



## FINDING AID

# **LEAH AND WALTER OEHRLE PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM 1933**

Prepared by  
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National Park Service  
Yellowstone National Park  
PO BOX 168  
Yellowstone National Park, WY 82190-0168

Collection Number: MSC 228

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## ***HISTORY***

Walter William Oehrle was born August 15, 1892, in Omaha, Nebraska, to Elizabeth Jane Fenwick and Emmanuel Gottlieb Oehrle. Interested in art from an early age, Walter worked for the Omaha Bee while still a student. After graduating high school in 1910, he worked as a designer and draftsman for a lighting manufacturer, an artist for the Bee Publishing Company, and an illustrator for the Twentieth Century Farmer. After service in WWI, Oehrle attended the Academy of Fine Arts and the Art Institute of Chicago for six months, before returning to work at the Omaha Bee in 1920. In the 1920s, Walter worked for a number of commercial art companies, included several in which he was a co-founder and partner. In 1925, Walter began to work with the Union Pacific Railroad, producing promotional brochures for rail travel to Yellowstone National Park featuring anthropomorphized bears. Oehrle created eight signed brochures through 1929, after which the railroad stopped including signatures on promotional artwork. Oehrle continued to work for the Union Pacific at least through the 1930s although it is not possible to identify which works were his. In 1935, Walter was invited by architect Robert Reamer and Yellowstone Park Company President William M. Nichols to design the artwork for what would become the Bear Pit Lounge in Yellowstone's Old Faithful Inn. The designs were then sandblasted onto six large wooden panels and hung in the Inn's new barroom. (The original panels are now housed in the park's museum collection. Reproductions recreated on glass now hang in their place.)

In 1936, Oehrle joined the Walt Disney Company, working on the Silly Symphony films. In 1938, Walter worked as an illustrator on the team that created the Elsie the Cow advertising campaign for the Borden Dairy Company. Oehrle painted Elsie as part of the Borden exhibit at the 1939 World's Fair and sold a set of postcards depicting her, which helped boost public awareness of the image and launched an icon used by the company until the 1970s. Oehrle later provided freelance artwork for Mobile Gas and drew Penny the Chicken for Swanson's. Later works appeared in the Saturday Evening Post and Life Magazine.

Leah Louise Keith was born on May 9, 1898, in Des Moines, Iowa to Anna Victoria Peterson and Walter Wesley Keith. She worked as the movie editor and secretary at the Omaha Bee. After a stint as editor at the Omaha World-Herald, Leah then moved to a position at the Duroc Journal, a farm newspaper focused on the Duroc hog breed, working there from 1922 to 1928. In the 1920s, Leah was active in the Washington Girls Club of Omaha as well as the Women's Press Club. In the 1960s, she embarked on a speaking tour to women's clubs on the topic, "Is Your Financial House in Order?". She was also a lifelong Presbyterian, becoming a deacon of her church in her later years.

Walter and Leah married on November 27, 1920, in Omaha. Daughter Keith was born on March 16, 1928. In 1933, Walter and Leah traveled to a number of western national parks, including Yellowstone, likely as part of a Union Pacific sponsored excursion. Following the trip, the family moved to Chicago. By the early 1930s, the family alternated between Chicago and New York City, maintaining apartments in both locations. In 1936, they spent a year in Hollywood before moving to New York City. In 1939, Walter adopted the professional last name of Early; Leah also used Early as a last name, while Keith used it as a middle name. In 1941, the family moved to Pelham, New York, where Keith attended high school. Walter passed away on July 3, 1957, in Omaha, Nebraska, while visiting family. Leah died in 1994, in Washington, D.C. The couple are buried in in Hillcrest Memorial Cemetery in Omaha, Nebraska.

## ***SCOPE AND CONTENT***

### LEAH AND WALTER OEHRLE PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM 1933

*COLLECTION NUMBER:* MSC 228 (YELL 227145)

*VOLUME:* 0.2 Linear Feet

*PROVENANCE:* Gift of Robert A. Nisbet, Jr., 2023.

#### *DESCRIPTION*

The collection consists of photograph album depicted a trip to Yellowstone National Park in by journalist artist and illustrator Walter William Oehrle and his wife, journalist Leah Louise Keith in 1933. Skilled photographers, several of the images are identified as taken for the Union Pacific Railroad. The album contains images of the couple at numerous park locations including the Old Faithful Geyser area, Yellowstone Lake, and the Lower Falls of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone. Thermal features depicted include Lone Star Geyser, Grotto Geyser, and Castle Geyser. Activities shown include fishing, horseback riding, boating, and hiking. People photographed include several images of wranglers as well as shots of photographers and tourists. There are also several photographs of Bryce Canyon and Grand Canyon National Parks.

*ORGANIZATION:* The album remains in its original order.

*RESTRICTIONS:* No

#### *ASSOCIATED MATERIALS:*

- Biography of Walter Oehrle by Robert A. Nisbet, Jr., Yellowstone National Park Research Library
- Bear Pit Lounge panels, related sketches, and other artwork, Yellowstone National Park Museum Collections

## ***CONTAINER LIST***

### **Box 1**

<b>File Unit</b>	<b>Title</b>
01.01	Photo Album, 1933