

East Texas Historical Journal

Volume 25 | Issue 2

Article 5

10-1987

Walter Prescott Webb: The Classroom Teacher

W. E. Hollon

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

Recommended Citation

Hollon, W. E. (1987) "Walter Prescott Webb: The Classroom Teacher," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 25: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol25/iss2/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu.

**“WALTER PRESSCOTT WEBB:
THE CLASSROOM TEACHER”**

by W. Eugene Hollon

Like most of his students, I heard about him long before enrolling in my first class with Walter Prescott Webb in the summer of 1936. I first saw him a few months previously when he spoke to a group of South Texas public school administrators on the campus of Texas A & I College at Kingsville. At the time I held the august position of principal of the grade school at Mirando City, a border town near Laredo. The entire state that year was caught up in a patriotic orgy of celebrating the centennial of Texas independence from Mexico. Texas historians were very much in demand as speakers, especially those who had ever written a book. Not only had Webb written *The Great Plains*, but his *Texas Rangers* recently had been made into a movie starring Fred McMurray.

Even though Paramount used nothing in the book but the title, Webb would modestly boast in later years that he received enough money from the deal during the depression years to “buy a new suit of clothes and a train ticket to the next meeting of the American Historical Association.”

Following an elaborate introduction by a name-dropping school superintendent, a somewhat unusual looking man in his late forties moved immediately to a large map of the United States, pointed to the 98th meridian, and launched into a fascinating lecture on the American frontier. Slightly under six feet in height, he possessed a very large, very round, and very bald head. His weathered face and red complexion did nothing for his brown tweed suit and miss-matched shirt and tie. Nevertheless, there was an aura about this man with the thick neck and owl-like eyes. His deliberate movements and dry, resonant voice commanded instant respect. To my knowledge, he represented the first individual I had ever seen who had written a book. Indeed, I had been highly suspicious that some of my frontier instructors at East Texas State Teachers College had even read a book since graduating from Peabody College with an M.S. degree in Education.

Joe Frantz once wrote that everyone who knew Webb felt that they owned a piece of him. Such belief was an illusion, a vain fantasy as thin of substance as pink air. Webb belonged to no man, not even to the seventh decibel point. Many have proclaimed him to be the greatest intellectual and original thinker that Texas has produced in the past century. Of course, most of those who make this assertion are native sons of a state more famous for football, beauty queens, Baptist preachers, cattle, oil and gas (natural and otherwise) than for brains. Still, Walter Prescott Webb was

not an ordinary man, regardless of where he came from or where he went or how long he stayed. More books, articles, and historical sessions have been devoted to him in the past decade than any other Texas-born scholar.

No one exposed to Webb's personality and character more than three or four times could escape being profoundly influenced, one way or the other. Some of his former students contacted in preparation for this paper invariably praised him as a great friend and intellectual giant but criticized his classroom performance. Others could find no fault with him whatsoever and seemed to lose sight of the fact that he was even mortal. But no one failed to recall explicit details of their first and last meetings.

Webb came to the University of Oklahoma for several lectures during my twenty-two years there in the History Department, the first time in 1946. I picked him up at the Santa Fe depot around 6:00 o'clock that morning and dropped him off at the motel for a few hours of sleep. When I called for him later in the day, he answered the door with a magazine in hand and clad in a one-piece suit of cotton underwear. He apologized for being late, and while he was getting dressed and as we carried on with small talk, my mind turned to many things — including the old book *Life With Father*. The sight of the great Walter Prescott Webb in his underwear was no less a shock than that experienced by young Clarence Day the first time he encountered his authoritarian father without a coat.

On another occasion Webb was invited to the Norman campus to speak to a group of nationally renowned psychologists — self proclaimed, that is. The conference was devoted to the subject of "tensions." Several in the audience became extremely agitated, for Webb not only ignored the subject at hand, his predictions for the future, as usual, proved very pessimistic. One visitor from Columbia University reacted so rudely in his remarks that the host professors apologized for his behavior. Whereupon, Webb rose deliberately from his chair in the audience and responded, "It seems to me that you distinguished scholars can learn all you need to know about 'tensions' by studying one another."

I took three history courses and one graduate seminar with Webb between 1937 and 1941. The lecture courses included the Great Plains, the History of the United States before the Civil War, and what would be called today "the Gilded Age." The seminar was devoted to topics relating to the American frontier. While re-reading the lecture notes for the regular courses recently, I was surprised to see that they averaged less than thirty, compared to more than 300 pages of notes for Professor Gutsch's class on the British Empire.

