the home as Pettigrew left it and his collection of artifacts from throughout the world.

“Echoes of November” is available at the Heritage Stores at the Cultural Heritage Center and the Capitol.

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

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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.