
"A Goodly Fellowship": The Kentucky-Tennessee ASA's First Forty Years

Thomas Blues
University of Kentucky

We know who they were, what they proposed to do, and where they began to do it. But exactly what they talked about at that initial gathering forty years ago, and exactly when they talked about it, we don't know; for no written record of the first meeting is extant in the accumulated file folders of papers (the Constitution, membership rosters, meeting sites, officers, programs, bills, and correspondence) that constitute the Archives of the Kentucky-Tennessee American Studies Association.

We can find a few facts in the mists of our origins. Among the founders were Lyman Burbank, Durant da Ponte, Richard Beale Davis, LeRoy Graf, Nathalia Wright (University of Tennessee); Clement Eaton, Robert Jacobs (University of Kentucky); Harold Bradley, Randall Stewart (Vanderbilt); Earl Rovit (University of Louisville); Paul Nagle (Eastern Kentucky State College); Richard Drake (Berea College). The first members gathered in Lexington one day in the spring of 1955. They adopted a Constitution that linked them to the national association and committed them to the promotion of "the study of American civilization, both in general and with particular reference to the area from which its membership is drawn, and especially in aspects which involve more than a single academic discipline." Clement Eaton was elected President, Richard Beale David Vice-President, and LeRoy Graf Secretary-Treasurer.

Thanks to the first issue of the Association's newsletter in June 1956, we know a good deal more about the second annual meeting--April 6-7 in Nashville. Carl Bode of the University of Maryland presented a paper Friday evening. Saturday morning there was a panel discussion on "Urbanism in the South," moderated by August Meier of Fisk University. His distinguished colleague, Arna Bontemps, delivered the concluding luncheon talk on Booker T. Washington.

Thus was established a pattern that carried through several years; three or four presentations, in contrast to the twelve or more we now average; panel discussions ("Tastemakers of the Old South" in 1957, "European Influences on the Culture of the Southeast" in 1958, "The Advancement of Culture in Louisville" in 1959 (featuring Barry Bingham and former Louisville mayor Charles Farnsley), "Contemporary Linguistics and American Studies" in 1961, with John Jacob Niles participating--and so on into the mid 1960s); and distinguished speakers from beyond the borders of the border states (C. Vann Woodward, George Rogers Taylor, Raven McDavid, Louis D. Rubin).

The 1957 meeting, at what was then Eastern Kentucky State College in Richmond, set another pattern that has endured: the alternating of meeting sites between Kentucky in odd years, and Tennessee in even years. Until 1973, meetings were almost always held on college campuses--in Tennessee at such sites as Knoxville, Nashville, Johnson City, Cookeville, and Memphis; in Kentucky at Lexington, Richmond, Berea, Louisville, Georgetown, and Bowling Green. Since the early 1970s, the Association has gathered principally at state parks (perhaps our favorite has been Fall Creek Falls in Tennessee) and at Shakertown in Kentucky.

In numbers, the Association has increased somewhat since its founding. The early years counted members in the forties; we now and for the past several years count ourselves in the fifties at annual meetings. Still, we have lasted over almost half a century, while other small groups have consolidated into larger regional associations (the Southern American Studies Association, which meets biennially, comes to mind). I think one of the reasons for our continued existence is that we teach ourselves something interesting about the region in which we live every time we meet.

From the beginning, the Association has attended to its constitutional obligation to study "the area from which its membership is drawn." A survey of newsletters and programs informs us that we have been interested in the area's popular culture (the automobile in Eastern Kentucky; Saturday night at the movies in Campbellsville), its educational history (education during the Great Depression) and innovations (the Highlander Folk School), religion (revivalism and anti-intellectualism in Kentucky, Zionism in Tennessee), political history (the anti-slavery movement, the New Deal and the South), culture heroes (Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett, Kit Carson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln), Appalachian culture (creative expression in the folk arts, ginseng collecting), some Agrarians (Warren, Tate, and Ransom) and Tate's wife, Caroline Gordon, celebrated cases and events (the Beauchamp-Sharp affair, Bryan and Darrow at Dayton, the Black Patch Wars), women's history (women in a rural Kentucky church, the woman as reformer), African-American history (black pioneers from the border states).

Somewhat surprisingly, Kentucky-Tennessee writers have not received the attention we might have expected. Those who have been studied (in addition to the Agrarians mentioned above) include Mary Noailles Murfree, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, John Fox, Jr., Susan Clay Sawitzky, Thomas Merton, Evelyn Scott, Jesse Stuart, Peter Taylor, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Gurney Norman. The first paper on Harriet Arnow was read in 1986; there have been five since. Wendell Berry's work was the subject of a paper for the first and only time in 1993. A number of the area's writers have so far never been attended to; among them George Washington Harris, James Lane Allen, Nikki Giovanni, Cormac McCarthy, Alex Haley, Randall Jarrell, and Richard Marius.

If it is true that we teach other when we meet, it is also true that from the outset we have enjoyed meeting with one another. In the May 1960 Newsletter, Durant da Ponte referred to the Kentucky-Tennessee ASA as "a goodly fellowship...(which) has remained relatively fixed as to its personnel--these comprising a solid core of devoted... members whose aim has been the furtherance of American studies in this region." The structure of our annual gatherings has encouraged our getting to know one another and the development of friendships. For if the time is short, it is time spent together. With few exceptions over the years, we have assembled in single sessions; we enjoy an evening meal together, preceded by the revered "attitudinal adjustment hour." Off-campus meeting sites encourage informality; they effectively reduce academic stuffiness without discouraging serious scholarship and conversation.

While the current vice-president plans each meeting's program, the secretary-treasurer seeks and secures the meeting site, publicizes the event, issues calls for papers, and attends to the myriad details of making everything work. Vice-presidents metamorphose into ceremonial presidents when their real work is done, but secretary-treasurers endure and keep working. Our group's continued existence is owed in large part to a short list of members who have held this key office, from LeRoy Graf and Durant da Ponte of the University of Tennessee in the early years, through William Berge (1967-86) and Gene Forderhase (since 1986) of Eastern Kentucky University. In addition to their other duties, Professors Graf and da Ponte after him edited and disseminated an informative newsletter twice a year from 1956 through 1964. Issues of the newsletter announced our annual meetings, provided abstracts of papers and business reports, gave out news of members' publications and academic

activities, and provided other information of interest to American Studies professionals. As successors to the Office, Professors Berge and Forderhase have been largely responsible for the Association's continuity and stability for nearly thirty years.

Now, four decades beyond the first meeting, we find ourselves a constant and faithful membership that supports the Association with our attendance, scholarly contributions, and participation in the duties of governance. We also have a journal that publishes a biennial issue, under the able co-editorship of Sarah Howell and Michael Dunne of MTSU and with the financial support of several of the area universities. The editorial board is comprised of Thomas Blues of the University of Kentucky, J.W. Cooke of Tennessee State University, and Allison Ensor of the University of Tennessee. *Border States* prints many of the papers presented at our spring meeting, but welcomes essays dealing with all aspects of the regional culture.

We can say with some confidence that the machine is in good working order; but we must also acknowledge that it can always use new parts. Almost from the beginning, the Association has been concerned to sustain and increase its numbers. A membership committee was formed in 1963, and from time to time over the years efforts have been made to draw more participants to the annual meetings. A promising sign is the increased presence of graduate students. We also need to consider ways to attract and involve younger faculty from more of the region's colleges and universities. Forty is not old, but it is getting there.

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This web page is maintained by

Dr. Harold D. Tallant, Department of History, Georgetown College
400 East College Street, Georgetown, KY 40324, (502) 863-8075

E-mail: htallant@georgetowncollege.edu