

Title of Session: Social Studies Forum - Ernie Pyle

Moderator: Michael Hutchison

Guest Speaker: Ray Boomhower

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MichaelH: Let's start our session... we normally have a few folks come a bit late

EmilyLS: sounds good to me

MichaelH: Welcome to tonight's Social Studies forum

MichaelH: As you might have noted from BJ's announcement, we are lucky to have Ray Boomhower, who is a senior editor for the Indiana Historical Society Press join us tonight

BJB2 cheers wildly!

BJB2: hi, Dennis. Welcome

DennisR: Hi!

BJB2: we're just starting introductions, Dennis

MichaelH: Ray has recently written a book called, "The Soldier's Friend: A Life of Ernie Pyle", and he's graciously agreed to discuss Ernie's life with us tonight, as well as his research and information about the book

MichaelH waves to Dennis

BJB2: very cool....welcome, Ray!

MichaelH: so, without further ado

RayBo: Glad to be here.

MichaelH: let's start with introductions... if everyone would like to take a moment and tell us who you are, where and what you teach...

BJB2: I teach communication in a small school in south central Pennsylvania

MichaelH is a social studies teacher in southwestern Indiana

EmilyLS: My name is Emily, I teach 3rd grade in a suburb of Pittsburgh

TharpBGst17: My name is Brian, I teach at McKeesport High School outside of Pittsburgh, PA, and I teach American and World History

MichaelH: BJ, we've got a lot of Pennsylvania people tonight...

BJB2 nods...I see that!

DennisR: My name is Dennis. I teach Civics & Economics to 7th graders and World Studies to 8th grade students at Montevideo Middle in Virginia.

MichaelH: I had a chance to hear Ray talk about Ernie and the book at our local public library back in May, and I thought he'd be a great guest for the Social Studies forum

MichaelH: Ray, I'll give you the floor to discuss Ernie in a second, but was there something specific about him or his life that especially interested you to write the book?

RayBo: Ernie has been a part of my life since my college days at Indiana University in Bloomington.

RayBo: I majored in journalism and spent much of my time in Ernie Pyle hall, going to classes and, as Ernie did, working on the Indiana Daily Student. He's always been a hero of mine.

RayBo: There was something about this small, quiet man that drew my attention. I marveled at how a kid from a small town in Indiana could become so famous and so admired.

MichaelH: Ernie would have been at IU around 1920, maybe a little before?

RayBo: He was born in August 1900 and started at IU in 1918. He wanted to serve in World War I like his friend, Thad Hooker, but the war ended before he could serve, so he went to IU. He made a good friend in Paige Cavanaugh, a WWI vet. The story goes that they decided to study journalism because the classes were the easiest on campus!

RayBo: He also had a mentor in the dean of men, Clarence Edmondson, who encouraged him in his goal of becoming a reporter.

MichaelH: But he didn't finish at IU... didn't he leave around the time of his senior year?

EmilyLS: Did his friend Thad survive WW I, and fight in WW II with him?

RayBo: Yes, during his senior year editors at the LaPorte Herald in northern Indiana came calling looking for a reporter. The folks in the journalism department recommended Ernie. He left before graduating, which was a big disappointment to his parents.

RayBo: Thad did survive WWI. I don't know if he served again in the next war.

TharpBGst17: I know that a college education was much less at that time, but wow, that must have been disappointing

MichaelH: for our friends from Pennsylvania.. LaPorte, Indiana was about an hour and a half or so East of Chicago :)

EmilyLS: It is interesting also, how the department condoned him leaving the program early

RayBo: It never seemed to bother Ernie. And in those days, a college degree was not a requirement if you wanted to be a reporter. Ernie had good experience from working on the Daily Student.

MichaelH: was that when he began writing his travelogue columns, Ray?

MichaelH: . o O (in LaPorte?)

TharpBGst17: I get that...my grandfather was a local reporter who never got a college degree

RayBo: He was at LaPorte only a short time before he took a job with a new Scripps-Howard newspaper in Washington, DC. He gained some fame as the paper's aviation columnist, then later traveled the country as a traveling correspondent, producing a column six days a week under the name "The Hoosier Vagabond."

DennisR: I believe this was at a time when only a small portion of the population graduated from high school.

