

David Thelen

Making the past come alive for everyone has been the animating goal of David Thelen's long and illustrious career as a historian of the United States. As a scholar, teacher, public lecturer, and journal editor, Dave has searched for ways to connect history to people's lives. From his initial research on the Progressives in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Wisconsin to his current studies of how people from military commanders to museum goers use the past, Dave has been strikingly successful in achieving his goals. Along the way he has become one of the leading innovators in American history of his generation.

Dave received his B.A. from Antioch College in 1962 and his M.A. (1964) and Ph.D. (1967) from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He began his academic career at the University of Missouri–Columbia in 1966 and rose to full professor by 1974. At Missouri, Dave published a series of important studies of progressive era politics that helped redefine the field, most notably *The New Citizenship: Origins of Progressivism in Wisconsin, 1885–1900* (1972). He also put theory into practice by becoming actively engaged in local conservation efforts. His work was recognized several times, including a 1978 award as “Citizen Conservationist of the Year” by the local chapter of the Sierra Club.

In 1985 Dave moved to Indiana University. He also assumed one of the defining roles of his career by becoming editor of the *Journal of American History (JAH)*, the field's flagship journal. Dave transformed the *JAH* by making it an even more vital means of scholarly communication for professional historians, as well as an increasingly significant medium for public engagement. Prime among his innovations was the commissioning of special theme issues in which a group of authors interrogated a topic from a variety of perspectives. Seeking to reach a larger audience, Dave published several of these issues as books: *The Constitution and American Life* (1988), *Memory and American History* (1990), and *Discovering America: Essays on the Search for an Identity* (1994). Even more influential were Dave's efforts to use the *JAH* as a means of internationalizing American history. He encouraged historians who lived in other nations but studied American history to submit articles to the journal. And he created an international board of editors to promote scholarship and discussion about American history from a global perspective. Near the end of his tenure as editor, Dave took the journal online and became a founder of the History Cooperative, which seeks to provide digital history to professional historians and the public. When Dave left the *JAH* in 1999, an article in the *New York Times* concluded that he had “been among the best editors of any American historical periodical in this century.” Fittingly, that same year the Organization of American Historians (OAH) recognized his work at the *JAH* by naming its prize for the best article originally published in a foreign language for him. In paying tribute to Dave, OAH president Jacquelyn Hall declared that he is “a rare individual who has had a significant impact on the historical profession not only through his scholarship, but also through institutional innovation, each of which reflects a breadth and creativity that would put most scholars to shame.”

While at Indiana Dave's scholarship complemented his journal work by expanding his attempts to understand how the public learns and uses history.

He published a series of pathbreaking books and articles that sought to close the divide between professional historians and the public. Both the range of his efforts and their intent are evident in the titles of his most influential studies: *Becoming Citizens in the Age of Television: How Americans Challenged the Media and Seized Political Initiative During the Iran-Contra Debate* (1996) and *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998). Dave's work also took him to the public sites of history learning. He gave talks to groups of museum curators and advised historical museums on how best to engage visitors through their exhibits. In addition, he participated in a number of critical conferences that sought to promote reforms in history training and practice aimed at

expanding the intellectual boundaries of the discipline. In 2004 Indiana University recognized Dave's many achievements by appointing him as a distinguished professor.

Over the course of his career Dave has received numerous other awards as well. These include the Award of Merit twice from the American Association of State and Local History, and the Historic Preservation Award from Mary Washington University in 1999. Dave was a Guggenheim Fellow (1973–1974) and a Fulbright-Hays Senior Research Fellow to the United Kingdom (1973–1974). And he has held visiting appointments at the University of Manchester, the University of Amsterdam, and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.

Dave retired from Indiana University in the spring of 2006. But he is still hard at work. He will spend the spring of 2007 teaching in Amsterdam and working on his current studies of how people reenact the past. He will bring the same passionate engagement to these projects that he has brought to every aspect of his career. And, as in the past, the results will inspire us to think about American history in very different ways.

Michael Grossberg