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WKU History

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Glasgow Campus Hires First Full-Time Historian

Bill says that he was attracted to the Glasgow position because he felt he had a lot to offer the kind of student he knew he would encounter there: people with limited financial means, many of them working full or part time, many of them the first in their families to attend college. Bill grew up in Pittsburgh, PA, in an inner city neighborhood where going to college was a rare thing. He and his family scraped up the funds for him to go to the University of Pittsburgh, but after two years he felt he did not belong and dropped out to join the army. After two years in the military he decided he was indeed meant for college work, completed his degree, and then did a Ph.D. at West Virginia University.

Bill says he believes the feeling of wondering – Do I belong in college? – is neither a rural nor an urban but a broadly and quite common “American” phenomenon. His mission is to tell his students that they do indeed belong. He spends his free hours at the Glasgow Campus snackbar talking with his students, encouraging them to stick to it, keep plugging, and get their degrees. In order to show them the value of their own culture, he has encouraged them to work at the Glasgow Kentucky Cultural Center (formerly the Museum of the Barrens) on Saturdays.

Director of the Glasgow Campus Juanita Bayless is highly pleased with Bill’s work. She says that history enrollment and enthusiasm for the subject are at an all-time high because Bill understands first time college students and helps them overcome obstacles to their success. His students have told her that Bill has a talent for making history “come alive” to them, a goal all historians share.
For the past several years a grant from former History Professor Lowell Harrison has annually funded a campus appearance by a nationally prominent historian. This year the visiting lecturer was Dr. Janet Davis, chair of the American Studies Department at the University of Texas.

During an afternoon seminar with our history majors and before an evening audience of 300 students and faculty on April 6, 2005, she both enlightened and entertained us with stories from her recent book *The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the Big Top*, published by the University of North Carolina Press in 2002. She artfully recounted the life of American circuses of a hundred years ago: the way they crisscrossed the land, vividly reflecting the culture of the day, molding public opinion and values. Following is a conversation she had with her host, WKU’s Professor of American Studies Tony Harkins:

**TH:** Why do you think the circus came to take on the central role it did in turn of the century America?

**JD:** The circus, in many respects, was the biggest cultural form around at the turn of the century. Employing over a thousand performers, hundreds of animals, scores of laborers, cooks, welders, animal men, wardrobe managers, canvas men and more, the biggest American circuses could literally shut a town down in a way unmatched by other contemporary entertainments like baseball or theater. When doing my research, I found a fascinating reference to “Circus Day” in some court records: when asked when a crime occurred, a plaintiff simply told the judge that his horse was stolen on “Circus Day” and the judge knew exactly what he meant.

The ubiquity of the railroad circus was the product of several convergences in the late nineteenth century: the rise of a transcontinental network of railroads that could take circuses coast to coast and thus allowed the circus to expand mightily its reach and scale; the growth of an assembly-line labor force (the biggest shows were highly specialized, coordinated displays of labor); the rise of American overseas expansion (the circus reenacted contemporary battles and peace treaties); the large-scale entry of women in the paid labor market (women performers were now a prominent part of the show and were often billed as “fearless New Women”); and scientific racism and evolutionary hierarchies (the circus juxtaposed people and animals in sprawling, tented “Strange Congresses of Savage Tribes from around the Globe”). In short,
the railroad circus presents a colorful window into a society that was at the crossroads of Victorian and modern.

TH: What accounts for the circus’s demise (at least as it once was) and to when would you date this?

JD: It’s tough to pinpoint a date for the circus’s demise because it has proven to be very durable over time. Just when people declare it dead, the circus seems to keep on ticking. I’ll explain what I mean by way of a few examples. Circus folk and newspaper writers alike mourned the “death” of the circus in July 1956, when John Ringling North (whose mother Ida Ringling was a sister of the original seven Ringling brothers) decided to cut labor costs and abandon the canvas tent in favor of big, air-conditioned arenas. Another potential death knell came twelve years earlier on July 6, 1944, when a disastrous circus fire killed 168 people during a performance in Hartford, Connecticut. But even earlier, the circus had already started a long, slow decline. By the mid-twenties, the vast circus parades (the free show that preceded the paid show) had disappeared because circus owners had deemed them too expensive. Consequently, the circus no longer possessed the same totalizing community presence that it did just twenty years earlier. Furthermore, during the 1920s, the rise of other media like film and radio, and the rise of “automobility” meant that the circus no longer had a monopoly on the wider world.

JD: Popular culture tells us a lot about the politics and pleasures of everyday life. Of course, it’s easy to overplay this— that is, to look for consumer resistance through an activity like window-shopping, for example. But popular culture helps us understand lived experiences at particular historical moments. For example, Mary Rolandson’s best-selling captivity narrative during King Philip’s War contains a treasure trove of insights into colonial ideologies about gender, race, and religion, notions of respectability, and shifting constructions of “Englishness” in the “howling wilderness” of North America. Moreover, popular forms help us articulate the complex relationships between ideology, cultural practice, work, leisure, and lived experience. Pop cultural artifacts — toys, circus posters, nineteenth-century aquariums, you name it — give historians insights into the experiences and values of people whose lives might otherwise be invisible in the historical world.

TH: What do you think historians can gain from the field of American Studies, in terms of methodology, topics to investigate, and ways to intersect with other disciplines and the broader reading public?

JD: In many ways, the American Studies movement over the past seventy years has taught traditional disciplines like History and English to become more attentive to untraditional sources outside the fold of the printed word: songs, paintings, oral history, pottery, the archeological record, material culture, industrial design — I could go on and on. The field’s interdisciplinary foundation makes it highly inclusive. There is a real equality of sources in the discipline and there is a strong commitment to reaching broader audiences. American Studies is devoted to the cultures of the United States and is obsessed with big questions about American identity.
News From the History Department

In support of our plans to establish a CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE CIVIL WAR in the West and to hire a Civil War Era specialist as Frockt Family Professor, Western has purchased a collection of primary sources on microfilm and microfiche. Included are Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations From the Revolution through the Civil War (1,564 reels), Records of Southern Plantations From Emancipation to the Great Migration (207 reels), Letters Received by the Attorney General (168 reels), Civil War Battles and Campaigns (2,479 fiche), Civil War Unit Histories: Regimental Histories and Personal Narratives (10,331 fiche), Confederate Military Manuscripts (103 reels), Papers of Union Staff Officers, 1861-1865 (50 reels), and the Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America (76 fiche). This excellent group of documents will be housed in the Kentucky Library. Western is the only institution in the U.S. to own the entire set.

History alumni are invited to participate in two UPCOMING TRIPS ABROAD conducted by members of our staff. In January 2006 Latin American Historian John Dizgun will lead a tour to explore the Mayan ruins in the Yucatan of Mexico. For information you may contact John at <john.dizgun@wku.edu> or call him at 270-745-6486. During the summer of 2006 Dr. James Baker will lead a tour of Ireland. History alumni are especially apt to enjoy a foray into the land and culture that so many of us consider part of our heritage. This trip follows Dr. Baker’s successful alumni trek through the Castles and Palaces of England in 2004. For more information and/or to sign up early, contact William Skaggs in the WKU Alumni Office: <william.skaggs@wku.edu> or call him at 1-888-WKU-ALUM.

CONGRATULATIONS to WKU’s Paula Trafton (M.A. 1997) on her appointment as an instructor in the University Experience Program, which is designed to help new students succeed in college. Incoming students who show an interest in being history majors will be encouraged to take her courses. Paula has a good track record of helping students resolve personal problems, overcome obstacles, and develop a love for the study of history.