There were sixty-nine of us in the graduate seminar, the majority of whom were bewildered education majors seeking a fillip from sitting at the feet of the great Webb. Ernest Wallace once informed me that he and I and the late E.C. Barksdale were the only members of that summer class of 1937 who ultimately received the Ph.D. degree. My notes on Webb's

introductory remarks to the seminar consist of the following paragraph: "Graduate students can learn as much or more from one another in a group of this sort as they can from the instructor. Your paper should reflect considerable research efforts on your part. If you do not already know how to write clear, concise, declarative sentences, it's time that you learned. You are allowed a certain number of dull sentences. That is all you are allowed. If you have trouble with a particular sentence or phrase, throw it out completely and start over. Be careful in your choice of words and avoid using 'former' and 'latter'." Period.

Since I was then living in the ranching country of the Edwards Plateau in West Texas, I chose a subject relating to the origins of the local sheep industry. Another student from Tennessee announced that she wanted to do a paper on moonshining. Webb curtly remarked that it was not "a fit subject for a woman." She went ahead with it anyway and he later pronounced it one of the most interesting papers that he had read in a long time. When my paper was returned at the end of the course, it contained a grade of "B±/A-". There were no corrections or comments except an occasional "rewrite" or "recast," but nothing more explicit as to what to do. I had forgotten the incident, but Ernest Wallace claims that during the presentation of his paper, Webb became as excited as a graduate student who had just made a big discovery. "Later he wrote for a copy of the paper for use in future seminars and as the basis for a chapter in this book," according to Ernest.

W. Turrentine Jackson, one of Webb's first graduate students, well remembers a similar experience. "The most emotional I ever saw him was when I gave a report — terribly sectional and biased — about the legal system and the courts," Turpy remarked. "He slapped his hands together, had a full smile in the back of the room, and came jumping down the aisle shouting 'give 'em hell, Jackson.' Well, it scared the living hell out of me, for I had never seen him react in such a way."

Although he generally was courteous and respectful of students, he had another side in class and he did not suffer fools gladly. Once when he made what I thought was a profound statement, I whispered to the graduate student next to me that Dr. Webb was the greatest teacher I had ever seen. Whereupon, he stopped in the middle of the sentence, glared at me at the back of the room, and stated bluntly that if I wanted to carry on a conversation, then to get the hell out of the room. It was not one of his better days — nor mine. Later, I learned that he stopped off in a colleague's office after class and remarked that he had behaved very badly and was ashamed at what he had just said to a student who did not deserve it. The next day he made a point of inviting me to have a cup of coffee with him across the street from the campus. It was the beginning of a friendship that lasted until the day he died twenty-seven years later.

Dorman Winfrey, one of Webb's post-War II graduate students and

later Director of the Texas State Library, recalls the time when a student reported on a Texas Rangers topic without having read any books on the subject. "Webb's face drew up, his teeth ground a little bit, and all of us understood what was about to take place. It did." Several years earlier a local high school principal wrote a paper on some phase of frontier economics. The student critic had already warned the professor that the man had plagiarized the entire essay from one or two textbooks. Webb sat through the presentation, fuming. Afterwards, he looked the individual straight in the eye, and between clinched teeth informed him that good research required the use of original, or at least sound, reliable sources. "Your research is not acceptable," he stated. "In fact, I consider it an insult to me and to your fellow students in this class. I don't want you ever again to enroll in one of my courses or in any other seminar in the History Department. As of this moment, you are no longer a candidate for an advanced degree in this department."

Another student in that same seminar received an entirely different treatment. Because he wrote poorly and was academically weak, he had to work twice as hard to get half as far as others. Webb encouraged him to keep trying and advised him on how to improve. At the end of the course he suggested that he drop out of graduate school for a while to get more teaching experience. Two years later he wrote the individual to tell him that it was now time for him to resume his graduate work. He eventually received the Ph.D. under Webb's direction. As in the case of both individuals, it was his way of conducting a preliminary examination. That he was an easy mark for a grade, once he became acquainted with you, was well known. He said many times in later life that he never sat in on a Ph.D. exam where a student was not asked a lot of silly questions that he could have passed himself.

No one would have picked Webb out for a scholar if they passed him on an Austin street or observed him tramping through the brush on his Friday Mountain Ranch. To be perfectly honest, he was not a formidable figure in appearance or dress. He was taller than he appeared because he walked with a slight forward stoop. Sometime around World War II he adopted a conservative Stetson for all occasions and frequently kept it on in his office at Garrison Hall — either to encourage someone to drop by and invite him out for a cup of coffee or to discourage some students from interrupting his chain of thought.

"I could pretty well tell if it was all right to knock and say 'hello'," Frank Vandiver wrote soon after Webb's death in 1963, "it all depended upon how wide open the door was. Just a crack meant stay out, a warning generally punctuated by a clacking typewriter. Wide-open meant come on in, a welcome reinforced by Webb's sitting in his swivel chair, cocked back, looking out in the hallway. Even so, I ventured to that office with qualms. I shouldn't have, but I did. The thing was, I admired Dr. Webb too much to feel comfortable around him. Growing up around the Univer-

sity, hearing about him, listening to his lectures, all built a circumspect awe which walled me from him."

