

History Happenings

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“Black Power and the American Dream”

By Kaylin T. Ewing



One of the many sessions held during the GAAAH conference

Last month, the Graduate Association for African American History hosted one of the University of Memphis's largest and most successful events. As an international conference, the 13th Annual Graduate Conference in African American History attracted applicants from throughout the United States and foreign nations, including Nigeria and Canada. The three-day conference featured panels from November 9 through November 11 and was generously sponsored by the Department of History, the Benjamin L. Hooks Institute for Social Change, the Program in African and African American Studies, Student Event Allocation Funds, and the Marcus Orr Center for the Humanities.

The Hooks Institute co-sponsored an opening luncheon and evening book talk featuring film producer and former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee activist Judy Richardson, co-author of *Hands on the Freedom Plow*. Richardson chatted amiably with

conference panelists, faculty, and staff alike during the luncheon and continued to impress invited guests during an evening book talk. Visitors from nearby LeMoyne-Owen College contacted GAAAH's President, Kaylin T. Ewing, with remarks of how pleased they were with the quality and content of Richardson's event.

Each day featured panel presentations of original research by graduate students from a variety of institutions. Some themes included: The Politics of Racial Violence, Black Culture and Social Change, and Transnational Perspectives. Notably, David Irwin from the University of St. Thomas held the honor of being the first undergraduate student to present with his paper entitled “Evolving Radical Thought: Politics, Culture, and Black Transnational Space in the Twentieth Century.” Presenters and guests alike commented on the level of scholarship evident in each panel session. Awards for the Memphis State Eight Paper Prize were presented to Sarah Rowley (Indiana University), Andrew Amron (University of Alabama), and Carolyn Roberts (Harvard University) for first, second, and third place, respectively.

The feature event of this year's conference was a keynote address by Dr. Peniel Joseph, Professor of History at Tufts University. His books include *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* and *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama*. This keynote address came at a critical juncture in our nation's history. The tenure of the first African American president has created lingering, contentious political debates. Thus, the theme “Black Power and the American Dream” provided a forum for much needed discourse. Graduate students, undergraduates, faculty and staff from the University of Memphis and surrounding colleges joined with local Memphians to swell attendance to a record number of 380 audience members in the University Center



Carolyn Roberts and Andrew Ammons, two of the winners of the Memphis State Eight Paper Prizes



Dr. Peniel Joseph delivering the keynote address

Ballroom. GAAAH sincerely appreciates the additional promotion by the Kappa Eta Chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated that increased undergraduate turnout.

Dr. Joseph, an acclaimed historian and social activist, captivated the audience with a lively discussion of the origins and impact of Black Power as a political and social ideology. His address, “Stokely Carmichael and America in the 1960s,” at times elicited vigorous applause and affirmative declarations from the audience. Joseph’s discussion of Carmichael as a community leader emphasized his larger point about the interconnectedness of social justice movements, including the current Occupy Wall Street demonstrations that have spread across the nation.

The week’s events were concluded with a homecoming of recent doctoral graduates from the University’s History Department. Drs. Daryl Carter, Reginald Ellis, Shirletta Kinchen, and Darius Young shared their experiences with conference participants. In an informal roundtable discussion, they provided advice about finishing graduate school and successfully navigating the job market. Editor Larry Malley from the

University of Arkansas Press also provided information about the process of publishing. GAAAH member James Conway, in a touching display, presented former presidents of the organization with awards for their prior service.

Each GAAAH member worked to ensure that this year’s conference was a great success. However, this event would not have been possible without the continuous support of faculty advisor Dr. Aram Goudsouzian and the tireless efforts of Administrative Associate Karen Bradley. GAAAH is also deeply appreciative of the faculty members who volunteered their time to chair sessions and judge the paper competition. GAAAH is grateful for everyone’s input and enthusiasm. We look forward to seeing everyone at another successful conference next year.



