

Robert Shields, Wordy Diarist, Dies at 89

By DOUGLASMARTIN

The Rev. Robert W. Shields, a preacher and teacher who for a quarter-century spent four hours a day recording his life in five-minute segments — from changing light bulbs to pondering God to visiting the bathroom — and ended up with a 37.5-million-word diary, perhaps the most verbose one ever, died on Oct. 15 at his home in Dayton, Wash.

The cause of death was a heart attack, his daughter Klara Hicks said.

Mr. Shields was 89, and little more than a decade had passed since his second stroke ended his ability to type. He said in an interview with National Public Radio in 1994 that stopping the diary would be like “turning off my life” — so perhaps his spiritual death was in June 1997.

He knocked out three million words in his best years, a million in slow ones. Guinness World Records does not address diary word lengths, but said the longest diary — measured in duration — was done over 91 years by Col. Ernest Loftus of Harare, Zimbabwe.

Mr. Shields’s 37.5 million words apparently exceeded the more than 21 million in the colorful diary of Edward Robb Ellis, a newspaperman who died in 1998, and the 17 million words of Arthur Crew Inman, a reclusive poet who died in 1963. The 17th-century London diary of Samuel Pepys was a mere 1.25 million words.

Mr. Shields’s diary may not be read — nor subjected to a word count — for 50 years by the terms under which he gave it to Washington State University in 1999. And as blogs threaten to revolutionize the very concept of a diary, who knows if someone somewhere has somehow written an even more prolix, but still-secret diary?

What seems certain is that Mr. Shields believed that nothing truly happened to him unless he wrote it down.

He regularly recorded his body temperature and blood pressure; critiqued newspapers; and described all the junk mail he got and the cost of almost everything he bought. He had three dozen ways, none obscene, to describe his urinations, all recorded. He slept in two-hour stretches in order to record his dreams.

An impish, balding man, he mimicked the inventor Buckminster Fuller, who documented his life in what he called a chronofile by pasting letters, bills and all manner of pieces of paper in a huge scrapbook for 68 years. Among other things, Mr. Shields taped nasal hair into his diary for DNA study by future scientists.

He said he did not know why he started keeping a diary in 1972. He just knew he could not stop.

“You might say I’m a nut,” he said in an interview with The Sunday Oregonian in 1996. “We are driven by compulsions we don’t know.”

Mr. Shields hoped historians would find his minutia meaningful.

“Maybe by looking into someone’s life at that depth, every minute of every day, they’ll find out something about all people,” he said in an interview with The Seattle Times in 1994. “I don’t know. No way to tell.”

Robert William Shields was born in Seymour, Ind., on May 17, 1918. His father was a speed-typing champion who could type the Gettysburg Address over and over at 222 words a minute. He began a diary at 17, mainly to chart a romance, but lost interest.

He graduated from Franklin College in Indiana and attended several divinity schools before being ordained as a Protestant minister. He served congregations in Indiana, New Hampshire and Iowa before he tired of church politics. He moved to South Dakota and became a high-school English teacher.

He paid bills by teaching, working for a high-school yearbook company and doctoring books for vanity presses. Less lucratively, he wrote an unpublished history of a train-robbing gang, and 1,200 poems, of which he said five, maybe six, were good.

In Dayton, Mr. Shields did not minister to a church, but presided over weddings and funerals. He not only did not charge newlyweds, but also gave them a cash gift.

To do his diary, Mr. Shields, usually in his underwear, retreated to his back-porch office. He sunk into a tattered secretary’s chair cushioned by a foam doughnut. He was surrounded by six I.B.M. electric typewriters, arranged in a horseshoe. He migrated from machine to machine. The complete works of the Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg and lots of typewriter ribbons surrounded him.

In addition to 91 boxes crammed with 25 years of his life, Mr. Shields is survived by his wife, the former Grace Augusta Hotson; his daughters Klara Hicks, of Seattle, and Cornelia and Heidi Shields, both of Dayton; his brother, Monty, of Seymour, and four grandchildren.

After he became disabled in 1997, Mr. Shields dictated diary entries to his wife until she — quickly — tired of the exercise. Three years earlier, when an interviewer had asked her about her husband’s fixation on posterity, she replied, “Good old posterity.”

