

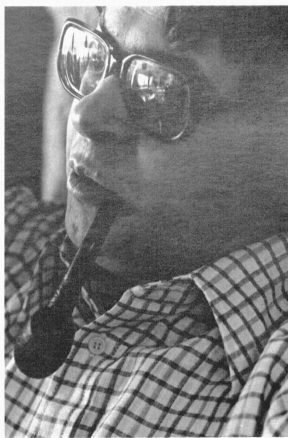
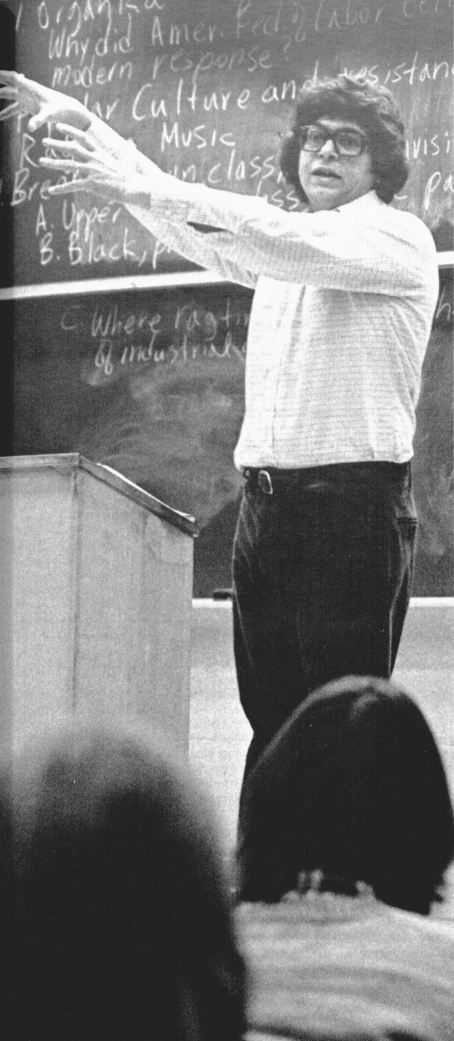


Taking—and Making— History with **DAVID THELEN**

By Leigh Branham

Dr. David P. Thelen — who wants his students to see the alternatives life offers — enters the Arts & Science auditorium and walks briskly down the aisle, his lecture notes, pipe, and paper cup full of Coke in hand. His topic for the day, according to the course outline of History 251 — Twentieth Century America, is “how did industrial capitalism undermine traditional society?” Thelen launches right into it, wasting no time. Soon, he has forgotten his notes. He seems to trust his instincts, his spontaneous recall of stories and incidents that lend the ring of truth and immediacy to history. He paces the stage, constantly punctuating his statements with





body emphasis. Like a basketball referee calling a foul, Thelen moves with forceful animation.

"So, the notion that time is money, the preaching of temperance and self-control . . . all these ideas were needed to create and maintain a sober and disciplined work force," Thelen summarizes, as he steps stage right, gathering his next thought. Abruptly, he stops, bends his knees, and makes a sweeping gesture with his clenched fist.

"Not good enough," he shouts. "How can we *really* break into their lives," asked the industrial capitalists, "and gain control?" The answer," says Thelen, "was the public schools."

None of the 180 or so students appears to be sleeping. Some are taking notes. Others just listen and think.

The student yearbook named Thelen "Outstanding Professor" in 1971, and he was also the recipient of the Faculty-Alumni Teaching award in 1968. "I've waited two years to get into this course," says one student, Kate Laughlin, at the end of a lecture.

A small group of students descends on Thelen after class, ready to ask questions, argue a point, or begin putting their own opinions into words. They will follow him out of the auditorium as a new class comes in. Through the double doors and down the hall to the history department, they often follow him into his office. There, amidst the untidy piles and boxes of books, old tests and papers, Thelen attends to his students one on one.

"My message, if I have a message," says Thelen, "is that at any particular time, nothing is, or was, inevitable. There are always live alternatives. What makes me happiest in reading my course evaluations is when students indicate they see more alternatives in their lives than they had before."

Thelen says that when he was a doctoral candidate himself at the University of Wisconsin, the professors there "had no time at all for undergrads or grad students alike." When he first came to the University for a job interview in 1966 he was actively seeking "a place where there was a more personal tie with the student." Thelen has found it at Mizzou.

"The chairman of the history department at Wisconsin had worked at MU previously in his career," says Thelen, "and he said it was the best place he's ever been — a good place to do work, and a good place in terms of academic freedom."

Thelen has taken advantage of the favorable atmosphere to do a great deal of work. In his 12 years at the University, Thelen has taught seven different courses in American history, among them a one-hour mini-course he originated, Social Outlawry in America from Jesse James to the Present. He has written three scholarly and influential works about the progressive movement in America and the life and times of the Wisconsin Senator, Robert La-Follette. He has regularly had articles published in the historical journals and has delivered lectures and papers

throughout the U.S. (and in Great Britain, during his year there, 1973-74, as a Guggenheim Fellow and a Fulbright-Hays Senior Research Fellow).

"I'm less of a workaholic than I was 10 years ago," says Thelen. "I used to be terribly ambitious. Modest goals weren't enough. I've started relaxing more, and I've become more involved in community activities that interest me." Thelen lights his pipe and smiles — "I've come to like the more direct and meaningful, concrete results of beer containers."

It was none other than David P. Thelen who led the fight for the can-ban ordinance that was passed in last April's city elections. After the opponents of the ordinance sought an injunction against its enforcement, alleging unconstitutionality, Thelen responded, "They are taking the money that Columbians spend when they buy beer and pop to hire lawyers to try to defeat the will of the majority of Columbians."