Former GAAAH presidents Shirletta Kinchen, Darius Young, and Reginald Ellis with the awards presented by James Conway

Native Americans through Pictures

By Matthew Daniel Mason

*Dr. Mason graciously supplied for this article several photographs by Charles Josiah Van Schaick that appear in the book *People of the Big Voice*.*

In fall 2011, Wisconsin Historical Society Press published *People of the Big Voice: Photographs of Ho-Chunk Families by Charles Van Schaick, 1879–1942*. This collaborative work that I completed with the co-authors, Tom Jones, Michael Schmudlach, Amy Lonetree, and George A. Greendeer, provides a visual record of Ho-Chunk families in western Wisconsin depicted through the lens of professional photographer Charles Josiah Van Schaick (1852–1946) in Black River Falls. His portraits of Ho-Chunk, formerly known as Winnebago, are especially poignant because they offer a vantage point on a period termed “the dark ages” in Indian tribal history.

The following briefly describes my background related to the work and how it led to my career in archives, followed by a synopsis of *People of the Big Voice*.

My Work with the Van Schaick Collection

I first encountered the photography of Van Schaick in a thematic studies course taught by F. Jack Hurley in the fall semester of 1995. At one point, Jack discussed the misuse of Van Schaick’s photographs by Michael Lesy in his book, *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973). I became intrigued by the images Lesy used in the book and frankly appalled by their exploitation. Although I did not explore the work or the photographs in that class, they stayed with me as I completed my doctoral coursework and relocated to Madison, Wisconsin, in 1997.



Cousins Carrie Elk (ENooKah), of mixed African-American and Ho-Chunk heritage who identified herself as Ho-Chunk, and Annie Lowe Lincoln (Red Bird), circa 1904



Dr. Matthew Mason
Archivist at the Beinecke Rare Book and
Manuscript Library at Yale University

Beginning in April 1998, I volunteered at the Wisconsin Historical Society to organize and describe the collection of nearly six thousand glass plate negatives in the Van Schaick Collection held by the repository. Over six years, I inspected each negative, captured digital reference images, composed detailed descriptions of the images, and placed the collection into archival housing.

Van Schaick left a rich photographic legacy, but he did not leave any publicly accessible personal papers in the

form of business records, journals, or correspondence. Consequently, much of biographical and professional information about him comes chiefly from newspaper accounts. For my dissertation, I wrote a biography of Van Schaick, as well as a detailed critique of *Wisconsin Death Trip*, which formed a major portion of my work, “A Partial Presentation of the Past: A Critical Examination of *Wisconsin Death Trip*,” which I completed in 2008.

Impressed with my volunteer work with the Van Schaick collection, the Wisconsin Historical Society hired me as an Archives Assistant in 1998, and then as a Project Archivist in 2000. I concurrently earned a Master of Arts degree from the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin - Madison with a specialization in Archives and Records Administration in 2003. In 2003-2004, I worked as a project archivist at the Merrill G. Burlingame Special Collections at Montana State University - Bozeman. In fall 2004, I began my tenure as an archivist at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, where I specialize in photographic collections, as well as manuscript collections mainly based in the Trans-Mississippi West.

Synopsis of *People of the Big Voice*

For more than sixty years, Van Schaick chronicled the lives of people in and around Black River Falls, Wisconsin. Beginning in 1879, he methodically captured images of his neighbors and friends who visited his gallery, as well as creating views of their homes and businesses. Van Schaick also took informal snapshots that documented the changes and constancies in his community. Studio portraits comprised a significant portion of his business; they encompass nearly sixty percent of his extant negatives, while portraits of Ho-Chunk people account for nearly one-third of the surviving studio work.

Van Schaick's portrait photographs provide especially rich visual documents of the Ho-Chunk who frequented his business. The studio portraits of tribal members depict them dressed in traditional regalia and contemporary fashions, as well as identifying themselves as indigenous peoples to the camera lens. Van Schaick did not systematically create portraits of Ho-Chunk. Instead, they patronized his business because he created fine images. The Ho-Chunk also invited Van Schaick to capture images of community events, such as powwows and their homes. His enduring role in the community allowed him to document generations of Native families.



Will (Willy) Goodvillage (MaHayEKeReNaKAh), posing in front of a painted backdrop, circa 1910

My contribution to *People of the Big Voice* briefly summarizes the professional life of Van Schaick and outlines the stewardship of his photographic collection by the Jackson County Historical Society in Black River Falls and the Wisconsin Historical Society. It also discusses the different photographic formats used by Van Schaick to market portraits to his Ho-Chunk clients and identifies several of his contemporaries who also captured images of Native Americans in Wisconsin and throughout North America. It concludes with a discussion of the portrait photography and the meanings a viewer may derive from these images as documents of the past.

