

Revelations of the Past

History continuously reveals itself. Every so often, we read of a discovery that reveals more of the past – a letter from Abraham Lincoln tucked away in a book, or a musical piece by some long-dead composer found buried in university archives. Such discoveries constantly expand and enrich our understanding. I have personal experience in that regard, because history has revealed itself concerning my own writing.

A very recent instance involves *The Taos Massacres*, my 2004 historical novel about the uprising of New Mexicans and Indians against American authority in 1847. In that uprising, several Americans and a couple French-Canadians were besieged in Simeon Turley's grist mill and whiskey distillery a dozen miles north of Taos.

Before starting to write *The Taos Massacres*, I went to Taos to acquaint myself with the area. By chance, I noticed an advertisement in the local newspaper: "Turley Mill ruins, ultimate riverside homesite, historical ruins, serious inquiries only." Wow! I thought.

I spent several hours at the site of Turley's enterprise alongside gushing Rio Hondo, where the tumbled remains of several rubble walls were scattered along a 100-yard expanse. It appears that no one had sketched Turley's establishment in the 1840's, when it was likely abandoned after it was set afire and Turley was killed, but I wanted to be as accurate as possible in reconstructing the siege. I walked the area and took photographs. Cowpies from grazing cattle were the only evidence of use.

I pored over the few contemporary written references available to look for hints of Turley's layout to compare with what I had seen in person. When *The Taos Massacres* went to press, I included a diagram of Turley's establishment as I imagined it to be. My diagram indicated a half-dozen "rooms" in Turley's main structure.

Now, almost 20 years after my visit, we will soon have a much better idea of Turley's grist mill and whiskey distillery. Happily, the property was not sold as the "ultimate riverside homesite." It is now an archeological dig. Albert D. Gonzalez, a Ph.D. candidate at Southern Methodist University, will finish mapping the site this year (2010). In contrast to my earlier estimate of half-dozen rooms in Turley's main structure, Gonzalez has identified 24!

Another example of history revealing itself concerns my visit several years ago to the University of Wisconsin hospital for a minor surgical procedure. At the time, I was working on *Behind Enemy Lines*, a narrative of my childhood polio and the way it affected my life. I had been working mostly from memory and a few scattered documents...school records, newspaper clippings, letters, etc. I lacked a coherent plan for how I should proceed, but I wanted to write about that period of my life, perhaps just to get it out of my system.

Before the surgical procedure, a young physician glancing through my chart said, "Do you know there are pictures of you in here?" I looked at them. I was 12 years old. I wore nothing but a "diaper," and I was posed both front and sideways to show the effects of polio on my left leg. The pictures had been taken 50 years earlier. I had no idea they existed, or that my medical records from that era might be available. But they were, and they enabled me to reconstruct many of the events of that seminal period in my life...dates, events, descriptions, people, reports, more letters. One significant event was an operation on my foot called a "Dunn stabilization." I read a step-by-step description of what was done to my polio foot. I had lived for 50 years with the consequences of that operation without ever knowing what it was.

As is so often the case, the wealth of facts in those newly revealed records began to bubble up lost memories and images, the stuff that makes the past come alive. As I continued work on my memoir with these "original sources," I discovered time and again that my memory had

conflated events. If I had not chanced upon those medical records and been motivated to find other contemporary material, I would have written a much less historically accurate memoir.

I wonder now, what else is out there that I do not know that might change what I described of the past in *Behind Enemy Lines*? I have come to believe that our understanding of even exhaustively researched history is in reality a snapshot of an evolving past.

I have no doubt that many such discoveries will be made regarding the 1st North Dakota Volunteer Infantry Regiment, the subject of my latest book, *The Boys: 1st North Dakota Volunteers in the Philippines*. Several unpublished diaries and narratives residing in historical collections formed the heart of my history of the regiment's service in the Philippines, including my grandpa's pocket notebook. He carried it with him during his service with the 1st North Dakota regiment in 1898-99, and gave it to my mother shortly before he died. Then, she gave it to me shortly before she died. It was almost 100 years old then, an "original source." I intend to contribute a PDF version of his notebook to the State Historical Society of North Dakota.

How many notebooks like my grandpa's lie in attic trunks and dresser drawers? More than 700 men served in that regiment at a time when keeping diaries and journals was popular. I *just know* there are many other such items yet to reach the public. Hopefully, like my grandpa's diary, some of these historical documents will make their way to museums and university archives and be the stuff of further research. Unfortunately, perhaps most will be lost by being tossed. Something is valuable only if someone wants it. As my grandpa and the men of the 1st North Dakota regiment fade from memory, their writing and photographs and keepsakes also lose their meaning. How sad.

I am intrigued by a document still undiscovered that I again *just know* has to be out there somewhere. It concerns Mary Broad (or Bryant), the principal figure in my 2005 historical novel, *The Odyssey of Mary B*. James Boswell of biography fame befriended Mary when she was returned as a prisoner to England after escaping from the new penal colony in Australia. After her release from prison, Boswell paid for her lodgings in London and otherwise helped her to adjust to her new freedom. There came a time, however, when it was best she return to her home and family in Fowey, Cornwall. Boswell arranged for a small pension and paid for her passage. On the day of her departure, he said, "I went to her in the forenoon and wrote two sheets of paper of her curious account of her escape from Botany Bay."¹ Those two sheets would probably have been equivalent to about eight letter-size pages, amounting to several hundred words.

Boswell's account is one of only two personal accounts of Mary's remarkable adventure that we know was written. The other was by Captain Watkin Tench of the Royal Marines, who wrote his on the ship that was bringing Mary back to England. Neither document has been discovered.

After writing down Mary's story, Boswell went home to eat dinner. I wonder if at home he tucked his folded sheets into a book?

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¹ Quoted in *Boswell: The Great Biographer*, ed. Marlies K. Danziger.