

"THE PHEASANTS SHOT THE ARCHDUCK!"  
AND OTHER HISTORICAL TRUTHS

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During my fifteen years of teaching American history at the college level, I have learned an important truth. Those who revise historical understanding are not we historians, but our students. They, far more than we, contribute new twists to history, uncover hidden reservoirs of possibility, and create insights of stunning brilliance. Sometimes.

For example, one student provided a colleague of mine with an ornithological interpretation of the origins of World War I which began, he wrote, when "the pheasants shot the archduck." Another young whiz provided additional insight when she uncovered the fact that the Archduke Ferdinand had been "assinated"--raising interesting questions as to the position of the assailant when he committed the sneaky deed.

Yet my colleague has been no more blessed than I have when it comes to receiving gems of profundity from students. I have learned libraries of new ideas on virtually every topic. Take politics, for instance. In his family history paper, a requirement for my Ethnic American course, I found out that one student's great uncle was successful in politics because "he had a genuine flare (sic) for meeting people." I chose not to question him further. Another introduced me to a new nationality when she discovered newspaper written in "Italian, German and Serbo-Creation." My students have also taught me over and over of the resilience and inventiveness of their immigrant forebears. Concerning marriage customs, I discovered that one student's grandmother "had married Nathan \_\_\_\_\_, son of a butcher and a butcher himself, in a large grocery store in Washington." Thus while immigrants got married in unusual locales, I discovered strange marital restrictions as well. One student informed me that "Italians of first and second generation rarely intermarried." I also found out that I have long been wrong in teaching that immigrants worked in the cities. Indeed, they worked in the fields as I was informed by the young woman who wrote "their employment and job situation was mostly in the blue collard field," the location of which she did not disclose. Perhaps the busiest of all immigrants, however, was one student's grandfather who "married Celia \_\_\_\_\_ and moved to California and died February 13, 1969." It takes us a lifetime to do what our ancestors could do in a single day. Little wonder that our civilization is on the wane.

My students have not confined their wisdom to ethnic history only. Indeed, I am teaching labor history much differently than I used to. I now know that labor unions were once powered by solar co-ops, for example. I owe that discovery to the student who informed me that trade unions resulted from "communal solarity." Nor do I quite know how much publicity to give the scandal one of my students unearthed concerning Henry Clay Frick and Andrew Carnegie. The student even provided the year (1882) that "the joining of Carnegie and Frick took place." I also now realize that the needle trades were among the most risky because "getting into a seamstress could end in bankrupcy (sic)." Indeed, my lecture on plant safety has taken on a whole new slant since I found out that "the amount of danger brought about during industrialization also took place in the furnaces." One student summed up the plight of workers with unmatched feeling when he wrote that they "all felt helplessness, loneliness, and a feeling of being unwanted, unnoticed and unfelt." Of course, I do not explore in lecture the sexual frustrations of the laborer.

Yet students will not allow me to forget the centrality of sex in history. Sex, for example, played a part in the coming of the American Revolution. Americans "were disturbed at the way the British soldiers stop anyone they feel to demand identification." On the other hand, the colonists could hardly complain of police brutality. Like the revolution, the sectional conflict was also steeped in sexuality. One student told me that because both the North and South were left "unsatisfied" after the Compromise of 1850, "John C. Calhoun became a hard line sexualist." In fact, another student stated bluntly that "since the days of Andrew Jackson the South had been struggling for its' (sic) sexual rights." But perhaps the keenest new view as to the cause of the Civil War was provided by a particularly enthusiastic young feminist who enlightened me that "On the surface, the South was different from the North because of their way of putting their women on a pedestal; but down under, the women were the same." I have discreetly chosen to omit this important new approach from my lectures.

Some students provide me with pithy bits of information rather than whole new interpretations of historical phenomena. To those who are particularly pointed, I give the Calvin Coolidge award in honor of that president's penetrating observation concerning the origins of the Great Depression. "When people get thrown out of work," Coolidge chortled, "unemployment increases." In the same vein, my students have told me that "the build-up in the cities lead (sic) to urbanization," or "ethnic groups grew as immigrants flowed into the city," or "the immigrants moved to the cities causing a rise in the population," or "as labor unions gained members, they became stronger and stronger." I have also found out that "the [A.F. of L.'s] leader, Samuel Gompers, was the head of this union." I was not certain what the following student was saying, but, knowing that it was as profound as anything Coolidge ever said, I gave him a Coolidge award anyway. "The plight of blacks worsened," he wrote gravely, "as they remained at the bottom of the social scale."

There are times, however, when I must confess that my students are too brilliant for me. Their insights have left me puzzled and humbled. I am still trying to figure out the hidden meaning of the student who wrote "The Battle of Lexington revival of wage and price control resulted unsuccessfully." Likewise, I still set some time aside each week to ponder "the republican party split at the people were supported by the majority, democratic party, however, the big businessmen supported the wigh (sic) party to gain political ends which died in 1850." And who knows but that the key to understanding the American Revolution lies somewhere buried in "Servants treated poorly, commonly influenced by the recruitment or continental congress." There have been occasions when I have felt close to deciphering the mysteries of these passages, but until someone unearths a new Rosetta Stone I fear that I shall be condemned to darkness.

But history reveals in light, not darkness. Perhaps, like scientists, history students stumble upon their greatest discoveries by accident, inadvertently. Some students uncover not only history's fundamental truths, but they elucidate the very core of the human condition. One young man encapsulated the dilemma of the one and the many when he observed that "America is a land where one can express his individuality if he behaves and acts like everyone else." Equally pregnant with meaning for all ages, one wise junior said simply, "One major misunderstanding consisted of marriage."

Thus, while many of my unblessed colleagues curse their grading chores as the bane of their existence, such is not the case with me and my fellow

historians. Student examinations and research papers are not burdens for us but journeys to another land, another mode of thought and language. On any topic under the sun and many others not, we have much to learn from our students.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:**

For all of us who teach history, Paul McBride's essay hits home. In leading discussions, grading examinations, and reading papers, we discover new "historical truths" in our students' "bloopers." For those of you who might be interested in sharing your own collections of mistakes, I would invite you to send them to Stephen Kneeshaw, Editor of TEACHING HISTORY, at The School of the Ozarks, Point Lookout, MO 65726. We will try to run these "historical truths" as space permits.