My co-authors of *People of the Big Voice* provide valuable insights into the photographs from distinct Ho-Chunk viewpoints.

Amy Lonetree (MaHiSkaMonEWinKah), an associate professor in the American Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, provides a critical essay. She underscores how the portraits depict individuals “just a few short years after the darkest, most devastating period for the Ho-Chunk. Invasion, diseases, warfare, forced assimilation, loss of land, and repeated forced removals from our beloved homelands [that] left the Ho-Chunk people in a fight for their culture and their lives.”



Martha Lyons-Stacy (KaRaChoWinKah) holding her son James Stacy (NaHeKah), circa 1904

Tom Jones (ChakShepSkaKah), an assistant professor of photography at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, discusses the visual collaboration between Van Schaick and Ho-Chunk. He states that the images “become a reminder and memorial of a people who had a strength, determination, and resilience to survive and fight for their people, their land, and their culture.”

Michael Schmudlach (WeeMauHaKah) is a general contractor specializing in custom building and historic preservation, as well as a member of the Board of Curators at the Wisconsin Historical Society. He wrote the gallery essays and informative captions for the photographs. Schmudlach has a lifelong relationship with the Ho-Chunk and has a deep understanding of their material culture.

George A. Greendeer (HoXingKah, Deer Image in the Morning Mist) is the tribal genealogist of the Ho-Chunk Nation. Greendeer and Schmudlach did particularly admirable work in untangling the genealogical roots of Ho-Chunk in the photographs. Working from identifications gathered by stewards of the collection and tribal history initiatives, as well as discussions with Ho-Chunk elders, over ninety percent of the individuals are identified in the book, many with their Ho-Chunk names.

The book has a foreword by Truman Lowe (WaKaJaHunkKah, King of Thunder), a professor emeritus of fine art at the University of Wisconsin, and former curator of contemporary art at the National Museum of the American Indian, and an afterword by Janice M. Rice (HiNukHiJaWi, Changing Season Woman), Senior Academic Librarian at the

University of Wisconsin - Madison. This book is the first bilingual work book for the Wisconsin Historical Society Press; both the foreword and afterword are in Ho-Chunk and English.

Overall, I enjoyed the process related to *People of the Big Voice*. The work I did at the Wisconsin Historical Society allowed me to place the photographs created by Van Schaick in their proper context, as well as providing a path to my archival career. I appreciate that a portion of the work I completed for my doctoral degree in the Department of History at the University of Memphis will reach a wider audience. I am also delighted with the final product and the positive responses by many members of the Ho-Chunk Nation as they connect to their past through the photographs and text in the book.

Phoebe Omlie Returns Home

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas interviews Janann Sherman, whose book on aviation pioneer Phoebe Omlie was published in September.



Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: How did Phoebe Omlie secure her name on a bronze plaque for the control tower of the Memphis Airport?

Jannan Sherman: After an amazing career in aviation, Phoebe died completely alone. She had lived the past five years in a fleabag hotel in Indianapolis. After her death, a group of aviation enthusiasts brought her body home to be buried next to her husband in Forest Hill cemetery.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: How old was she? Did she have a family?

Jannan Sherman: She was 73, cut off from her family, with no children and destitute. So what little “family” she had were those people in Memphis. Even though she had been out of touch for 20 years, people still remembered the impact of her career and her life in Memphis. One person in particular, James Kacarides, decided that there should be something to memorialize her here in Memphis and he set out initially to try to get the airport named for her. When that didn’t go anywhere, he then tried some of the smaller airports that were being dedicated: the one that became the Charles Baker airport, the one that became the DeWitt Spain, obviously without success. So, he decided the next step was to contact the FAA to see if he could get the control tower named after her.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: Why was James Kacarides so interested in placing Phoebe Omlie in the local history?

Jannan Sherman: He had followed her career for many years. He was a writer and aviator in Memphis, and he just wanted to see justice done. He wanted to see Phoebe’s career remembered. The FAA told him that they do not name federal property for individuals. “That would take an act of Congress,” they told him. They meant to discourage him, but he took up the suggestion. He contacted his congressman Harold Ford, and Senator Harold Baker. They wrote parallel legislation, got it through the House and the Senate, and it was signed by President Ronald Reagan in June, 1982.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: Being approved in 1982, how did it take this long to materialize?