RayBo: His column appeared in other Scripps-Howard newspapers around the country. It quickly became one of the most popular features in any newspaper that it appeared in.

EmilyLS: How did his family feel then when he went to Washington DC did their feelings of disappointment disappear?

RayBo: it was a fleeting disappointment. His parents were always proud of his achievements, as was his hometown, Dana, Indiana, which touted its favorite son whenever it had the chance.

MichaelH: Ray, was there something evident early on in his writing that made editors aware that he would be an outstanding correspondent?

MichaelH: I guess I am asking was there a particular story or series of stories that piqued the interest of Scripps-Howard?

RayBo: He was always careful to write engaging, lively copy. He served for a time as managing editor and tried to instill in his reporters the need to write naturally, to engage the reader. It's a lesson he always followed. There were times, however, when he did not think his writing was up to snuff. He had a bit of an inferiority complex, coming from such a small Hoosier town. His contemporaries always admired his writing, especially his WWII columns.

MichaelH: I can certainly understand that... even now, the WW II columns are so, well, readable

MichaelH: I don't think I've ever read any of his travelogue or other work, though

MichaelH: Was it his idea to go cover World War II, or did Scripps-Howard assign him the duty?

RayBo: Yes, what was a pleasant surprise for me is how well most of his columns from the war, and his days as a traveling correspondent, read so well today. He wrote his traveling correspondent columns during the Great Depression, and they were often filled with humorous, off-the-wall stuff that tried to entertain readers. He did do some serious reporting as well.

RayBo: When England and France entered the war with Germany, and England stood alone against the German blitz, Ernie convinced his editors to send him to England to report on the bombing. He had always wanted to see war and this was his chance.

EmilyLS: Was the company at all reluctant to send him?

TharpBGst17: When you were doing your research, did you spend more time investigating his life or his columns?

RayBo: These columns from England were an early hint as to his work when America entered the war. He did not talk to politicians and big-name figures, but average Englishmen to gain their views of what was happening.

RayBo: There are a number of collections of Ernie's columns from the war, from his days as a traveling correspondent, and even one from his aviation column days. I also went through his letters and other correspondence at the Ernie Pyle State Historic Site in Dana and the Lilly Library in Bloomington.

EmilyLS: He had interesting tactics...Not many (if any at all) reporters today try to interview citizens being effected by war

MichaelH: I was interested, though in how he really had a hard time psychologically toward the end of the European war, and that he didn't really want to go cover the Pacific... was there any one event that caused him to feel this way, or was it just the grind

of the war in total?

RayBo: He had one close call in Italy when a shell hit his room, but I believe it was not one incident, but the overall effect of seeing so many wounded and dead men.

DennisR: I've always wondered what possessed him to place himself, at his age, in harm's way like the twenty-something GIs?

TharpBGst17: I am extremely interested in the fact that he decided to report the war rather than fight in it

RayBo: yes, he was quite a bit older than the young GIs. I think he found his calling in telling their stories and how they reacted to the stress of combat.

EmilyLS: How did the GI's feel towards him reporting as opposed to fighting with them?

RayBo: He did not want to go to the Pacific, but felt he owed it to the sailors, marines, and soldiers there to tell their stories.

TharpBGst17: Was he able to hitch rides to get from place to place in the Pacific Theater?

RayBo: Ernie was the GIs favorite reporter. They were happy to have him tell their stories to the folks back home. Ernie shared their foxholes and their food and tried to do an accurate job, as best he could, on what combat was like.

DennisR: How did he manage to retain objectivity when so near the front lines? or did he?

RayBo: Ernie always identified with the average soldier and was their best spokesperson. he felt he owed it to them to tell their stories as fairly and accurately as possible.

TharpBGst17: that is really a great question Dennis

TharpBGst17: I would find that very difficult

RayBo: Ernie admired the average GI--the "mud rain wind and frost boys"--but also had a soft spot for such generals as Omar Bradley and Dwight Eisenhower. He had no use for old "blood and guts" George Patton, however.

EmilyLS: Did Ernie ever express his own personal feelings throughout his writing?

