

VIEWED HISTORICALLY
The e-Newsletter of the History Department of the
University of Missouri, Columbia

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Why This Newsletter

One of the issues concerning us in the history department, in this respect sharing a feeling common at the University of Missouri, is getting our message out. Through our classes, students at the university know what the department's historians are doing; our professional colleagues know about us via our presentations at scholarly conferences and our books and journal articles. It's not so simple, though to keep in touch with the general public and, especially, with the department's friends and alumni.

One way to keep in touch, which we have used in the past, is a printed newsletter. But such newsletters are cumbersome and time-consuming to get out, costly to publish and mail and, today, in an age of instant electronic communication, outdated by the time they're printed. A better way to stay in touch is via the history department's web site, which has been newly revised and upgraded. We invite you to check out our new site: <http://history.missouri.edu>

Web sites are passive vehicles; you have to be looking for them to find the information on them. For that reason, we are reserving a section of the site for a regular e-newsletter, *Viewed Historically*. We expect a new issue will appear about three times a year, roughly

in November, February and May. Each issue will contain a greeting from the chair and the latest news about the department's faculty and its students. There will be a special section reserved for the news from friends and alumni, and we would like you to send us information about yourselves. If you go to

http://www.history.missouri.edu/alumni_news.html you can see the news, some of it now rather outdated, that the department has received from alumni in the past. With your assistance, we can expand this news and bring it up to date. Finally, the newsletter will contain a short, first-person essay, "Historical Reflections," with some observations about historical topics, such as the nature of the study of the past, the use and abuse of history in public life, or the way that history is presented, whether at universities, schools or in books and the mass media.

If you have comments, suggestions, or information that you would like to share, we would appreciate hearing them.

Please send information about yourself to the history department administrator, [Melinda Lockwood](#), by clicking on her name. If you know someone who you think should receive a notice about the department's newsletter, please inform

her, and you can also do so if you wish to be taken off our e-mail list.

Send comments about the newsletter to the department chair, [Jonathan Sperber](#), once again by clicking on his name. If you have suggestions for the department's web site, you can send

them to the departmental web-master, [Jeff Pasley](#).

Thanks for your interest and attention.

Jonathan Sperber
Chair, Department of History
University of Missouri, Columbia

News about the History Department

The department's web page has a [news and events section](#) containing breaking news about people in the department, the department's weekly bulletin, its event calendar, and links to other news about history. Please scan that section for the latest news; in this newsletter, our department news will focus on a few, more in-depth stories.



MARY NETH, 1954-2005

The first story here is a sad one. We regret to inform our friends and alumni of the death of Mary Neth, Professor of U.S. Women's History and of Women's and Gender Studies, September 14, 2005, following a struggle with cancer. Born in rural Missouri, Neth received her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin in 1987, and, after stints at the Smithsonian Institution and Virginia Polytechnic University came to Mizzou in 1995. Her study of women's farm

work in the first half of the twentieth century, *Preserving the Family Farm* appeared with Johns Hopkins University Press that same year. Neth was a founding member of the Rural Women's Studies Association and was always very active in its affairs. Another major scholarly interest of hers was quite different. For the last ten years of her life, she was working on a very large project, a social and cultural history of tap-dancing in modern America, that was still unfinished at the time of her death.

The Women's and Gender Studies Program and the Department of History sponsored a memorial meeting to Mary, two weeks after her death. At that meeting, there were many tributes to Mary and memories of her shared by her colleagues, her students and the many friends she made in the course of her scholarly career. We have collected a number of these tributes; please click [here](#) to read them.

The second piece of news is rather more cheerful. Due to the difficult financial situation of the past few years and the university's early retirement program, the history department had lost a number of faculty positions and had been unable

to fill them. We are pleased to announce that with improving fiscal circumstances, we have begun a process of hiring new colleagues to fill the vacant position. We expect to continue our hiring over the next several years, and the newsletter will report regularly on the department's new professors

The first new hire came last year and, as of August 2005 we have a new faculty member to teach Latin American history, Robert Smale from the University of Texas. Professor Smale will introduce himself here.



