

# MY HISTORY DEGREE: A PARTIAL MEMOIR

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By my senior year at the University of Massachusetts, I decided that history -- American history -- was my favorite subject. I had been a Sociology major for two years (B.A., 1966) and prior to that a Government major and prior to that a Business Administration major. Sometime during the first semester of my freshman year, not too long after I had started to drink coffee, I "discovered" the excitement of learning -- learning acquired by the reasoning process as opposed to knowledge accumulated by the memorization process. So I thought I should get into a more "intellectual" discipline. Eventually I got around to history, and at the same time, into faded dungarees, tattered sneakers, and army surplus: paraphernalia that provided visible evidence, in the mid-sixties, of where I was in relation to the Civil Rights movement, Bob Dylan, and the war.

I could march on Washington sustained by my reading assignments, class discussions, and term-paper research (the war with Mexico, the decimation of the Indians, Jim Crow, the Philippine Insurrection, the Ludlow Massacre, William Appleman Williams ...) My "homework" anticipated the politics of the next week. I read and wrote with an acute sense that my friends and I were participating in the consequences of the events we were studying. Although many students in the 1960's denied the "relevance" of history, historians, younger ones especially and their graduate students, experienced during these years a vivifying elevation of historical consciousness. We used yesterday's scholarship to elucidate the present and to support tomorrow's argument against the policies of our government.

Not until my last week as a graduate student did I give any consideration to a "career" or "job" ... My adviser had warned me against the M.A.T. (Master

of Arts in Teaching). We agreed on an open-ended approach: a straight M.A. with the obvious implication of an eventual Ph.D. The future was open, the present exciting.

It was also during these years that people, older people began to ask me what I was going to do after I got my degree in history. If asked by a professor, I would be accomodating and dutifully suggest further study and a life devoted to scholarship. If asked by relatives (members all of the working-class), I would automatically answer "teach". But as degree-day approached, what had been only an emotionally-charged abstraction -- the war -- became, for me, a dreadful reality, and I knew that the reception of my M.A. in history would be soon followed by an induction notice. The draft board informed me that my deferment days were over (unless, per-chance, I could get a teaching position). And so half-heartedly I wrote to several high schools in western Massachusetts announcing my availability and proudly listing an M.A. (American history) on my resume. In April King was assasinated, and two months later, RFK. In the weeks between those two stunning tragedies, I was interviewed by several high school principals, each asking me the following two questions: "Are you certified?" and "What is your draft status?"

I officially became an M.A. in history on a stifling hot June day and after the ceremony I drove alone to my favorite place: a grove of willows on a high bank above the Connecticut River where the Holyoke Range looks like a strand of blue humps stretched across the downriver horizon. I had done my best paper there, note cards scattered over an old army blanket. But on that particular day I just sat in the shade, absent-mindedly watching the coming-and-goings of the twittering bank swallows, and wondered what I should do with my M.A. in history, awarded to me by a relatively prestigious eastern university, no less!

On the evening of Robert Kennedy's funeral, I met the girl I would eventually marry. The rest of that summer I did very little except read, think, listen to music, follow the Red Sox, drink beer and stuff. There was just me, with a girl

friend, some other friends, and an M.A. in history, and the Army was after my body. But the mills of the selective service ground exceedingly slow that summer and when autumn arrived, my draft notice had not. My girl friend left for Hawaii to fulfill a teaching contract and I got a job in an apple orchard. McIntosh, Cortland, Delicious, and Baldwin. On September 14th I went to Springfield, as ordered by the Government, for my pre-induction physical. I knew that my 25-year-old self was in "A-1 condition" and I knew I was smart enough to know the wrong answers. But habit took over, maybe pride, and I passed all aspects of the pre-induction inspection.

The apple-picking season ended the week Nixon got elected and I found a job in construction: a Colonial Hilton, no less! Then one day in deep, dark December I got a call from an Air Force recruiter. He knew that I was going to get an induction order early the next week and he therefore said: "Blaise, you're going to get drafted into the Army and yet you have an M.A. in history! Why not join the Air Force and put that degree to good use. You could teach at the War College, do research and writing for the historical division ... your own apartment .. thirty-five hour week .. modern gymnasium ... in the shade." I thought it over, called him back, and said "O.K." I went downtown right away and told everyone I saw that if you had an M.A. in history you had it made in the Air Force. But when I got home I flopped down onto my bed and began to think, to recall, to realize all that I had read and thought and said during the past few years, and I changed my mind. When I failed to meet him at Bradley Field, the recruiter was very angry. In his office he had several walls-full of recruitment certificates and certainly I would have been a prize catch. He telephoned me from the airport and asked, sarcastically, to send him a postcard from Fort Dix. Then told me again that the Army "would not give a hoot or a hollex" for my M.A. in history.

My cousins were Marines; my father, in World War II, had been a paratrooper, and I as a child, as an adolescent, and even after, dreamed of being a soldier.

