What Was Hidden On Hart’s Bookshelf?

*By Jenny Myer, 2018 Getty Intern*

Over seventy years have passed since silent film star, William S. Hart passed away, but even after his death, new discoveries about his life and career continue to surface. The most recent discoveries have been made this summer, hidden between the pages of Hart’s books.

This summer, I was given the incredible opportunity to complete an internship at the William S. Hart Museum, conducting research into Hart’s personal book collection. The project consisted of cataloging and researching the books in the collection, along with documenting interesting findings or items found within the books. Imagine if someone were to look at the types of books you collect in your home. What would those books tell us about your life or interests? What secrets would they hold?

In total, I cataloged over 1,200 books in his collection, and out of those, 335 inscriptions had been written in the books by various authors, friends, or fans. Apart from inscriptions, I also discovered items hidden within the pages of the books, including photographs, a real Iris flower, handwritten notes, letters, and even a newspaper from 1925. The books tell a story about the life and history of William S. Hart, a man who had a profound impact on the silent film industry and in the town of Newhall. He may no longer be alive, but the items in his home still have a story to tell. The books give us insight into the personal lives of both Hart and his sister, Mary Ellen.

Included in his book collection are books that his sister Mary Ellen, who also lived with him, owned. It was easy to predict the type of books that Hart collected, since we know he had a love for the West and Native Americans. Unsurprisingly, these types of books took up most of his collection, but what intrigued me the most were Mary Ellen’s books. In her room, I discovered astrology books, cookbooks, French language books, and books on gardening. As we already know a lot about her famous brother’s interests, it was fascinating to discover what interested his sister. One of the most personal books in the collection was a cookbook that had been entirely put together by Mary Ellen. She had taken the time to cut out each individual recipe and glue them into this book, organizing the recipes by different categories. The book, however, remains unfinished as there are loose recipes placed in envelopes that never made it onto the pages.

I have enjoyed this internship so much that I decided to become a volunteer at the William S. Hart Museum once the internship concludes, continuing to share my love of history. I am excited to see what findings we may discover next and what else we can learn about the life of this famous western actor.