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ECU History Professor, Chair Engages Public in Weekly Civil War Podcast

GREENVILLE, N.C. (Dec. 9, 2013) — For nearly 10 years, Dr. Gerald J. Prokopowicz, professor and chair of the Department of History at East Carolina University, has been engaging a worldwide audience through a weekly podcast about topics pertaining to the Civil War. Produced by Internet radio station Voice America, “Civil War Talk Radio,” airs live every Wednesday at 7 p.m. EST on www.voiceamerica.com/show/2205/civil-war-talk-radio. Each episode is recorded directly from Prokopowicz’s office on the third floor of the Brewster building in Greenville, N.C.

“Initially the idea was that Internet radio would be the next big thing, and they wanted content for their shows. So someone at the station came up with the idea about a show on the Civil War,” said Prokopowicz. “They found someone to host the first four episodes, and for the fifth one, I was contacted in October 2004. So I did one. Then I did the next one. Then I did the next 210, or so, in a row.”

Each week, Prokopowicz and a guest discuss various aspects of Civil War history. He says the show forces him to keep current on recent publications about the Civil War. He reads nearly one book a week, or approximately 40 books a year, with short breaks during the summer.

“One of the strengths of the show is that it’s aimed at a knowledgeable audience,” said Prokopowicz. “If we do a show on the Battle of Gettysburg, I feel free asking the guest, ‘What is your position on the controversy of General Sickles and the Third Corps on July 2?’ without telling the audience what that controversy was; I assume they already know. I think that is the appeal, that it assumes the listener is well informed, or can become well informed by reading up on the topic.”

Prokopowicz gives the audience a chance to hear from expert authors, musicians, artists, preservationists and other people in fields connected to the Civil War, and he has an informal rule not to have someone on the show more frequently than once every five years. Out of 200+ ‘Who’s Who’ on the Civil War, a lot of people have been on the show. Past guests have included well-known historians James McPherson, Doris Kearns Goodwin and Gary Gallagher, as well as artist Don Troiani and filmmaker Ken Burns.

Another strong point of the show, according to Prokopowicz is that it is just an informal conversation. He has an hour with his guest, and there is no prepared list of questions. He has taken the time to read the book the author has written, or listen to the music the artist has composed, and he goes from there.
“I learned from the old Siskel and Ebert movie review show,” said Prokopowicz. “I met Gene Siskel once in Chicago. He recorded a piece for a museum I worked in at the time, and he talked about how the secret of their show was that there are three people – the two reviewers and the audience – and they form a triangle. They’d look at the camera and address you, the viewer, and it was a 3-way conversation, although that was invisible to the viewer. They made you the third actor in their conversation without you knowing it. That’s the lesson I’ve tried to take for this podcast – that there are three of us there – the author, the listener, and myself. And I’ll occasionally address the listener directly to make clear they are here too. There’d be no show if they weren’t there listening.”

In addition, Prokopowicz receives a fair amount of email from people who say they didn’t know much about the War, but that they have learned a lot by listening to the show. Some people have playfully complained that they’ve spent too much money on books after listening to the show, because they have to buy that week’s book and read it.

“I wanted to write a short note and thank you for the time you have devoted to Civil War Talk Radio,” emailed one listener. “I found the podcast by happenstance back in February this year and have since listened to every show. You have mentioned in a few shows in the past that your podcast isn’t something people who have little knowledge in the Civil War will probably listen to, but I am one of those who had very little memory of my history classes way back in elementary school. So I have learned a lot from your show and the authors whose books I’ve purchased as a result.”

Around the time Civil War Talk Radio was established, the word podcast was just being coined. And although this was not the way the show was initially envisioned, it is how the show has become popular; with listeners downloading episodes after they have aired, sometimes years later. Additionally, it has proven a useful way to engage a broad audience, not only at ECU, but also beyond Greenville, the state of North Carolina and the U.S.

In his public history courses at ECU, Prokopowicz points out the podcasts to his students as a new way to communicate history to the public. And the show has spawned a following. One individual has generated a Facebook page dedicated to the show. Another fan has created a website (www.impedimentsofwar.org) where visitors will find links to current and archived episodes, more information on the authors’ books discussed on the show, and even a way to donate to a fund for Prokopowicz to purchase new books to read and use for future interviews.

These sites create another level of engagement with Prokopowicz’s audience, in addition to the email communication he often receives.

“I'm a big fan of Civil War Talk Radio. So first of all please accept my thanks and appreciation for your excellent show,” emailed one listener. “Your program makes me feel like I'm part of the larger Civil War community. It's always a happy day when iTunes delivers a new show!”

Another listener wrote, “As I listen to the latest Civil War Talk Radio broadcast with Tom Vossler, I am compelled to write an email that I have been meaning to send for quite some time. I am an 8th grade US history teacher at University School of Milwaukee in Wisconsin, a Michigan native and a Civil War enthusiast. My Civil War unit is the highlight of my year (for my students and myself), and I must say that your podcasts have made a huge difference in my instruction. I listen to your podcasts consistently, and they give me an amazing breadth of knowledge about and appreciation for the Civil War. My students instantly sense this affinity for Civil War studies and, as a result, dive into it themselves. So, the first part of my email is to simply say … thank you.”

In corresponding back with this history teacher, Prokopowicz has discussed doing a show on teaching in high school, and he says he will probably have this teacher on the show next season.

In discussing how long Prokopowicz will continue to produce the show, he said there really was never a plan, but he will do them as long as it is interesting.

“The show is generally interesting to me because every week I learn something. There’s no shortage of people with interesting stories.”
Prokopowicz received his undergraduate and law degrees from the University of Michigan. He practiced law in Chicago for several years before returning to academia and completing a PhD from Harvard University. As a professor of public history at ECU, Prokopowicz is dedicated to training students to practice history outside of academia, and to removing the artificial barriers that divide academic historians from public historians and from the public itself.

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