Jannan Sherman: That was a big mystery. When I interviewed James Kacarides about it, he didn’t know either. He knew that the legislation had passed, that it was signed, but a plaque never arrived. I spent a good deal of time over about six years to investigate the mystery. I eventually found my way to a retired FAA administrator for the Atlanta District in the 1980s. He said that he didn’t remember anything about the issue and had no records to consult about it. But he did give me the name of somebody at the FAA in Washington and I did contact that person. I sent him all the materials that Kacarides had shared with me. He could not figure out what was going on until we had a conversation, and he suddenly said, “What was that date again?” When I told him the date he said, “That was during the PATCO strike, when Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers.”

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: So the FAA has in its hands something more serious than a plaque for Phoebe.

Jannan Sherman: Yes, the plaque got lost in the shuffle. That is when I started to talk to everybody I could find saying, you know it is a law in the books that says that this is the Omlie Tower, so why don’t we just recognize it; why don’t we do the dedication and be done with it? But the Airport Authority insisted that it was already the Omlie Tower, despite the fact that they did not use that designation and no one knew about it. They were not interested in discussing it. But I kept pursuing it and in fact my pursuit intensified as a new control tower took shape at the airport. I finally connected through a very long involved process with Doug Murphy, who is now the regional FAA administrator in Atlanta. After talking to

him about Phoebe Omlie and her career and sending him some materials that I have written about her, he said, “Oh my goodness, we need to recognize her and her husband.”

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: How do you explain the eagerness of the Atlanta FAA administrator to recognize Phoebe’s importance?

Jannan Sherman: Because he was clearly a history buff and Phoebe’s story mattered to him. After our conversation he said, “I will see what we can do.” The first thing he did was to arrange a meeting with the FAA’s National Counsel, who gave the legal opinion that the name could not be transferred from the old tower to the new tower without further legislation. Mr. Murphy assured me that he would work at getting some kind of permanent recognition for Phoebe, her husband, and the tower in the terminal. There actually is a little history room in the terminal, which has a few trophies including the leather bit that Phoebe put in her mouth when she was hanging by her teeth from an airplane. The room was dark and nobody pays much attention to it. It is underneath the stairway in the terminal and it has been turned into a window now; it is not even a room. I cautioned Mr. Murphy that the Airport would tell him that there already was something dedicated to Phoebe in there. So, that was where it was left. Then a few weeks ago, I was contacted to write the narrative for a historical marker dedicated to the Omlie Tower.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: Who invited you to write the narrative?

Jannan Sherman: Janice Young of the Airport Authority. She invited me to write a very short history of Phoebe and her husband’s impact on aviation in Memphis and the dedication of the tower. What resulted was a bronze historical marker near the cell-phone parking lot, located in front of the hotel. If you stand to read the plaque, you are looking directly at the control tower. Actually you’ll see both towers, at least for now. The old tower is due to be taken down in a couple of months.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: Why did they want to honor Phoebe’s husband?

Jannan Sherman: Because he actually ran the first airport. Phoebe and Vernon Omlie established the first airport in the Memphis area north of town in 1925. In 1927, they brought Charles Lindbergh here, who just had returned from flying from United States to Paris, and who lobbied for a municipal airport located where it is now. Vernon was the first person to run the airport. Phoebe’s husband died very young in a plane crash in St. Louis in 1936. Phoebe went on to have this incredible career after he died. It was appropriate that that the



Phoebe Omlie at the height of her fame

Omlie Tower was dedicated to both of them. The plaque was uncovered and the new tower dedicated on October 20. Doug Murphy was there, so was FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt who, in his remarks to the assembly at the dedication, talked about the Omlies.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: It seems it was a very important event. Would you talk about the other guests at the ceremony?

Jannan Sherman: The best part for me was that I was able to bring James Kacarides with me to the invitation-only ceremony. Others included both mayors, Luttrell and Wharton, Representative Steve Cohen and several other Representatives from Tennessee and Arkansas, as well as representatives from the Airport Authority and the Federal Aviation Administration.

Guiomar Dueñas-Vargas: Then, you finally brought Phoebe Omlie back home.

