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Writer revives inspirational story of Olivia hero Michael Dowling

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OLIVIA, MINN. — By the time he reached Olivia, TV producer and author Lynn Lehmann had become so enthralled with the life of Michael Dowling that he fully expected to see a statue of the man in the town square.

To his surprise, Lehmann found only a handful of people who knew the story.

Lehmann, of Salt Lake City, since has been introducing a younger generation to the life of a local hero in this west-central Minnesota city. The author tells the story of Dowling (1866-1921) in "Blizzard," a book he self-published last fall.

At age 14, Dowling became lost in December 1880 in a blizzard in Yellow Medicine County. Because he was severely frostbitten, doctors amputated both legs below the knees, the left arm below the elbow, his fingers and half his right thumb.

The operation was performed on a kitchen table, and the chloroformed Dowling woke up to hear one of the doctors whisper: "He can never survive such an operation."

"You liars!" Dowling is said to have shouted. "I'll live longer than either of you!" He overcame his physical handicaps to become a school teacher, principal, superintendent of Renville County schools, publisher and then owner of the Renville Star Farmer, Minnesota legislator and speaker of the House, state GOP Party secretary and President William McKinley's education commissioner.

There's more. Dowling married the woman of his dreams, Johanna (Jennie) L. Bordewich, of Granite Falls, and had three daughters. When he died at age 55 in 1921, he was known throughout the nation and much of Europe for his role in helping disabled World War I vets.

As a young man lacking artificial limbs, Dowling relied on friends to push him to classes at Granite Falls High in a makeshift



Lynn Lehmann

baby carriage.

He told Yellow Medicine County commissioners that if they would send him to Carleton College for a year, he never would be a ward of the county. They voted 2-1 to send him to school for two terms.

Dowling never looked back.

What impressed Lehmann most was Dowling's ability to succeed during his era. "He overcame incredible obstacles at a time when people who had physical challenges were written off," the author said.

Sound like something for the movies? That's what Lehmann is thinking. He's written a screenplay called "The Ice Candle" and is trying to interest a movie producer in it.