Robert Smale's interest in history began during his visits to his father's high school classroom in the small town of Boulder City, Nevada. Leland "Skip" Smale shouldered the eclectic teaching load often associated with high school coaches: history, drivers' education, and health; Robert's father did coach baseball, basketball, and tennis. While his father's collection of driving simulators, ball machines, and sporting equipment held a certain distracting appeal, the models of medieval siege machinery and history books stored in the classroom most captured Robert's

imagination. Smale would eventually pursue his fascination with history through the college level with a B.A. from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin.

Robert eventually combined his passion for history with an interest in the Spanish language sparked by several exceptional high school language instructors. Today, Smale specializes in the history of Latin America. He has spent over two and a half years living and studying in the land-locked Andean republic of Bolivia. He has also traveled widely in Mexico, Peru, Argentina, and Chile. His research focuses on the political, economic, and cultural struggles of South America's popular classes: the rural peasantry and the urban working class. He is currently drafting a book on peasant and worker political mobilization in early twentieth-century Bolivia. That country experienced one of Latin America's more substantial social revolutions of the modern era. In 1952, the country's labor unions defeated the conservative military in three days of street battles and imposed a significant socialist reform. Robert's research examines the roots of this militancy during the earliest years of industrialization in Bolivia.

Robert Smale is enjoying living in Columbia, Missouri surrounded by his family. He lives with his wife Daveiva Murillo and their two young children Skip and Scott. His mother and grandmother have relocated from Las Vegas, Nevada and now live in Columbia as well.

Historical Reflections

One of the reasons I agreed—in retrospect, perhaps a bit too light-heartedly—to serve as chair when my colleagues elected me to that office last April, was that I had just finished a large research project, I had been working on for the last ten years. The project is a study of the uses of property in the personal lives and the society of south-western Germany during the hundred years preceding the First World War. It appeared in print last month, under the rather ponderous title, [Property and Civil Society in South-Western Germany 1820-1914](#), with Oxford University Press.

An attractive feature of this project was that it was based on an unusually interesting source, namely civil court records. When people start suing each other, they reveal details about their lives that they might have otherwise preferred not to mention and which historians would otherwise have no way of learning. So in working on my book, I discovered a lot of great stories. There was the railroad worker in the town of Neustadt in 1874, who was caught by his wife trying to have unnatural relations with a goose. She threw him out the house and he responded by suing his father-in-law. Or, to take another example, from just five years later, the two brothers in Bad Dürkheim, who bricked up their neighbor's kitchen window and attached a bird-cage to it, leading to a three-year-long legal imbroglio, whose ramifications reached as far as Cincinnati. Then there was a veritable Balzacian family tragedy, the story of the peasant paterfamilias in Weisenheim am Berg, whose very

success at accumulating property led him into a bitter dispute with his sons-in-law, who taught their children to throw rocks at their grandfather. Or . . . well, you get the point.

I was telling some of these stories to Ian Worthington, the history department's redoubtable expert on ancient Greece, and he responded to them by saying that while the stories were very amusing, he didn't entirely see what was so new about them, since he knew of lawsuits on quite similar topics in fourth-century B.C. Athens. Ian's comment got me to thinking, certainly directly about my book, which came to include a discussion both of what was uniquely nineteenth century about the attitudes towards property apparent in the stories of legal actions I recounted, and also what was distinctly German about them. But Ian also caused me to think about the nature of the study of the past, and the place of both narrative and analysis within it.

Narrative is important to what historians do. We tell stories about the past, and we generally try to tell—maybe not always successfully—interesting ones. In this respect, both our teaching and scholarship has the potential to be more appealing, in class to students, and in books to the general public, than the work of a lot of people in the social sciences, who generally reject narrative in favor of analysis. Yet, for all the fascination of telling stories about the past, these stories should not be, for historians, an end in themselves.

One of the limitations on historical story-telling is that the stories must be as accurate as possible a representation of past events—at the very least, not contradicting evidence from the past and not making going beyond what is provided in that evidence. More than that, though, stories need a point, they should be part, either explicitly or implicitly, of an analysis of the past. This analysis illuminates the past, explaining the ideas of past human beings, the material conditions under which they lived, the social relationships they had, the actions in which they engaged. All of this analysis should underscore both similarities of past circumstances with the present and, at least as importantly, differences between past and present.

Striking a balance between narrative and analysis, between telling a good story about the past, and explaining what that story means for our understanding of the past—and through that understanding of the past, our understanding of our present condition—is one of the most important, but also most difficult, aspects of the historian's craft.

Jonathan Sperber