Witness to Spirit: My Life with Cowboys, Mozart and Indians

By Robert Staffanson

Ed Kimmick titled a review of Robert Staffanson’s memoir “The Most Interesting Man in Montana?” 250 pages later, I’d vote “yes.”

His story is divided, aptly, into three movements: Cowboys, Music and Indians, with a prelude and a postlude marking the opus of a remarkable life.

Staffanson, who now lives in Big Sky, was born in 1921 on a horse ranch near Sidney. He was riding alone by age 4 on a mustang called Injun, and spent the rest of his first decade helping his dad round up and tame wild colts.

His teen years were spent on a ranch near Deer Lodge, where “music began to dominate my spirit.” He had an affinity for the violin, which became his “lodestone” for a career in classical music.

And what a career it was! After graduating from the University of Montana with a master’s degree in music, he was hired to develop string and orchestra programs at the junior and senior high schools in Billings, and went on to launch the Billings Symphony in 1950, and a community chorus a year later.

Staffanson was one of 10 conductors chosen to participate in the inaugural American Conductor’s Symposium with the Philadelphia Orchestra under the direction of Eugene Ormandy, and became conductor of the Springfield Symphony Orchestra in Massachusetts. “At age 34, I left Billings and found myself overseeing one of the premier orchestras on the East Coast.”

This portion of Staffanson’s book is both enlightening and entertaining, describing his encounters with some of the preeminent conductors, composers and musicians of the mid 20th century.

Two decades later, near the pinnacle of a challenging and rewarding career, Staffanson stepped away from it all – “to meet the greatest challenge of my life … to work with and for Native people.” He went on to help forge the “Two Circles,” a unique organization comprised of the American Indian Institute and the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders.

The bond he feels with traditional Native Americans “goes beyond blood to spirit,” a theme he returns to again and again, as he travels from the world of cowboy to conductor, to his final role as advocate for a more ancient and inclusive world view. A remarkable man indeed!

— Kristi Niemeyer