

“Spirit of the Southern Frontier”

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Background: This project would bring to the Web and print an array of materials from 1830-1860, the era of the Southwestern Humorists. For the first time in 150 years, some of these materials would be available to those studying American humor or frontier culture.

I have long had an interest in humorous writing from the frontier South or “Old Southwest”—a region ranging from western Georgia to Arkansas—by writers such as George Washington Harris, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, and Johnson Jones Hooper. Many of these humorists originally found an audience through William T. Porter’s *Spirit of the Times*, a publication whose name inspires that of the current project. When other newspapers and journals, including *The Southern Literary Messenger*, followed Porter’s lead to publish frontier humor, a literary tradition that thrived until the beginning of the Civil War. Editors published hundreds of now-forgotten stories, as well as humorous tellings of “news”—real, embellished, or wholly imagined.

Much of this writing, with its duels, horse-swaps, and shotgun weddings, remains obscure despite its literary role as an antecedent to some of the South’s best known literature. To quote from the spring 2000 syllabus for “Humor of the Southern Frontier,” a senior seminar I taught about the humorists and their literary tradition:

After the Civil War, this body of work, with its raucous and violent events, folk dialect, and general flaunting of Victorian propriety, evolved into important works of fiction and drama by Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, and Flannery O’Connor. . . . As Hollywood discovered the region, poking fun at the hicks in films ranging from *Tobacco Road* to *Sling Blade*, writers such as John Kennedy Toole have incorporated elements of the vanished frontier and its literary style into their work. Meanwhile, African-American writers such as Charles Johnson have turned the narratives of the white antebellum humorists on their heads by using the region for the picaresque adventures of educated black characters.

Scholars such as James Justus, Thomas Inge, and Brom Weber have either published editions of the frontier humorists’ work or have explored their influences on other American writers. W.D. Taylor, an evaluator for this project, has studied the fictional journalists often employed as narrators for these raucous stories. Despite this scholarly attention, I have discovered very little work dedicated to unearthing additional material from archives and libraries, especially materials that provide a coherent picture of life on the frontier, such as advertisements, cartoons, fugitive-slave notices, letters to editors, and journalistic accounts of duels, suicides, marriages, and travel. For the seminar I led, students conducted original research in the archives of the Library of Virginia, and we were all astounded by the wealth of never-republished materials. While most of what we found lacks the craftsmanship of the Southwestern Humorists, our research helped us to form a clearer picture of a reciprocal relationship between journalism and the humorists’ work: how the humorists influenced the journalism of the day and where our humorists, and indeed the major writers who followed them, drew their inspiration.

The work of humorists, and indeed the culture they depicted, remain a footnote in the field of literary studies, in part because materials are hard to obtain. The best sources are the anthologies *Native American Humor*, edited by Walter Blair (now long out of print), and *Humor of the Old Southwest*, edited by Hennig Cohen & William B. Dillingham. This collection appeared in 1964 and is now in its third edition from The University of Georgia Press. Other than

this text, students and faculty turn to occasional editions of short stories by major humorists such as Harris and Hooper (both of whose work directly influenced the plot of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*). At the same time, the legacy of the humorists continues. One need only consider the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* to see how lively the tradition remains.

Description: I would continue digitizing materials in the public domain and to expand the content prepared for the seminar into an Web-based archive of fiction, journalism, advertisements, and photographs. I would also ascertain copyright status and secure permission to reproduce work from the archives of the Library of Virginia, as well as in old numbers of *The Spirit of the Times* in the collections of The University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, and William and Mary.

The *Spirit* Web site would provide not only an archive, but a growing resource for scholarship about the literary tradition and frontier life. I would invite ACS faculty to contribute additional materials on an ongoing basis. Such a site might, in time, grow to include secondary work such as refereed articles.

Timeline:

Spring 2003: Preliminary work with existing materials. I plan to have a Web interface for the site, and methods for searching it, set up on a server at the University of Richmond. Materials from the seminar would be the first entries on the site. I would make copyright inquiries at the four institutions and work with the publications office at the Library of Virginia to support a printed version of selected materials from the online archive. Evaluators would look at the site to assess its scholarly merit and ease of use.

Summer 2003: Expansion of the site. I would travel to the three universities noted and the Libraries of Virginia and Congress. As needed I would travel elsewhere to consult a complete run of *Spirit of the Times* or other publications from the frontier era. Existing materials would be supplemented by selections from the library's archives, and from print and photo collections there and at the three universities mentioned. Evaluators again look at the site.

Fall 2003 (and beyond): The growing library of frontier materials becomes available to ACS faculty via Richmond's Web site.

Technology: I would use my own laptop, digital cameras, digital video cameras, and imaging software to process the printed materials. Richmond can supply additional data storage to host the *Spirit* on a server here.

Other Support: I would also apply for a Undergraduate Summer Research Fellowship from the University of Richmond. This would fund an English major to assist me in collecting and proofreading materials and a student employee of Academic Technology Services to assist with site design and construction. I should be able to supplement the student fellowship, if needed, with funds from Academic Technology Services at Richmond. Since the students will need to travel to assist me with research, I plan to apply for a Research Grant to cover their expenses. Further human and financial support may be available through the Library of Virginia, which supported my work in the archives as I developed the seminar.

Learning Outcomes: The most important outcome would be for students at ACS institutions, whose research would expand the archive. Original research is uncommon for undergraduates in the humanities; the *Spirit* would provide an opportunity. As the archive grows, those studying the history or literature of 19th century America would benefit from a single online source to provide

materials unavailable in existing anthologies. Studying these background and popular materials would not be limited to those employing a New Historicist approach to literary work. Historians and teachers of literature who employ various theoretical praxes would benefit as well. The work of amateur writers and the non-literary materials put the development of well known novels and drama into a continuous tradition stretching back to late-Colonial times.

Curriculum: The site, much like other sites developed by me, would be available free to those with Web access. Locally, the site would be used in two courses: the senior seminar and a general-education course at Richmond.

Assessment: Faculty from the University of Richmond will assist in assessing the content and design of the Web site. Professor Welford D. Taylor, from the Department of English, is author or editor of works that include *The Newsprint Mask*, a study of fictional journalists in American literature, and *The Buck Fever Papers*, an edition of Sherwood Anderson's columns from newspapers in Marion, VA. Dr. Harry Ward, professor emeritus in History, is author of numerous books about Colonial America and the Revolutionary War era, including *Between the Lines: Banditti of the American Revolution*. Dr. Andrew Ross, from Modern Languages and Literatures, directs Richmond's Multimedia Language Lab. Dr. Ross develops multimedia materials for colleagues and maintains the department's Web site.

Dissemination: The seminar pages give a rough idea of how the archive might be shared; more importantly, it provides a look at the writing unearthed by students at the Library of Virginia. The site is <http://writing.richmond.edu/jessid/eng423/>. Obviously a Web-based archive, compatible with all major browsers and operating systems, would provide the best dissemination of HTML or PDF documents, as well as images rendered as high-quality JPG files. I could also provide materials on CD-ROM, as I have done for an internally funded project, "Training for Tough Tutorials," at <http://writing.richmond.edu/training/tough/>.

It would be advantageous to consider printing a companion volume, perhaps under the Library of Virginia masthead, for classroom use. A print companion could not capture all of the site materials, but it would provide a useful tool for the classroom. A teacher's manual, in print and on the Web site, would accompany the other resources.