

THiNK

MAGAZINE

COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS | *Spring 2010*







Monuments and Moments

History and memory, as well as the connections they share, are slippery at best. Still unformed in the minutes, days, and even years after an event's occurrence, each is instead shaped by political partisanship, scholarly advances, and individual recollections that frequently conflict and change over time.

As evidenced by the lingering controversy surrounding plans to memorialize the tragedies of 9/11, the physical monuments and cultural traditions seeking to honor the past are also subject to interpretation and debate. But for faculty and students in Purdue's College of Liberal Arts, such manifestations are often the most accessible starting point for reconciling these contextual gaps.

What remains at the end, of course, is far from being written in stone.

Living History

On a Friday late last August, Kristina Bross, an associate professor of English, asked the honors students in her Living History course to meet at Felix Haas Hall. She didn't tell them why. They may have passed the old red brick building many times before. Some may have even noticed the words "Memorial Gymnasium" etched in the concrete above its main entry. But Bross wanted them to explore the building as a monument and discover what historical evidence remained.

Stone engravings and plaques, both inside and outside the building, tell the story. On Halloween 1903, a train traveling to Indianapolis — full of Purdue football players, coaches, band members, and fans en route to a game against the rival Indiana Hoosiers — collided with a coal train just minutes from Union Station in Indianapolis. Seventeen were killed, including 14 players. Many more were injured.

One injured player, team captain and student body president Harry "Skillet" Leslie, took the lead in raising funds to honor his fallen teammates. With the help of the Big Four Railroad, he helped secure \$88,000 in donations, and Memorial Gymnasium was dedicated in 1909. Leslie, who would become the governor of Indiana, walked with a limp for the rest of his life, forever tied to a tragic piece of Purdue history.

LEFT: Cadets pay their respects to Capt. Timothy I. McGovern as his rifle, boots, and helmet form the "Battlefield Cross" at a memorial service conducted by Purdue's Army ROTC Boiler Battalion on November 20, 2007. McGovern, a 2001 Purdue graduate, was killed during combat operations in Iraq.

Photo by Andrew Hancock

ABOVE RIGHT: Flags grace the gravestones at Arlington National Cemetery on Memorial Day. Photo by Kathleen T. Rhem

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On Halloween in 1903, 17 people were killed when a train filled with Purdue football players, coaches, band members, and fans on their way to a game collided with a coal train just outside Indianapolis. Purdue archives photo

“One of our opening exercises was to look at archived materials from that moment — all of the telegrams from family members wondering where their kids were and the letters of condolence,” Bross says.

With the building renamed for Haas in 2006, Bross asked her students to view it as a palimpsest memorial — suggestive of an erasure. Students held a spirited debate about the ethics of renaming a memorial site, however noteworthy the namesake might be. Other questions followed. “We talked about how long you should remember,” Bross details. “When do you give up memorializing? What would be a fitting memorial today?”

As it turns out, in 2003, a full century after the train tragedy, the athletic department dedicated the tunnel the football players run through at Ross-Ade Stadium to “the memory of the 17 and the spirit of Leslie, President Stone, and the Boilermakers of 1903.”

Bross emphasizes that her course was not intended to be a morbid introduction to Purdue history, nor was it even a history class. They also looked at sports memorabilia on display at Bruno’s restaurant, observed the reenactments

of 18th century French fur traders and Indians at the Feast of the Hunters’ Moon, and delved into other local historical sites. “What’s interesting about these sites of memory was discovering how they overlapped,” she notes.

“We then turned to historical fiction,” says Bross. “We focused on Toni Morrison’s novel, *A Mercy*, which is set in 17th century New England. We thought about the way Morrison constructed historical fiction about people and voices who haven’t survived in the archive.”

Selective Forgetting

One of the most famous battle cries, certainly from within U.S. history, is “Remember the Alamo.” When an editor suggested to Randy Roberts that he write a book on the subject, the professor of history countered, “Okay, but I don’t want to do a book on just the Alamo. I want to deal with how we remember it.”