RayBo: yes, Ernie's column always had a personal touch. When he first left the fighting in North Africa and Italy for a break in the U.S., he admitted in his column that the grind of the war had taken a toll on him and he needed a rest. He also tried to explain how and why mistakes were made during the war, especially our early failures in North Africa.

MichaelH: Ray, I don't know if you mention this in the book, but what was Ernie's opinion of the film on his life, "The Story of GI Joe"?

TharpBGst17: I was just discussing North African involvement in WWII today

TharpBGst17: was he following Rommel?

RayBo: Unfortunately, the film came out after Ernie's death on Ie Shima. If you have not seen the film, I strongly recommend it. It stands the test of time as one of the better films about the GIs experience in the war.

DennisR: Did his pointing out mistakes of that campaign cause him problems with the censors?

MichaelH: it was on Turner Classic Movies about a year ago, and I burned it to DVD

TharpBGst17: is it his life story?

RayBo: Ernie always had good luck with the censors in North Africa and Europe. Because he reported mainly on the day-to-day activity of the soldier, they passed his columns without complaint. About the only time he had problems was with one column on shell shocked soldiers that they refused to pass.

RayBo: The movie is based on Ernie's columns and tells his story a little, but focuses mainly on a group of soldiers, including an office (played by Robert Mitchum) based on Ernie's famous "Death of Captain Waskow" column.

RayBo: Burgess Meredith plays Ernie, but Mitchum steals the show.

MichaelH: Ray, I wondered if you felt "The War" did Ernie justice...or do you feel they should have used more of his columns and writings in the narration?

EmilyLS: So Ernie's articles were not only published in the United States but also in North Africa and Europe?

RayBo: Unfortunately, I was on vacation and missed the program. I plan on getting it on DVD and seeing how they treated Ernie.

RayBo: Ernie's articles were published in the U.S. and servicemen could see them in the army's paper, "Stars and Stripes."

MichaelH: they mention him and quote him a few times, but they focus on Minnesota journalist Al McIntosh for most of the show

TharpBGst17: Do you use a lot of his actual columns in your book or did you use them

more for your personal research?

RayBo: Probably because they thought Ernie had been overdone.

RayBo: The book does have an appendix with some selected Ernie columns. Ones that I thought captured his best writing. I also quote from them throughout the book. There's a lot of biographical information in his early traveling correspondent columns.

MichaelH: Ray, what do you think Ernie would have done if he had survived the war... would he have made the jump to television, or maybe would he have retired?

RayBo: If you see a picture of Ernie, he probably would not have made the jump to television. I don't see him moving to management at Scripps-Howard. I think he would have kept writing in some capacity. Who knows? If he had survived WWII, he might have faced a lot of pressure to go to Korea to report on the fighting there. Knowing Ernie, he might have gone and been killed on some lonely hill there.

EmilyLS: How was Ernie Killed?

RayBo: He had gone to report on the last great campaign of the Pacific war, the Battle of Okinawa. There is a small island west of Okinawa, called Ie Shima. He was with a group of soldiers from the 77th Infantry Division who had gone ahead to scout for a new command post. The group came under fire, scrambled off their jeeps for cover in ditches by the side of the road. Ernie raised his head to see if everyone was OK when the Japanese soldier fired, hitting him in the head and killing him instantly.

RayBo: There's a famous photo of a sign the 77th put up where Ernie died, indicating that they had "lost a buddy."

TharpBGst17: as a reporter, would he have ever carried a weapon?

MichaelH: Ray, I wondered if you saw the "History Detectives" episode where someone said they had Ernie's last typewriter?

EmilyLS: Did any other soldiers die at the same moment/place as Ernie, or was he the only casualty?

RayBo: No, as an accredited war correspondent he would not have carried any weapons. Just his notebook and a portable typewriter. Ernie would go up with a group of men, or visit an airfield for some time, and then come back behind the lines to write his columns.

RayBo: Ernie was the only casualty in the group he was with.

RayBo: I did not see the program, but have heard about it. I do know that the IU School of Journalism has on display one of Ernie typewriters.

MichaelH: I've never been to Dana, Ray... is there a lot at the historic site on Ernie

RayBo: The site does have a lot of material on Ernie. It also does a good job on outlining his WWII experience in exhibits in some old Quonset huts near the home.

