

The Visitor from another World
Scholars' Symposium, April 25, 2007

I'm pleased to participate in this relatively new academic tradition and to tell a few stories about the kinds of scholarship with which I've been involved. For me, scholarship is research, and my research is the kind that leads to stories that can be told on a stage or on a screen.

Like all research, mine is designed to be an avenue of discovery, a pathway to ideas and facts and feelings that might be translated into glimpses of truth about particular times and places, and I hope about our collective lives on this planet. Whether the final story is fiction or documentary, research is always the foundation. And that research is a passport to worlds other than the familiar one in which I live. I become the alien, the visitor from another world, an invited visitor in the best cases, with heightened senses that are always the primary benefit of travel.

The visits themselves occur in different places: sometimes in conversations in living rooms, campsites, kitchens or taverns; sometimes second-hand encounters in books, old newspapers, letters, and photographs in archives and personal collections; and sometimes in the way a sunrise illuminates forsythia, or the way wind whistles through a stand of pines.

So in our short time together today, I'll guide you on a tour of a few of the places I've visited, and the stories I made with what I learned there.

Not long after I'd moved to Bridgeport, CT, in the mid-seventies, I heard of a German immigrant who—it was said—had flown a powered aircraft in 1901—two years before the famous Kitty Hawk flight of the Wright Brothers. Local folklore no doubt, but

Gustave Whitehead was still there, buried in 1927 in a pauper's grave—but with an inscription that stated he had been officially declared the father of CT aviation in 1929.

Research is the safest form of time-travel and I packed for a trip to 1900 Bridgeport. The initial source was an out-of-print account of Whitehead's first-in-flight achievement. Its elderly author, then living in N.C., agreed to an interview. The story of Whitehead is this: In 1901 he flew his Model 21 aircraft on a controlled flight along the shore of Long Island Sound. There were several eye-witnesses. Accounts of the flight were published in newspapers, including a New York City daily and the prominent *Scientific American*. In fact, from 1903 until 1908, that journal referred to several powered flights by Whitehead.

But although the first flight was reported by eye witnesses to be considerably longer than the Wrights' flight two years later (over a half mile), the evidence was circumstantial because there was no photographic proof. While there are references to a blurry photo, it was never published, and never found. Instead, the articles included only artists' sketches of the plane in flight. Numerous photos exist of the aeronaut posing with his flying machine—on the ground.

I read the original articles and the transcripts of six eye-witnesses who were tracked down in the 1970s. Because of their advanced age, these men were considered to be unreliable. Then a 1948 contract was made public that documented that the Smithsonian Institution had bought the Wright airplane for \$1. in return for a pledge never to remove it from prominent display and never to “publish or permit to be displayed a statement about an earlier aircraft that would claim to have been capable of carrying a man under its own power in controlled flight.” The only thing I knew for sure

was that while it could have happened, history would be unlikely to recognize Whitehead's achievement. And so I determined to write a play about an imaginative, unproven flight—that I came to believe was based on a real one. It would be the story of an unrecognized, visionary inventor, who was impractical and ill equipped to cope with the quickly rising velocity of turn-of-the-century America. And because my completed stage production was to include projected photographs designed to capture the feeling of 1900 Bridgeport, my students and I visited libraries and historical societies—both in CT and NYC—visiting the world of the unknown aviator Gustave Whitehead.

Two footnotes: (1) In December, 1986, a local aviation group (the Whitehead Ultralight Club) built a reproduction of Model 21, based on old photos and print descriptions, it was made of piano wire, bamboo, Japanese silk, and spruce planking. It flew. (2) And so did my play, called *Windcrossing*. Colleague Chris Campbell and I adapted my play to the screen; it was produced and broadcast on CT public television.

