INTRODUCTION

This collection consists of fifteen diaries, written from 1935 to 1937 by Ida Tinsley Whiteacre, detailing her thoughts about living in the home of her daughter and son-in-law in St. Joseph, Missouri, during the Great Depression. Family conflicts, Depression-era prices and chores, and discussions about “physical culture” exercises and procedures are some of the topics covered. Although there is some attempt to keep regular dated entries, Whiteacre often copies previously dated entries from other journals not contained in this collection. That practice, along with the fact that she sometimes had two or more notebooks going at the same time, can make the chronology a little confusing at times.

DONOR INFORMATION

These diaries were donated to the State Historical Society by Nancy Farmer, Office of the Missouri State Treasurer – Division of Unclaimed Property on 10 April 2003 (Acc. No. 5978).

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ida Tinsley Whiteacre was born on December 10, 1860, and lost both her parents by the age of seven. Her childhood home was Columbus, Indiana. She lived for some time with her maternal aunt and, between the ages of 7 and 13, “learned to do the work of a woman” helping with childcare and housework, which left her in poor health. Her father had been a doctor and Ida felt that had he lived she would have followed in his footsteps, but because of her poor health, she studied art in college. She was married four years and was pregnant with her second child when her husband’s health failed. She supported herself, her husband and two children for 23 years as an art teacher.

Whiteacre spent several years living in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, but moved to St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1922 to be with her daughter, Vera, who was also an art teacher. While Vera was recuperating from surgery in the summer of 1922, Ida searched for a house to rent instead of the cramped apartment that they had been sharing. An agreement was reached whereby Ida would cook and clean for Mr. George Hull in return for renting quarters in his home for herself and her daughter. They moved into Hull’s house at 1212 Dewey Street, St. Joseph, in June, 1922.

During the next few years, Vera married George Hull and Ida, according to her diaries, invested $3600 from the sale of her Illinois home into the Dewey Street house, in addition to paying off the rest of Hull’s $5,000 mortgage. She converted part of the house – which was now hers – to apartments and took in renters. She was very proud of the fact that her hard work had left her nearly debt-free when her son, Hume, invited his mother to visit him in Chicago in 1933. She didn’t return to St. Joseph for more than a year and a half.

While Whiteacre was in Chicago, she left one of the renters to manage her St. Joseph home, since George and Vera Hull were living and working in another town. However, the Hulls lost their teaching positions when the college at which they were working closed in May of 1935, so they returned to St. Joseph. They had been hearing bad reports about the manager and felt that Ida should come home to see to the property herself. When she did return at the
beginning of July, 1935, the Hull’s suggested that Ida oust the manager’s family and allow the Hulls to live in the house rent-free in exchange for their providing Ida’s food. She rejected the proposition since she felt she needed at least $10 per month rent (of the $35 that would normally be paid for the apartment) in order to make expenses. Needless to say, this created hard feelings and caused a major quarrel among the family members. Money, and how it should be spent, was the primary cause of most of the problems between the two generations for quite some time. Ida Whiteacre’s senior years were filled with family conflicts and discord as the house was deeded over to her daughter and the three of them continued to live together in disharmony.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The collection consists of 15 notebooks in which Ida Whiteacre recorded her thoughts about her life while living in the home of her daughter and son-in-law in St. Joseph, Missouri. The diaries are arranged chronologically from February 1935 to December 1937, the years in which they were written, although several entries copied from earlier journals or account books, not included in this collection, date from as early as 1922. It is apparent that Whiteacre had been in the habit of writing journals and it is fairly certain that those included in this collection are only a portion of the total. It can be speculated that these particular diaries were left to be found in Unclaimed Property because Whiteacre felt that she needed to hide these volumes from her relatives, since they are not very flattering to her daughter and son-in-law, Vera and George Hull.

The first volume (11 February-5 August 1935) begins while Ida is in Chicago visiting her son and describes the books she is reading – mostly religious and “self-help” tomes – and things she is doing. She sounds reasonably happy and busy. The tone changes completely and the writing gets shakier after she returns to St. Joseph and gets into the confrontation with her son-in-law that results in a “terrible shock to my nerves and ruined my health.”

Entries in the succeeding volumes alternate between Ida’s resolutions to improve her mental outlook, care for her physical health, and mend the rift between herself and the Hulls, and bouts of anxiety, depression and the constant rehashing of her grievances against them. Some entries are upbeat and discuss the beauty of nature, comforts of religion, enjoyment of her “physical culture” exercises, and insights found in her reading, but the majority are downbeat, detailing worries about debts, the amount of work it takes to keep up the home, and her feelings of not being needed or wanted. However, the entries detailing the kindness of the Hulls after a fall that kept her laid up for two months demonstrate that the younger couple probably did not have the ill-feelings toward her that she supposed.

The volumes are obviously the writings of an elderly woman who has, in her own words, “a nervous condition” and is in a state of depression much of the time. There is evidence of confusion, repeating certain events over and over again, with her handwriting often reflecting her agitation. Entries also mention her son-in-law’s 1931 threat to go to court to have her declared incompetent to handle her affairs and her daughter’s telling her that she is “getting more queer every day.” For these reasons, the events described may not always be entirely accurate.

However, the Whiteacre Diaries still contain much to interest researchers. The family dynamics, though most certainly biased, help to paint a picture of life in America during the Great Depression and reflect the worries about money and the fear of losing everything that was so common at that time. Descriptions of household chores and prices of food, furniture, and other household expenses may also be of interest to students of the period. Also, a September
1935 entry describing Ida’s application for a government pension, among “crowds” of others, seems to refer to the first Social Security applicants. Whiteacre’s allotment was $8 per month.

VOLUME LIST

v. 1 February 11 - August 5, 1935  
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v. 3 December, 1935  
v. 4 January 2 - March 2, 1936  
v. 5 March 7 –May 20, 1936  
v. 6 May 30, 1936  
v. 7 May 22 –June 18, 1936  
v. 8 July 18 – October, 1936  
v. 9 November 11 –December 25, 1936  
v. 10 January 2 –April 16, 1937  
v. 11 March 6 –April 11, 1937  
v. 12 April 21 –July 17, 1937  
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v. 14 September 19 –October 21, 1937  
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