A prolific writer who has published books on such American icons as screen legend John Wayne, Roberts was particularly interested in how Hollywood came to deal with memories of the Alamo from movies with the Duke and

Davy Crockett in the Cold War years through the end of last century. About half of *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory*, written with James S. Olson, is about its history, he says. The rest deals with how the 1836 battle is remembered.

“Here’s an event where the participants on the Texas side were all killed,” Roberts notes. “So how does the news get out? What battles were the Daughters of the Republic of Texas fighting in terms of preserving the site? What do they want that site to represent?”

Though losing the battle, Texas would ultimately win the war and its independence from Mexico. Nevertheless, the Alamo is far more remembered than the Battle of San Jacinto, where General Sam Houston claimed victory in 18 minutes, Roberts says.

Roberts also examined the Alamo from its various points of view. “It’s a contested ground,” he says. “For Mexicans, it’s a site of great victory. But it’s also a creation myth for Texas. The Alamo is the central image of Texas history.”

But once tied to memory, history can also be a great burden, adds Roberts, quoting William Faulkner: “The past is never dead. It’s never even past.”

With the complexity of life along the Texas and Mexico border — to this day a history rich in bloodshed, racism, and different versions of the truth — Roberts ends his book with advice from a movie that runs counter to what many Texans grew up hearing. John Sayle’s 1996 movie, *Lone Star*, concludes with “Forget the Alamo. Start from scratch.”

Another Purdue professor, Caroline Janney, has also explored perspectives from a losing side. A Civil War historian, she discovered the true origins of Memorial Day that might surprise many. In *Burying the Dead but Not the Past: Ladies’ Memorial Associations and the Lost Cause*, Janney details the independent women’s groups, mostly from Virginia, who began organizing Confederate cemeteries in May 1865, less than one month after the end of the Civil War. The very first Memorial Days, which in some states would come to be known as Decoration Day, took place in April and May of 1866 — below the Mason-Dixon Line.

“The reason it’s important that women took the lead in the South is that they were seen as nonpolitical,” Janney says. “The irony of all this is that women had been arrested and held in prison for treason during the course of the war. But when the war was over, white southerners believed that

A cenotaph commemorating the Texans and Tejanos who died during the famous Battle of the Alamo in 1836 stands in front of the former Spanish mission at the center of Alamo Plaza in San Antonio, Texas. Photo by David R. Tribble



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the women's gender protected them from being charged with treason in the same way that former soldiers or confederate leaders would."

Politically charged speeches filled the air as a crowd as large as 60,000 attended a Memorial Day celebration in 1867 in Richmond, Virginia, a year before the Union began any commemoration of the dead, Janney says.

"It all goes hand in hand with how the war dead are going to be treated. By 1863, the federal government had a program in place to create national cemeteries. Gettysburg was created in 1863, and Arlington National, which was Robert E. Lee's home, followed in 1864. What a great insult to the most important commander of the Confederate Army to put a Union cemetery in his yard," she contends.

With most of the 360,000-plus Union dead in unmarked graves across southern battlefields, there was an outpouring from the north to secure better resting places for those soldiers, Janney explains. "A group that came to be known as the U.S. Burial Corps began exhuming remains from the South. So the national cemetery system was really born in the Civil War."

For Janney, the notion of memory is always contentious. She points to the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in downtown Indianapolis, the largest Civil War memorial

in the nation. The southern side of the monument, looking down South Meridian Street, shows the Confederate battle flag being trampled.

It's a politicized depiction Janney finds ironic given the notions of reconciliation and the national unity at the time of its dedication in 1901. "You have to keep in mind whose memory is being carved in stone," she says.

Legacies of War

For researchers and teachers in other disciplines, the study of memory and memorials is just as important. "Memory is something general and unspecific," suggests Andrew Buckser, a professor of anthropology. "Anthropologists who look at memory tend to look at why it takes its specific form. How do you pick out the things that you do?"

Buckser describes the chaotic "present tense" of time. Later, an authoritative version of the story, usually developed within the social context, starts to take shape. His book, *After the Rescue: Jewish Identity and Community in Contemporary Denmark*, tells the dramatic story of the Jews — both now and then — who escaped the Holocaust in World War II with the aid of the non-Jewish Danes.