Some years later, I was then living in Newtown, CT, I became fascinated with a single paragraph in a local history book. And this time there were no eye-witnesses at all. The paragraph stated that in the late 1850s, a local Negro farmer named James Purdy had assisted slaves to escape to Canada. The Underground Railroad operator had also assisted local white farmers during a smallpox epidemic. And finally, Purdy could read and write. I could find no additional information. Clearly not a suitable subject for a documentary, but seeds of a good story anyway. This would require a visit to mid-century Newtown, Connecticut, just before the Civil War. While I'd find nothing on Purdy himself, I could discover through books and interviews with historians how people lived: what they read and thought, did they know about *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, what their

houses looked like, what they ate, what kind of music they listened to, where they congregated, how they got there, and what they wore. What were their attitudes toward slavery, and the black race. What was the effect of the smallpox epidemic of 1859? Slowly I became more comfortable in Purdy's world, and I was able to develop fictional characters and a plot that would become a movie titled *Purdy's Station*, what I hoped was a story of courage and cowardice, and the cost of doing the right thing. (Or at least what I consider is the right thing.)

And when we produced the movie, we continued the visit to Purdy's world by selecting shooting locations in a church and a one-room schoolhouse that were both built before 1850. *Purdy's Station* too was broadcast on public television.

More recently in both time and space, I wrote a stage play set at Colby Junior College for Women in the early 1940s. It's about three roommates who struggle to find friendship, individual freedom, and their places in a world at war. Based on the assumption that fiction can tell truth at least as well—and often better—than non-fiction, my plan was to create fictional characters informed by historical record; to develop a set of experiences that would accurately reflect the cultural and social background of the early 40s. So while the story would be fictional, I felt it essential to create an authentic background, as true as possible to the time and place. To prepare to tell this story, I visited the world of New London in the early 1940s, but in this instance, time travel was much easier because I had a host of willing, able witnesses and a college archive full of relevant materials such as yearbooks, literary magazines, campus and local newspapers, memory books, student handbooks, period photographs, and speeches of President H. Leslie Sawyer. I interviewed six women—then in their mid-seventies—who were

students here in the early 40s. (One was Mary Teach, mother of Nancy Teach.) Several times I interviewed a 1941 faculty member who went to World War II, then returned years later to become president of this college: Everett Woodman.

Some of the facts I learned during the research lent themselves to my fictional structure better than I could have imagined. For example, this small, rural NH village had black-out drills and the college community, including the students, joined the local citizens to man spotting towers, scanning the sky for German planes that—according the U.S. military—were supposedly on a bombing raid at a major arsenal near Albany, NY. Or that First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt drove herself to this small campus to give a speech about women’s roles in the war effort. Or that in the evenings before mandatory lights-out at 11 p.m., the students rolled bandages for the American soldiers overseas. Or that no students were allowed to leave campus one Thanksgiving because the country was rationing gasoline and rubber for the war effort. Or that the students traditionally rose from their seats out of respect when a professor entered the classroom.

The production of the play itself allowed opportunities for additional research. I asked my production students to produce three video sequences that would be projected on stage as part of the performance. The first depicted a chapel service that occurred shortly after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor; the second, a traditional induction service of the student government officers, involving a horse-drawn coach; and the third, a fictional automobile excursion that the protagonists take to Mt. Kearsarge on the Thanksgiving they’re not allowed to go home.

The costumes, the cars, and the college traditions were researched and realized. So were historical radio broadcasts, such as FDR’s “Day of Infamy” speech and Edward

R. Murrow's wartime reports from London. And numerous selections of popular music, ostensibly being played on the radio (the sole source of electronic communication) and on the victrola. In terms of recorded music, we attempted to find vinyl, rather than tape or CDs, in order to reproduce the period sound of needle on records.

The research stage involved locating the media in local archives, in national repositories (for example, the University of Memphis Radio Program Archives, New York's Museum of Broadcasting), and numerous catalogs and internet sources. When this research process works—for me or my students—it extends beyond the local to the universal, with circles of understanding rippling out from the specific culture under study to a general understanding of the human experience.

Research is a necessary preparation of storytelling, but more than that, too. Research can lead to discovery—a sense of being the first to see something in a particular way, and the impulse to share that with others and as an alien visitor, traveling in both time and space, I'm able to renew a sense of awe and surprise—and to have a clearer idea of where I am on this planet.

And there's something else. In the morning as I walk onto campus, I see you students with cell phones and ipods, heading to classes in subjects like environmental science. And walking with you are the students of 1942, in skirts and white blouses, going to their classes in subjects like secretarial science. I know that President Galligan is in his office, and President Sawyer is in there too. They're having coffee and talking about—but that's another story.

Thank you again for listening to my travels. I hope that yours are wide, deep, and frequent.