

"The Spirit of the Southern Frontier": Building an Online Archive

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A Faculty Web-Designer's Perspective: Being "Rather Snappish"

In 2003, I received a Technology Fellowship from the ACS to develop an online archive of texts from the "Old Southwest," a large body of humorous fiction and nonfiction of varying quality but long-acknowledged literary influence. The work by Antebellum frontier humorists directly shaped Mark Twain's work, notably events in Huckleberry Finn's journey with Jim. The tradition of frontier humor also shows strongly in the works of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and other Southern writers.

Re-publishing the Southwestern material, all of it in the public domain, was worthwhile in itself, but as the "The Spirit" began its slow trek toward "the settlements" of academia, I also had pedagogical goals in mind. College faculty now have powerful and easy-to-use tools for crafting Web content, but increasingly much of what we craft is never shared. We can place materials into course-management systems, but that type of restricted-access "Web content" does not assist the work of scholars and teachers beyond the campus gates.

As we began the project, we started with a belief that the academic Internet should provide a "Commons" open to all visitors. Though none of our sources are under copyright, we still owed intellectual debts to many scholars. We wanted our site to complement, not compete with printed works about the Southern frontier, especially *Humor of the Old Southwest*, a fine anthology edited by Hennig Cohen and William B. Dillingham. We sought their publisher's permission to use the anthology's 22 categories of frontier humor from 1830-60. We then added three new categories. These rubrics saved us hours of guesswork and became the basis for our "topics index" online.

The archive also adheres to a few principles of design, access, and professionalism:

- Maintaining a consistent design so all pages load quickly and work with commonly available operating systems and browsers
- Including student as well as faculty work
- Avoiding mere "hobbyist" status for the site by continuing to add, proofread, and edit all materials as carefully as our small staff, the condition of originals, and the vagaries of the dialect and spelling of sources permit.

Easy enough. All we had to do was to wade through a wilderness of very rare books, crumbling newspapers, and miles of microfilm. As Erin and I slogged through reel after reel and gently handled originals from the 1840s and 50s, we remained true to our goals, even though it made more work for us. It would be seductively easy to feed content to our campus' helpful and talented staff who work for Information Services, but it would not give me the power I wanted to shape the project.

From the rough-edged font in the image maps, to the earthy, frontier-brown color chosen for links and the menu, to the utter simplicity of a mostly plain text design in a browser's default font, I wanted to buck the trend of making all sites look commercial and modern, from each university's main page to the templates our departments now all use, with handy "breadcrumbs" and other features. The fewer the HTML tags, I've reasoned, the fewer the changes needed in years to come, as browsers and HTML standards evolve.

This may sound reactionary enough, but I had another subversive goal in mind. I wanted to challenge an often-voiced assumption that undergraduates in the humanities cannot do original research.

By the way, my favorite title for a piece in the archive is "A Mouthful of Pickled Dog." Sometimes research and Web design seem about that savory.

A Student Researcher's Perspective: Wading Right In

When I signed on to work with Dr. Essid for the summer, I expected to be typing and filing. The project upended my assumptions about undergraduate research in English. At the Library of Virginia and the Alderman Library at the University of Virginia I looked through newspapers and books on microfilm and in the archives as Dr. Essid studied others--we were able to divide up *Spirit of the Times* reels by year, for example, and local papers by volume. Determining which pieces were forms of frontier humor or closely enough related to deserve space on our site was my responsibility, and I located about half of the material on the site.

To be honest, I nearly panicked the first time the archivists at the Library of Virginia handed me a parcel of disintegrating newspapers from the 1840s. I had never touched any paper so old and fragile, and I had the feeling that a page I accidentally ripped would be lost to the world forever. And although there are of course other copies of the newspapers we looked at, in some cases my fears were appropriate. Knowing that any journalist's work that we passed over might physically deteriorate in a few years, that I might be the last person to read a particular anecdote or notice, got me hooked on the project.

I came back to work for Dr. Essid the following summer because I'd grown attached to the texts I found. Yes, I've spent hundreds of hours at the keyboard, just as I expected, but since in most cases I had located the piece myself and had seen it in its original format or at least on microfilm, I wanted to transcribe it, and transcribing a piece became a chance to read it again and more closely. As a result I know most of these pieces inside and out. I've selected many of them, transcribed and categorized most of them, and proofread all of them. A few times I argued for the inclusion of a piece that wasn't Southwestern humor but that dealt with the same type of shifty characters or the same themes as anecdotes from that region. Another group of pieces I've tried to collect are stories that, although they tell about a hunt or a courtship or a country dance, tell their tales in such widely divergent tones from frontier humor pieces that they demonstrate the chance frontier humor had to sentimentalize a dying way of life and the extent to which it

rejected sentimentalism.

No special interest in the humor of the Old Southwest led me into this project. I had no idea what to answer, at first, when friends made knock-knock jokes with the inevitable line "Cactus who?" The humor of the Old Southwest revealed itself to me story by story in the *Spirit of the Times*, the *Reveille*, the *Picayune*, and the local newspapers and books we read. I still intend to study more well-known fiction at the graduate level, but getting to know the spirit of an era directly through its texts convinced me to focus on archival materials again in my honors thesis, prompted me to seek out a graduate school with impressive special collections in Southern literature, and helped me understand how much I enjoy the energy, the humor, and the earthiness of the Southern writing that developed largely out of frontier humor. Working on the Spirit site has been to my expectations of undergraduate research what fiddler Old Bob Walker was to the French violinist in "A Kentucky Fiddler," and to people's usual idea of an undergraduate's role, all I have to say is "Piana h--!"

Works Cited:

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