Hoping to remain neutral, Denmark put up little resistance to the powerful Nazi regime and was taken over



MULTIPLE MEMORIES

Erected as a memorial to veterans of the War for the Union (1861–65), the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in Indianapolis also commemorates the War with Mexico (1846–48), Indian and British Wars (1811–12), War of the Revolution, and the capture of Vincennes from the British on February 25, 1779.

There are a number of art works either built into the monument or placed throughout the grounds, including the statuary groups "War," "Peace," "The Dying Soldier," and "The Homefront," as well as the four statues at the corners of the monument representing the infantry, cavalry, artillery, and navy.

The "War" sculptural group (left) gives a feeling of aggressive action as Columbia charges into battle with her torch held high, surrounded by soldiers in the throes of combat. The sculpture includes a cavalry scout, men on horse, a drum, and a cannon.

Source: www.in.gov. Photo by Kay Schlumpf.



The Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, Germany, was designed to represent an ordered system that has lost touch with human reason. Photo by Pim Zeekoers



MEMORIAL DE
1914 VERDUN 1918

75 mm Canon modèle 1897
Le 75 mm est le premier canon véritablement antiaérien.
Il est le plus léger des canons de campagne et le plus rapide.
Il est le plus précis et le plus efficace.
Il est le plus polyvalent et le plus durable.
Il est le plus fiable et le plus robuste.
Il est le plus simple et le plus facile à utiliser.
Il est le plus économique et le plus rentable.
Il est le plus moderne et le plus avancé.
Il est le plus sûr et le plus sécurisé.
Il est le plus sûr et le plus sécurisé.

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ABOVE: Honoring the Danish people for rescuing the majority of Copenhagen's Jewish population during the Holocaust, this monument on Denmark Square in Jerusalem, Israel, recalls the boats on which Jews were smuggled to Sweden. Photo by Hovev Landoy. LEFT: The Verdun Memorial in northeast France commemorates one of the deadliest battles of World War I. Photo by Wolfgang Staudt.

by Germany in some six hours in 1940. Germany allowed the existing government to stay in place for three years and decided not to do anything with the country's 7,000 Jewish residents, states Buckser. When word came that they would be rounding up Jews in October 1943 and sending them to concentration camps, an almost spontaneous resistance sprang up to rush them to safety.

Buckser describes dramatic efforts to smuggle people into hospitals, and then employ ambulances to transport them north to fishing boats and ultimately to the safe shores of Sweden. A complete stranger might hand out house keys to a Jewish person in the street, offering a temporary hiding place. On streetcars, a group of Danes might shield a Jew from Nazi eyes.

As a result, the Germans captured just 482 out of some 7,000 Jews in Copenhagen, despite its occupation during the entire course of the war, Buckser says. Of those caught, most were rescued from concentration camps before the end of the war; only 53 died.

The subsequent memorials to the heroic story, such as the Museum of Danish Resistance in Copenhagen, have helped solidify Denmark's role not as an allied nation with Germany, but one that managed to peacefully save thousands of lives, Buckser asserts.

For Buckser, the construction of monuments is almost

always the outcome of a battle that memory wins. "Memorials take on a real cultural importance," he says. "They're not just pieces of granite. They're the focus of a lot of ideas."

Roberts also has examined the ravages of war from a historical perspective, leading groups of undergraduates on tours of European battlefields and museums over two consecutive spring breaks. They explored the streets of Paris and talked about the liberation of France from Nazi control in August 1944, crawled into the deadly trenches and foxholes of World War I, toured Omaha Beach and other significant World War II sites, and even visited Waterloo, the site of Napoleon's 19th century defeat. "The tour shows the legacy of war and what the wars were about," Roberts says.

One particularly vivid image rests in Verdun, home to a 10-month battle in World War I that killed more than 1 million people. Students looked down through windows of an ossuary to see "femur bones piled like cordwood and skulls half-blown away," Roberts says. "It's a pretty stark anti-war reminder."

But for all the reminders that monuments and memorials offer — however graphic or symbolic, stylized or worshipful, contested or accepted — they remain a product of collective memory. And ultimately, they endure as a concrete calling to keep both victories and losses alive.

By William Meiners