Webb had an instinct for knowing when you were discouraged. On three or four occasions during my final year in graduate school he called up unexpectedly and told me to use his car over the weekend, provided I returned it by 8:00 o'clock Sunday morning in time for him to drive out to the ranch. When one asked how he could pay him back for such acts of kindness or for his many letters of recommendation he wrote for me over the years, he invariably responded, "By passing it on to your own students someday."

Most of Webb's students learned more from him outside than inside the classroom. "I think that he did his best work walking from Garrison Hall to the Night Hawk or the Driscoll Hotel," one wrote. "On occasion when he asked me to join him, we would talk very little because I knew that he had damn important things on his mind. He was a thinker who felt that he never really understood the history profession." Another wrote: "He was more than a classroom instructor; he was a human being trying to clothe his ideas in words that came slowly as he thought his way through in front of a class. He was not a master of pedagogy trained in the tricks and mannerisms of others who outshone him at the podium."

With few exceptions, the best students attracted to his classes were someone else's. It was a "must" for anyone studying American history to have a field under him or for anyone in another discipline such as economics, political science, or philosophy to take at least one course with him. According to Walter Rundell, who worked on a book on Webb's teaching career, "there's lots of testimony in his papers at the University of Texas from undergraduates on whom he had a lasting effect." Webb had a way of stirring everyone up immediately, so much so that all but the dullest member of a class was determined to rush to the library to find evidence disproving his latest idea. After reading widely and deeply, some remained unconvinced, while others made a 180° turn. One thing for sure, no one remained neutral.

Webb could have cared less and was more apt to give a student an "A" who strongly disagreed with him than to one who accepted his ideas or statements without question. Although he encouraged criticism, he had no sympathy for those who went beyond what he called "gentlemanly behavior." And he had no patience with those who talked without having something to say. "Discussion can never proceed without disagreement," he often observed. "Once you launch an idea it is free to go its own way, for it is beyond your control — as it should be." He was as unorthodox in his grading as in his methodology and once gave an "A" to a student who submitted her seminar paper in the form of a series of cartoons, rather than as a formal essay. He announced to the class on the Great Plains that I attended in the summer of 1936 that he would excuse any student from the final exam who told him where he could locate

an early model Walker Colt Pistol.

While preparing this paper, I re-read the several books and articles that have been done on Webb. These included biographies by Neca Furman and Greg Tobian and works by Ronnie Dugger, Joe B. Frantz, Walter Rundell, W. Turrentine Jackson, George Wolfskill, William Owens, and Frank Vandiver. In addition, I wrote to several of his former students regarding their impressions of Webb as a classroom teacher and public speaker. "What was it that stamped this parochially educated Texan as a great teacher," I asked. "Or was he really as great as many have said he was?" I did not have to remind anyone that Webb had flunked his own Ph.D. exams at the University of Chicago; that he was forty-three years old when he did receive his doctor's degree, and then via the back door of his own department. (At least one member of the examining committee had been one of Webb's graduate students.)

Moreover, few of Webb's students ever published dissertations done under his direction, perhaps because they worked on portions of his *own* ideas and had little room for individual development. In some cases, he deliberately assigned topics that did not have a chance of book publication because they were far too specialized. Practically all of his teaching experience, except for visiting professorships in later life, was restricted to high schools and universities in Texas. And after more than four decades on the Austin campus, Webb produced surprisingly few Ph.D.'s — certainly nothing in comparison to Bolton, Curti, Nevins, or Turner. I also do not need to point out that Webb's scholarly reading went deep but relatively narrow and that much of his research was confined to reliable but limited secondary sources.

The seeds that Webb planted in the classroom years ago have now matured and the harvest season for the crop of students to which I belonged is fast drawing to a close. Thus, the objectivity that time inexorably brings forth enables Webb to emerge into clearer perspective as a teacher. The intervening years since his retirement and death have been extremely kind to his memory. And the man, teacher, friend, confidant, and thinker become one and the same. My memories of his lectures have become slightly blurred by time, but I had been exposed to so much poor and unimaginable teaching as an undergraduate, that Webb stood out like a giant among a group of mental midgets.

It therefore came as a surprise when a few of Webb's former students who treasure his memory as much as I, responded rather critically of his classroom performances. "I attended only one of his classes," a close friend, now retired, wrote. "It was not an exhilarating experience, for the truth is that Walter was not a good teacher. He bumbled; he just gave the class the pages of his *Great Plains* with little elaboration . . . Like too many of the history teachers I have known, he was content to gather a few wisps of straw and set them to a transient smolder. Barker, Biesele,

Hackett, and Gutsch of the "old history faculty" at the University of Texas were great teachers."