Jannan Sherman: Yes, having my book out, having the tower dedicated, and all the materials that I have accumulated over the years from scattered places having to do with Phoebe deposited in the Memphis Room and at the Pink Palace—Phoebe is finally home and at peace.

Faculty Research Showcase

By Catherine Phipps

The History Department faculty members are engaged in some truly exciting research! The faculty brown bag research series is a forum where we, as colleagues, can share and discuss our works-in-progress. The atmosphere is congenial and the feedback is constructive and often quite trenchant. My favorite part is learning where my colleagues' passions lie and seeing how they spend their best intellectual energy.

Three years ago Dr. Kent Schull and I started this series and so far we've had more than a dozen presentations. We meet every other month (alternating with Teaching Tactics, another faculty activity) for the hour just prior to the faculty meeting. The general format has been that the contributor submits his/her paper about a week ahead of time to ensure that others have a chance to read it. This submission is accompanied by a statement about the piece, including its intended function and audience (e.g., whether it is a journal article, conference paper, book chapter, book proposal, etc.). Presenters also usually supply information about what kinds of feedback they are most interested in receiving; for example, concerning a particular angle of inquiry or problem they've encountered in research or writing. The most useful responses, however, are often those that were not anticipated.

Having a full hour to discuss one's work with colleagues in the same discipline but with expertise in different fields provides an unusual opportunity to hear from a variety of perspectives. I've had a very positive experience presenting. After talking over the draft of a book chapter ("Special Trading Ports and Geopolitical Strategies in Japan's Gradual Opening") with other faculty members, I walked away with a better sense of how to frame not just the chapter itself but a whole section of my manuscript (*Empires on the Waterfront: Japan in the Age of Informal Imperialism*). I now more clearly highlight how my research addresses differences among geographical scales (the local, national, and global).

Dr. Scott Marler has commented that the brown bag was "very helpful" when he was writing a journal article, prompting him to be more emphatic about how his findings "complicate understandings of the post-Civil War South's economy as 'capitalist.'" The title of the paper was "Two Kinds of Freedom: Mercantile Development and Labor Systems in Louisiana Cotton and Sugar Parishes after the Civil War," and it was subsequently published in the journal *Agricultural History* (v. 85, Spring 2011, pp. 225-51).



Dr. Catherine Phipps

Other papers that have been presented include—but are not limited to—the following: "The Hindu Moses: Christian Polemics against Jewish Ritual and the Secularization of Hindu Law under Colonialism," published in the November 2009 issue of *History of Religions* (Robert Yelle); "Exile and Disease in German Togoland," which will be in a forthcoming issue of *Afrika Zamani* (Dennis Laumann); a book chapter, "Juvenile Delinquents and Ottoman Prisons: Re-conceptualizing Childhood in the Late Ottoman Empire," from *Prisons in the Late Ottoman Empire: Microcosms of Modernity* (Ken Schull); "Family Ideals: The Diverse Meanings of Residential Space in Chicago during the Baby Boom," to appear in a special issue of the *Journal of Urban History* (Sarah Potter); "Power of Myth: Popular Ethnonationalism and Nationality Building in Russian Altai" to be published as a chapter in *Prophecy from Inner Asia: Religion and Ethnonationalism in Altai, 1880s-1920s* (Andrei Znamenski), and a book chapter, "The Hidden Fear," from *King of the Court: Bill Russell and the Basketball Revolution* (Aram Goudsouzian).

If you haven't yet presented, come share your work with us. If you have already presented, you're welcome to do so again. If you aren't currently interested in presenting, come anyway! Some of our newest faculty members will be offering up their work in the spring, and I, for one, am looking forward to hearing more about what they have been working on. Thank you everyone for helping to make this forum useful, informative, and fun!

A Cheerful Story of American Music

By Charles Crawford

On October 27, a public keynote lecture by Preston Lauterbach at the University Center opened a symposium based on his recent book, *The Chitlin' Circuit and the Road to Rock 'N' Roll*. Sponsored by the Marcus W. Orr Center for the Humanities at The University of Memphis, the Mike Curb Institute for Music at Rhodes College, the Department of Music at The University of Memphis, and the Spence L. Wilson Chair at Rhodes College, the symposium continued with subsequent meetings at Dixon Gallery and Gardens and Rhodes College, as well as a concert featuring Bobby Rush and the Bo-Keys at The Warehouse Nightclub on G. E. Patterson Avenue.