Almost single-handedly I had repelled hordes of Red Chinese invading the Connecticut Valley. Millions had gone to wars for centuries on end. Why should I be different, or difficult? It would be an "experience" and Lord knows, in the sixties, we were all into "experiences". So I was resigned. I saw myself on the cover of Life, and on the "CBS Evening News". But not for long ...

For, you see, I had thought too much, and had read too much, and had talked too much ... and I now realized what I had to do. No more mind-games and wiseguy cynicism. Uncle Sam's bus was really on the way now ... and I realized that although my degree in history had not gotten me a teaching position, or, as of January, 1969, any other position, I had, while working towards that degree, reached another kind of "position" -- call it intellectual or emotional, it doesn't matter; it was, I suppose, a "moral" decision -- and in spite of my All-American, white, lower middle-class, French-Canadian, Irish-Catholic background -- I was, reluctantly, slowly, but surely, recognizing that I had to say "No" to what I had always assumed I would willingly and without question, answer "Of course...".

During that month of indecision, while pondering what I really ought to do with my one life, I still needed money. I got a job as a short-order cook, on the 4 P.M. to midnight shift, in a snack-bar on the UMass campus. On January 18th I left work (as usual) and went home (as usual). At 7 A.M. the next morning I reported for military induction, and was scheduled, by the Government, to be at Fort Jackson, South Carolina by 5 P.M. that same day. But I had my car keys in my pocket and no change of underwear so at 4 o'clock I was back at work, just as I had planned, shuffling hamburgers. Neither my fellow employees nor my boss ever suspected that except for my M.A. in history, I would have been at that moment somewhere over the Blue Ridge Mountains, flying south, on my way to a life-time of GI Benefits.

Now I was free to make my way into the world: just me and my history degree. First, I needed a better job. The body I had denied the Army, I gave to

Agway, Inc., and I let them use it to unload freight cars full of fertilizer, and grain, and cement. One day the manager said to me: "Don't just be physical. With an M.A. in history you can help me out in the brain section. Keep an eye on what's moving and what isn't, and what we need. Keep track of things out here (in the warehouse) for me." For eight months I worked like a whirling dervish. Six days a week I piled the trucks of the farmers of New England high with feed for their animals, limestone and fertilizer for their fields, barbed wire, malathion, parathion, and DDT. But I could no longer rationalize a \$79-a-week salary with six years of "higher education", in spite of the Woodstock trip.

At the end of summer I got the opportunity to join a surveying crew. I had no such experience, but the chief said to me: "If you've got an M.A. in history, you're probably smart enough to run a (surveyor's) gun." So for \$155-a-week (take-home), I took my degree to the future site of Rt. 91, Springfield to Chicopee, and learned in no time how to run the gun. Most of my fellow workers were young and out-of-sorts with the world. Hippies with jobs. They just loved me and my degree. Besides being an agreeable companion and an able worker, I was of service to them in two other ways: (1) on the New York Times! crossword puzzles while waiting for the temperature to rise above 15° or the rain to stop falling, and (2) by providing historical perspective for their "un-American" as well as anti-American grievances while continuously testing the logic of their opinions, and, on the other hand, rambling on about this and that -- providing them, inadvertantly, with what they thought was brilliant, irrefutable evidence that a radical position was, in fact, "correct" at that point in American history.

Well, I made a lot of money, watched a highway get built, and got married. Rt. 91 was complete. I wrote several letters of inquiry to community colleges throughout the West, and without waiting for any replies, packed everything we had into a Mustang, and in early April 1970, went westward to see what you

could get with a degree in history on the other side of the mighty Mississippi.

I established a headquarters in a motel near Santa Cruz beaches and each day, with my transcript and a big smile, I would visit State (of California) Unemployment Offices and private employment agencies. Zilch. But a man in San Jose was so impressed by my M.A. in history that he wanted to contact a man in New York who might get me a job on the Wall Street Journal! But, it was my M.A. in history that did get me my next job ...

My wife and I were parked on Virginia Avenue in Reno, Nevada, and as I got out of the car I told her that if I didn't get a job here, we would take my M.A. and go try L.A. I was a few minutes early so I wandered fascinated around the main floor of the Nevada Club, a gambling casino. A security-man fronted me and asked for an I.D. I was 27. I told him I was waiting for an interview with the owner. I had seen the "Help Wanted" ad in the morning paper after arriving the night before from California. He looked at me with obvious contempt. My worn and faded dungarees (the same pair), my cloddy work boots, my Wyoming sheep-herder's jacket, and my hair (too long for Nevada) didn't help matters much. But what he could not see, crumpled and sweat-stained in my fist inside my coat pocket, was my transcript. I got in line behind two white dudes who were very heavy into Brylcreem, brightly-colored plaid sportcoats, and black pointed shoes. No way! I thought. The owner then waved them aside after ten-to-fifteen seconds each. But I was cool -- and educated. He first asked me if I was married. "No," I answered -- a little white lie because if I had said "yes", he might have thought I was in Reno just long enough to get a divorce -- and I couldn't take that chance. Then he asked: How much is 13 x 13? 14 x 14? 15 x 15? ... Next I recited my employment history from age ten and ended with this kicker: "... and in the meantime I got an M.A. in history from the University of Massachusetts." It was at that precise moment that I removed the crumpled document from my coat pocket and flattened it out upon the counter. The owner then turned his twisted, bullet-ridden body towards me and glanced