Thelen says his main objection to the selling of beverages in cans is not the environmental impact, but rather the principle involved. "It's the imposition on people's lives that's really at issue here, the fact that people don't have a choice. Big business never asked. They just gave us cans and forced us to accept them for their own profit and convenience. It's more a matter of getting control of your life than it is an environmental issue."

In fact, it was a dozen or so students in Thelen's fall 1976 Citizens and the Environment class that chose the can-ban issue as their class project. And it was these students who conducted polls showing that the majority of Columbians were opposed to throwaway containers, then set about to get the initiative on the ballot. Thelen worked overtime advising them, speaking out, and coordinating their efforts. The results were highly gratifying to Thelen in more ways than one.

"These students were not involved at all when they came into the course," he recalls. "They had never thought they could influence anything or anybody. But to watch

On Teaching History

David Thelen freely admits he has no pretensions of teaching history "objectively."

"What happens when you start trying to teach all the interpretations and viewpoints of history," says Thelen, "is that when you ask students later to tell you what *they* think, and why, they tend not to really give their opinions. Instead, they'll give you everyone else's, partly this and partly that."

"I feel much more honest giving my own interpretation and letting the students judge for themselves. I think they appreciate that approach. . . . I like the sweaty, earnest, groping, troubled students. Those are the ones I enjoy teaching. I don't care about their I.Q.'s or their grade points or any of that. I like the searching students who are really looking at their beliefs."

On Controlling Your Lives

"An awful lot of students feel alienated and angry, even more than in the '60's," he says. "They feel 'there's nothing I can do anyway.' That 'oh me, everything out there is just one big overpowering and monolithic force, and it's going to do it to me no matter what, because I'm just a little seed being blown around by forces that I can't control.'"

One student said he didn't mean to sound cynical, but still believed that, as far as the University is concerned, no matter what the students say or do, the administrators "in their ivory towers" are "going to do exactly what they want." Thelen's quick reply: "I cannot deny that, but I can tell you this. If you assume you have no control, no possible hope of influencing, you surely won't. If you go out looking for bricks to fall on your head, bricks will fall on your head."

them develop a sense of unintimidated self-respect, the quiet determination they showed — the change was amazing."

Thelen still has some of those former students out to his house occasionally for discussions about the ordinance and the status of statewide and national legislative can-ban efforts.

One of the students is Karen Tulchinski, a senior sociology major who had never before become involved in politics of any kind. "At first I was nervous about becoming that involved," she says, "but it turned out to be one of the most worthwhile experiences of my life. I learned so much about politics and how power works. We all worked so hard. It was only a one-credit course, but the amount of work we put in was far more than anyone would've done for one-hour's credit."

Obviously, Thelen takes the idea of citizenship very seriously. He has even suggested that the University actually create a "department of citizenship," whose role it would be, he says, "to question what all the other departments are doing." He acknowledges that such a department would be quite threatening to some, "but," he maintains, "the alienation around here that's not being expressed needs constructive outlets through higher education. I think we would all benefit tremendously from watching entirely different sets of assumptions confronting one another on a direct, day-to-day basis."

Thelen combines his concern about active citizenship

with a strong belief in the importance of a "sense of community" among citizens. He remembers his childhood in Chicago, being aware of the deterioration of the sense of community in the Hyde Park section where he grew up.

"We would all go out on the 'rat patrols,' in the neighborhood," Thelen recalls. "Rat extermination was supposed to be the city official's job, but we had to do a lot of it ourselves."

To counteract the loss of community feeling in the neighborhood, Thelen had the idea, at age 12, to publish a street newspaper heavy on gossip. "My father still talks about that paper — the *Drexel (Street) Bugle* was the name of it. It was a rather pompous thing for a 12-year-old to do, but as I look back on it, I can see that gossip really was important to our sense of community there. . . ."

Thelen says he can't remember not wanting to be a teacher. He was strongly influenced by one particular teacher at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he received his AB in 1962. "He was anti-activist," says Thelen, "but very bright."

Thelen says good teaching requires enthusiasm of two kinds — enthusiasm "for the material, and in the sense that you really want to be there in the classroom more than anywhere else."

When he does leave the classroom and the University, he enjoys spending time with his wife, Esther, an assistant professor in the psychology department, and their two children, Jennifer, 11, and Jeremy, nine.

"I'm very conscious of not spending enough time with the children," says Thelen. "So, I try to talk with them about things as we go here and there in the car, or whenever I can."

Thelen also enjoys swimming in the quarry lake behind his house, backpacking, and eating. "What I really enjoy is getting completely away for a couple of weeks at the end of each academic year — going to the California Sierras or New Mexico, and just being out in the woods with the family. By the time May rolls around, I'm usually tense and very aware of all the things that didn't get done. Usually it takes the first two or three days of the vacation to get rid of that psychological tightness."

Thelen usually does most of his writing and research during the summers. He is currently writing the history of Missouri from 1875 to World War I for a five-volume history of the state. "There's a funny kind of attitude among Missourians," says Thelen. "There's a basic and profound conservatism, but also, below that, an angry radicalism, and a strong suspicion of government."

Many other people may be involved in as many different activities. But few others would seem to be living their beliefs with so much energy and passion, and in so many different ways — as teacher, scholar and community leader. Dr. Winfield Burgraaff, the history department chairman, understated it perfectly when he said of Thelen, "There is a coherence in his life and work." □