TharpBGst17: this is truly interesting

RayBo: Thanks!

MichaelH: Ray, before I forget...

MichaelH: you might like to give everyone information about how to buy the book

TharpBGst17: please do

RayBo: The book is available from the Indiana Historical Society's History Market, by calling [\(800\) 447-1830](tel:8004471830), or via the usual online sources such as Amazon.com. It costs \$17.95 and is heavily illustrated with a bibliography and index.

MichaelH: I'm looking for the book on the website, Ray... is there a link in the History Market website?

EmilyLS: When you wrote the book, were you able to interview anyone?

RayBo: yes, go to www.indianahistory.org

MichaelH: found it... go to <http://shop.indianahistory.org/index.html?lang=en-us&target=d40.html>, and scroll down. the order number is 6867

TharpBGst17: for a historical book like this, what type of promotion is involved? book signings?

RayBo: Instead of interviews, I depended on Ernie's correspondence, his columns, and other books on his life.

TharpBGst17: the reason I ask is because I have often thought about writing a book like this

EmilyLS: good for you Brian!

TharpBGst17: Thanks Em

EmilyLS: What area of history would you like to write about?

RayBo: The book is part of the IHS press's youth biography series, which is aimed at middle school to high school students. Previous books in the series have focused on Lew

Wallace and Mother Theodore Guerin. We've found that adults appreciate these concise biographies as well.

MichaelH: Ray, you've written several other books as well, right?

TharpBGst17: I am really interested in the Cold War era

RayBo: yes, mainly biographies on Indiana figures. I wrote the Lew Wallace youth biography and also a biography of Hoosier astronaut Gus Grissom.

MichaelH wonders if Ray's thought about writing a book on Gil Hodges?

RayBo: Gil is one of the figures that someone needs to do a biography on. We've featured him in Traces magazine in the past, but he would be a great subject for a youth biography.

MichaelH: last time I was at the IHS, I bought some back issue copies of the "Traces" magazine that included the story on Gil.

MichaelH: I may have mentioned... my wife's father coached Gil (in track and field) while Gil was a high school student

RayBo: He must have some great stories about Gil.

MichaelH: He did. Everything I ever heard about Gil was that he was a wonderful man

MichaelH: Gil mentioned Suzie's dad in a story they did on Gil in the Saturday Evening Post

RayBo: Yes, there doesn't seem to be any dirt on him.

EmilyLS: So Michael that may be an interesting project for you to take up: Writing a biography!

MichaelH: I just remember him as manager of the Mets... I was a little too young to remember him with the Dodgers

MichaelH: Oh, gosh, Emily.. I've got enough going on :)

RayBo: yes, he was the manager of the Miracle Mets. the 1969 team that broke the hearts of us Cubs fans!

MichaelH: I'm working with the IHS on doing a series of lessons on their collection on World War II

MichaelH: Ron Santo STILL can't get over the '69 Mets

RayBo: I believe our education department just finished some lesson plans based on the Pyle book that should be on our web site soon (I hope!)

MichaelH: That's great, Ray. I'll share the URL with everyone once the lessons are up

RayBo: I'll make sure to let you know when that happens.

MichaelH: We've probably taken up enough of Ray's time, but Ray, I hope you'll come back for another session sometime

RayBo: I certainly will. It's been great!

MichaelH: I'd especially like to hear about your research on Gus Grissom

MichaelH: Thanks everyone for joining us for our session.

RayBo: Glad to share his life with you and others.

MichaelH: Anyone with any last questions or comments for Ray before we give him the rest of the night off?

TharpBGst17: this has been very informative...thanks so much

MichaelH: Ray, thanks again for joining us. I'll get with you about another session if you have time to join us.

RayBo: glad you enjoyed it.

EmilyLS: Thank you so much Ray

RayBo: Looking forward to it.

MichaelH: And, thanks Emily and Brian for joining us tonight

TharpBGst17: it's been a pleasure

MichaelH: Ray, you'll get a transcript of the session on logout, feel free to use it any way you would like

RayBo: Thanks!

MichaelH waves goodnight for now

EmilyLS: Talk to you all later....Thanks for making my first time on Tapped In so enjoyable and interesting!