

Sharon Chmielarz

WAX CYLINDER RECORDINGS, RIFFS FROM A SMALL TOWN

1. A Shirt to Wear

Wanted: Woman, educated, good approach, opportunity to learn good business, must be free to leave the city . . .

Mobridge Tribune, early twentieth century

She rode into town, ignoring the warnings. *Streets, blocked, traffic, uncertain. Ice on the Missouri, thinning.*

She had my sister down under her apron. She didn't know, not at all, the Deloria Sisters from across the river.

Ella preserved the history of the Sun Dance;
her sister Susan, a Ghost Dance shirt, made holy

by the massacre at Wounded Knee. It was old
muslin, frailer than tea towel, the designs, worn

as a voice on a wax cylinder recording,
magic coming over waves of misfortune.

She didn't know this down in the basement,
standing among piles of whites and coloreds.

Chipping away at a cake of lye, she couldn't detect
any art work in workshirts, stiff with unblessed sweat.

2. Did You Hear That?

The ultimate, airy banister for small things –
a cannister zipping down a pneumatic tube

from the mezzanine to main floor
in J. C. Penney's, carrying money to the cashier,

she who never noticed her own hands,
precise, ringing up a sale – say, a prom dress,

never commented on how much you spent.

Started working at Penney's in the Twenties,
had to; still on her feet in the Fifties,
Sixties, Seventies. About her, the darkly sweet
fragrance of the weary. A company woman.
She covered her mouth when she coughed,
lower case coughs,
small as the 'c' in scraping by.

3. Response to "Letters to the Editor"

"What difference does it make
if we/*Tribune* misspelled Sakajawea . . .

we shall now call her Bird Woman . . .
she may also be called Mrs. Charbonneau

with a considerable degree
of propriety . . . this means less

wear and tear on our spelling,
enunciation, and pronunciation

apparatus, as well as upon the delicate
mechanism of our linotype

machine and the nervous system
of its patient, long-suffering operator."

4. The Sixth District Women's Convention

She was as pretty, and surely as quick
as an Honorable Mention, and at times,

as desperate as the ladies for something
other than dust, but she'd married

a handsome peasant. Sorry, wrong
class. Imagination is a balm; use it,

and she thumbs her nose at the ladies
from her washer in the basement. As if

she were interested in lawyered, doctored,
business-manned wives. As if she wanted

to join their *Cultus* and *L'Eclatant Douzaine* clubs,
or listen to Wagner. His *Dämmerung*.

5. Drive

The new woman drove. A woman like Maude Caldwell,
owner of one of the town's first five automobiles,

free to keep her first name after "Mrs.," have accidents,
leave town, spend the winters in Minneapolis.

Maude did perms. If the client's husband was short of cash,
he could work off the cost. In or outside the shop, a place

so small when Maude did Mrs. Batteen's river of hair she kept swaying
back, back into a closet to comb out, to the end, the soft, brown waves.

Handsome, willowy Mrs. Batteen, mistress to the richest man in Walworth County,
his name engraved for all to see forever on the lintel to the town's public library.

6. Getting Her Name into Print

Ella Grace Clara,
speak from the cellar,

what is your counsel for me?
Ah, yes, I remember,

the cliché
tossed over your shoulder,

the throw-away,
"Be happy."

7. Other Women

Other women worked in a cabin in the willows
along the river, their nipples, targets,

real, blond bombshells for drunken johns
with guns. Mae West look-alikes, coming

in sweet, sweet five-and-dime perfume.
Their scarlet lipstick planted untidy O!'s

on married men's collars. One stain
led to another to be washed

with the workshirts, slow to take offense.
The town routed out the whole bunch first.

Whores scattered like cats down alleys,
so mangy they became police notes,

under the rung where the poor,
approved by the County for relief, clustered

in chilblained lists. I could go on,
but you see. The past falls, like a descant

from Eden. Voices get lost. Mrs. Bachelor,
our kitty-corner neighbor, whose kitchen

was cloud-white, told my mother, "Ella,
heaven and hell are right here on earth."