In his keynote lecture, Lauterbach disproved the frequently repeated rule that great writers are often poor public speakers. Presented masterfully but with much appreciated humor, he entertained his extensive audience with anecdotal accounts from the lives of many of the most famous African American musicians including B.B. King, Little Richard, Ray Charles, Louis Armstrong, Rufus Thomas, Ike Turner, and others.

In language from the era prior to the 1950s, the Chitlin' Circuit was the nationwide web of dance halls and nightclubs followed by the itinerant bands and smaller music

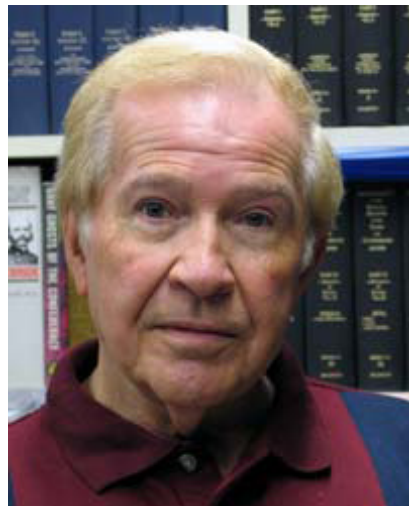
groups who traveled through America to bring entertainment to African American audiences who were not accepted in the established venues frequented by the white majority. While Lauterbach's discussion of Memphis musicians was of greatest interest locally, the content of his book is much wider, dealing necessarily with other population centers where the music of these groups was in demand, such as Chicago, New Orleans, Indianapolis, St. Louis and Houston.

Written with a reporter's flair for human interest and a good story, the book provides an example also of professional historical research at its best. Accumulating information from many different cities and archives, it demonstrates that it is possible to publish a book in which the endnotes are almost as interesting as the text itself. All who are interested in one of the most profound changes of the 1950s, the Rock 'N' Roll Revolution, would understand it much better after reading this book. Published by W. W. Norton & Company in 2011, it has won a national following and has been accepted by the History Book Club.

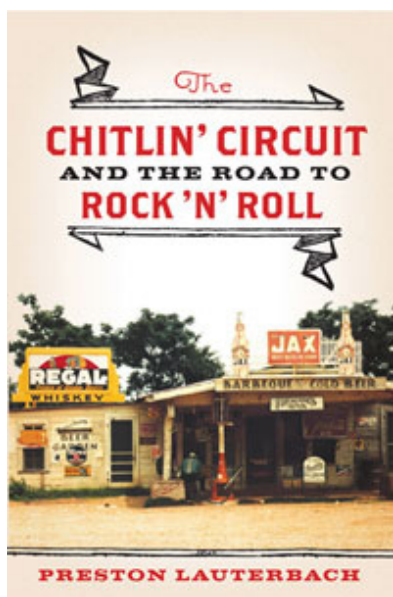
Reviews, which have been numerous, have been uniformly favorable. The *Wall Street*

Journal reported, "Mr. Lauterbach uncovers story as sensational as any day-glo poster...the book is at heart a well-researched valentine to a lost world of seedy con men, promoters and club owners, the power brokers and hustlers who made the circuitry spark." According to the *Boston Globe*, "Preston Lauterbach's rollicking, radiant new book plumbs the music's deep black roots, providing an important historical corrective.... Lauterbach spins the tale with enormous vitality and it's terribly fun to read."

Shoppers for a Christmas gift for any music lover should consider a copy of this book.



Dr. Charles Crawford



Preston Lauterbach

One Day in the Life of a Historian

By Susan O'Donovan

My typical day starts with a cup of coffee in the half-light of pre-dawn. Yawning myself awake, as I did this morning, I read a little (today's choice was an essay by historian of science, Donna Haraway), respond to email, review materials for a historical journal I edit, and perhaps check to see what kind of farm equipment has been posted for sale on craigslist. I enjoy this quiet interlude, because next on the agenda is a trip to the barn to feed chickens, medicate the barn cat, throw hay to the horse and his pal, a geriatric donkey, and, as I have for the past couple of days, to poke my head out the back door to see what might have wandered into the live-animal trap I've set in an attempt to capture whatever has been attacking my hens. This morning I found a very wet and unhappy opossum. Like yesterday's captive (pictured below) he's since been relocated.