at the paper before him. He saw a list of cryptic semi-words such as "Sem Prog Era", "Am Rev Per", and "Lab Hist" as well as a column of A's and B's. Then, gruffly, like the old ganster he was, he ordered me to "get a haircut and report here at 4 A.M. tomorrow." With fair multiplication skills and a degree in history, and after registering my thumbprint with the FBI, I became a keno writer in Reno, Nevada.

One day after work I went into the beautiful Reno Public Library and registered for a library card. (I had always loved libraries and had been an ardent library user since the age of six.) Memories of my freshman year at UMass came to me just then -- memories of my claiming a certain cozy carrel deep in the bowels of good ol' Goodell Library ... memories of weekend evenings of intense study in the library while occasionally going out for and smuggling back in two cups of hot coffee -- in winter they would be carried discreetly in the pockets of a ski-jacket; in warmer weather, in a book bag held vertically -- yet carefully ... memories...

On another evening, while in the University of Nevada Library waiting for the showing of a movie, I began to notice some people scurrying purposely in and out of doors that led to places apparently out-of-bounds to students. I looked slowly around at the books and journals, so neat and natural upon their shelves, and thought: "Somebody must work here, I mean, besides the lady who checks out the books."

A few weeks later I received a letter from the Dean of Casper Community College in Wyoming inviting me to apply for an instructorship in history. All I had to do was to send transcripts (of course, I thought) and five (five!) academic references. I could only think of three professors who, if given enough details, might remember me. (Why didn't anyone ever tell me about references and placement offices as I went through school? I would have gladly traded, for that information, any data I had about the Smoot-Hawley Tariff!) I wrote to the three professors and to my high school football coach. I could



not come up with a fifth. Casper wrote back in a few weeks and told me that they wanted at least the M.A. in history as well as teaching experience. Reasonable enough, I thought.

I cannot imagine any area on earth more spectacular or more enchanting than that of the deserts, mountains, rivers and lakes around Reno, Nevada. Nor can I imagine any occupation duller than that of a keno writer. So I left the "Biggest Little City in the World" and I came home: across John Freemont and Jedidiah Smith's Great Basin, through the canyonlands of John Wesley Powell and Edward Abbey, the Taos of the Pueblo and D.H. Lawrence, the Great State of Texas, until I reached Springfield, Massachusetts where I got a job in the local library there at a salary of \$4,789.

A year later I enrolled in the School of Library Science at Simmons College in Boston (where I learned that John Dewey did not invent the Dewey Decimal System) and eleven months later I added the initials M.S. to those of B.A. and M.A. After my graduation I took my degrees and experiences to my Alma Mater but was quickly dismissed because they wanted academic library experience plus at least three degrees. So I spent the next few weeks writing letters to libraries in North America and driving a Courtesy Cab through the night-time streets of my hometown, using my M.A. in history as a source of ideas and information with which to spice crosstown conversations. I stopped driving the taxi when I was chosen, over thirty other candidates, to be the new director of the public library in Coventry, Connecticut. The Board of Trustee's selection committee was most impressed, I later learned, by my year of experience in Springfield, my (new) haircut, my (new) \$157.00 Bill Blass suit, and my pleasant, smiling disposition. They liked the M.A. only for the prestige it conferred upon their little library.

At Coventry I did such history-oriented projects as helping a student write a paper about the removal of the Cherokee Indians, and with a \$6000 book budget, "develop" the library's collection of American history and



American literature. I assure you: one would have to go a long way to find another library with the complete works of Jack Kerouac, for instance.

Then, at the age of thirty, I decided to get serious about my career as well as financial security. I drove up to Boston one Monday and consulted the job file in the Simmons College Placement Office. There were two likely positions. The public library in Richmond, Virginia had an opening in their History and Literature Division. (Many large public libraries and university libraries divide their collections and their staff into subject areas.) I applied there and was invited for an interview. My wife and I found Richmond both sophisticated and charming, a southern Boston, heavy with history, with several colleges and universities to enliven the atmosphere, and, apparently, inexpensive, but comfortable and convenient housing in a slightly shabbier version of D.C.'s Georgetown section. But I think I lost this job by insisting that I have two months to relocate.

Then I applied for the other likely position. And here I am at Western Connecticut State College's Ruth A. Haas Library. I was very happy to hook up with a "solvent" state such as Tom Meskill's Connecticut.

"Security," I thought, "you are mine..."