I could hardly disagree more with the above observation, but I also realize that what turns one individual off can turn another on. With all due respect to Barker, Biesele, Hackett, and Gutsch, with whom I had courses, they were strong on facts but about as intellectually challenging on ideas as one of the followers of the Reverend Moon. Words poured forth from Professor Gutsch's mouth faster than bullets from a machine gun. And, as was said of President Warren G. Harding's speeches, his lectures resembled a vast army of words marching across the landscape in search of an idea. Barker was past his prime when I enrolled in his Jackson course and he obviously had never recovered from the disintegration of the Whig Party. As for Professor Hackett, he could assemble a wagon load of Spanish documents; but as Webb once said, "he did not know what in the hell to do with them."

Even Webb's previously mentioned critic enthusiastically admitted that he had one of the fine, creative minds of modern times and compared him in this regard to Billington, Nichols, Curti, and Atherton. But if Webb was as bad in the classroom and he and one or two others have testified, then perhaps he was so bad that he was good.

When I asked Turpy Jackson for his impressions of Webb's classroom performance, his response was slightly more favorable. "But I would have to admit, Gene, that Webb was not at his best as a lecturer. In fact, he hated lecturing and did everything he could to avoid giving what passes for one. This is not to suggest that he did not have an innovative and interesting, free-flowing classroom. He wanted students to give reports and exchange ideas." Indeed, Webb borrowed freely from students before applying their ideas to his own use. But he never failed to give generous credit to those who deserved it.

Ernest Wallace once served as Webb's grader: "I had the feeling that he really did not enjoy lecture courses, but his seminars were something else," Ernest wrote. "We talked a lot about grading and the amount of marking I should do, but I cannot recall that he ever re-read any paper I had read or that he ever changed a single grade — except at my request. He was always asking me questions about West Texas. For some reason, he and I hit it off well — perhaps because neither of us were inclined to talk very much." (That's not the Ernest Wallace I knew for more than forty-five years.)

As for myself, each hour spent in one of Webb's classes seemed more like fifteen or twenty minutes. Doubtless, like Frank Vandiver and many others, I held him in circumspect awe. Those who wanted to learn considerable and those who did not could have their safe grade. He left factual details for the students to read in the textbook and thus felt free to chart his own course. His fractured sentences often left you hanging in

the air, or to be completed in your own mind. Eventually, everything seemed to come together and the second half of the period could be as exhilarating as a down-hill ride on a roller coaster. He had a way of reducing everything to what he was interested in, regardless of the subject matter. He taught a variety of courses, particularly in his earlier career, completely different from those dealing with the American West. A student taking his Western Civilization course once described it to another as "mostly about the frontier."

Webb covered only a few topics in each of the courses I had with him, but he covered them thoroughly. He invariably related each to the frontier and its democratizing influence upon United States and world history. He challenged people to think about every aspect of the frontier, the changes that occurred with European expansion, with the closing of the frontier in the United States, what society would be like as the frontier in other parts of the Western World disappeared. He encouraged students to react with their own experiences, to evaluate great writings of the past in terms of the present, and to discover verifications and contradictions of existing information. He made frequent references to the works of Eugene Manlove Rhodes, Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, Dorothy Scarborough, Hamlin Garland, Andy Adams, Emerson Hough, Vardis Fisher, Owen Wister, and Ole Rolvaag. All of what he said may sound like stale clichés today, but it was exciting stuff to my unsophisticated generation of graduate students.

Webb never bothered too much with exceptions and could get away with sweeping statements that few would dare attempt. The following were chosen at random from my ancient notes, and they do not necessarily represent good examples of what I mean:

"Women live longer than men because they nag their husbands to an early grave."

"If science can not rescue us, we are doomed for a second fall of the Roman Empire."

"I never heard an unpleasant sound in nature."

"All literature is a branch of history."

"The population of the United States will level off to around 150,000,000 by the year 2000, or about the maximum that this country can possibly support."

"Major John Wesley Powell's recommendations never got anywhere in Congress. Consequently, Westerners were driven to lying, cheating, and stealing."

"America is too independent for the corporations to rule and fool indefinitely."

"The North owns everything in the South and West worth owning."

“Women live longer than men because their husbands work so damn hard buying them things that they can’t afford.”

No one to my knowledge had come up with a satisfactory criterion for measuring excellent teaching, especially those who hand out faculty awards at spring commencements. For one thing, the results are too long in coming in. Webb violated every pedagogical rule in the book. He not only would fail to receive a good teaching award today, it is doubtful if the Department of History at the University of Texas would even give his application for a position as assistant professor a second look. Most great teachers, like great paintings or literary classics, must wait for the ultimate judgment of time.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once described a great man as one who never reminds us of others. By such a standard, Walter Prescott Webb not only was a great man, he was the greatest teacher that thousands of Texas students ever experienced.