

Small conferences

Fertile ground for generating ideas



Wendy Swanberg of the University of Wisconsin at Madison receiving from UT Chattanooga Chancellor Roger Brown a certificate recognizing Swanberg's "Outstanding Student Paper."

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We're moving into the "paper-deadline" season for journalism historians, and no doubt, *Clio* readers are starting to think about which papers are going to be ready this spring and where to send them. Like all of you, I'm considering the usual suspects, which for me includes a small conference held annually exactly in my area of speciality, the Symposium on the 19th Century Press, Civil War, and Freedom of Information. Maybe there are more of those small, intimate, specialized-topic conferences out there, but it seems to me that their numbers are limited, and that's too bad.

Special topic conferences like the one I go to are generally fertile ground for generating ideas among scholars who work on closely related topics, and they are also good training grounds for graduate students. At least, that's been my experience at the 19th Century Press

symposium which is sponsored by the West Chair of Excellence at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

I started attending that conference about a decade ago as a second-year Ph.D. student. My first presentation there was my second scholarly presentation ever. Even before the conference began, people who had been

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active in setting it up were reaching out to make me feel welcome. Barbara Strauss Reed from Rutgers, knowing graduate students are always short on money, e-mailed me several weeks be-

fore the conference to offer to share her room. Hazel Dicken-Garcia from Minnesota made it a point to compliment me on my paper, despite the roughness of my presentation style and the very obvious flaws in my untutored writing and research.

To have two noted senior historians take such a personal interest in a green graduate student was a heady experience, but that's the beauty of such specialized conferences. With usually fewer than 50 people attending, it's possible to talk about ideas with the luminaries in the field, and to get to know them as something more than names on journal pages. That encourages young scholars to stretch themselves, and sometimes, they, in turn, can teach the more established researchers a thing or two, too.

Plus, there's nothing like finding a colleague who actually WANTS to talk about the suppression of Democratic newspapers by Republican authorities in the North or how John Mosby was portrayed in that old TV show you remember from childhood, "The Gray Ghosts," or the effects of co-operationist editors on Mississippi's decision to secede in 1861.

Probably the most important outcome of this conference is the way it's stimulated interest in the 19th century press. Attendance has grown

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Braving unseasonably chilly temperatures and a brisk breeze, symposium participants hear United States Park Service Historian Jim Ogden explain the battle for Missionary Ridge from Orchard Knob, the site of General Grant's battlefield headquarters.

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each year, and the papers continue to be good. Further, the entrepreneurial conference organizers, David Sachman, West Chair of Excellence in UT-Chattanooga's Communication's Department, and Kit Rushing, chair of that department, have developed a cottage industry in publishing books of readings based on conference papers.

The first one, *The Civil War and the Press*, was published in 2000 by Transaction Publishers. Two new books are to be published by Purdue University Press in the next couple of years.

That, ultimately, is the value of smaller conferences: they stimulate productive, important scholarship in niche areas that might not get a lot of attention at the larger conferences.

Just think about what we might know about the history of the African-American press, women journalists, alternative or community newspapers, the wire services, religious journalism, or the evolution of professional ethics if a handful of us got together each to share what we know!

If you'd like to know more about the annual Symposium on the 19th Century Press, Civil War, and Freedom of Expression, check out its web site: <http://www.utc.edu/Academic/Communication/conference/index.php>

*Photographs by Kit Rushing
University of Tennessee-Chattanooga*

Save the date

The History Division members' meeting at the AEJMC convention in Washington, D.C., will be convened at

7 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 11

The meeting agenda will feature recognition of authors of the convention's top faculty and student history papers. Please plan to attend.