A very wet and unhappy opossum caught in a live-animal trap

It's an odd mix of the life of the mind and the life of the field. Some might find the combination absurd, if not outlandish. A friend laughingly accuses me of living my own reality show, and on mornings like today's, when I found myself driving through the rain with a soggy 'possum for company, I'm inclined to agree. Yet at the same time, what appears on the surface to be a wildly contradictory mix is absolutely fundamental to who and what I am as a scholar. Simply put, I would not be the historian I am without the grittier part of my day. The questions I ask, the ideas I develop, and the conclusions I draw are formed where field, farm, and archive collide. The commonplace, in other words, counts.

Take for instance the problem of plow. I grew up a tomboy and from my earliest memories, accompanied my father around the fields and forests of central Washington State. But in hunting, hiking, fishing, and gathering firewood, I learned the truth of what another friend calls the "really real." In the absence of equalizing technologies, there were things that I was never able to do as well as my dad. I did not have his height, his strength, or his length of arm. As a consequence of a bedrock reality that no amount of social or biological engineering could ever overcome, I carried a smaller rifle, swung a smaller axe, and took more steps on every hike than my dad ever did. Even today, I drive a small tractor.



Dr. Susan O'Donovan

What I learned in following along behind my father were quotidian lessons. They were also conceptual, intellectual, and analytical lessons, and ones that came back to me years later as I struggled to unravel the lives enslaved women and men made for themselves on cotton's frontier. Research into the first years of freedom had already made clear to me that black women were considered second-class laborers by the white men who were their only potential employers. Black men counted more under the new, free-labor scheme. The question to me was why. Why were planters so reluctant to hire back black women? Why did they decry them as the "incubus among us"? Where did these ideas come from, and why? The answer I knew lay in slavery, and knowing that slavery at its most fundamental was a system of labor exploitation and that slaves spent most of their time at work for one or another slaveholder, I began to ask questions about how that work was organized. Who did what with which tool, in whose company, where, and when?

In digging around to find answers to these and other inquiries, I began to realize that part of the answer resided in plow. Slave women plowed. There was no doubt about that. But in the course of my research, I came to realize that women did not plow like men. Masters assigned black women almost

exclusively to the lighter weight, more manageable “scooter plow,” an implement used primarily to cultivate between rows of growing crops. Slave men routinely plowed at all seasons and with the full range of plow, but slave women’s plowing was a seasonal activity. Thus when emancipation brought with it the need to pay all workers for services rendered, most former slaveholders did what all good capitalists do, they hired only those who would give them most bangs for the buck. In the case of the cotton South, those most preferred class of black workers were the men who employers knew could use every plow in the agricultural inventory.

The Haitian anthropologist, Michel-Rolph Trouillot once commented that we cannot know what we cannot imagine. What we have been, what we have done, and what we have known in our pasts (however past those pasts may be) profoundly influences who we are and what we may be. The same dynamic is at work in historical studies. Personal experiences are part of the apparatus through which we all think. Our pasts are our mental laboratories. In my case, that mental workspace is littered with the memories of a rural childhood where technologies were limited and physical capacity key. It is unlikely that in the absence of a personal past that involved “boy axes” and small rifles (I always carried my mother’s .270 when out hunting rather than my father’s heavier 30.06) I would ever have known to problematize plows: asking a historian’s questions size, shape, weight, and use. Moreover, it was only in knowing about plows and about how they shaped the lives to the people who used them, that I was able to begin to explain why it was that black women’s



Dr. O'Donovan and her small tractor

value to white landowners fell as fast and far as it did in the first days of freedom.

I've since abandoned plow for new topics of inquiry, but library and life continue to collide in surprising and illuminative ways. This time around, however, it's my long personal history with horses and especially the frustratingly fragile equine leg that is informing the kind of questions I ask and the history I'm writing. Still, on mornings when the water is sloshing out of the rain gauge and the mud threatens to suck the boots from my feet, it's easy to forget the intellectual and conceptual utility of what yet another friend likes to call “barn aerobics.” Maybe I'll better remember that value when the sun reappears, the apple trees blossom, and the 'possums quit eating my chickens.



The donkey and the horse grazing