

Ralph A. Wooster: A Retrospective of a Gentleman Scholar

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That Ralph Ancil Wooster would become a historian seems in retrospect an inevitable progression. Determination, self discipline and curiosity were evident early on in his character. There were hints of intellectual gifts and an ability to grasp significant concepts at an early age. His saturnine qualities of caution and pragmatism would later place him under the guidance of the precise Barnes F. Lathrop. On the other hand, his quick spirit and vision would make the expansive Walter P. Webb a recurrent and vital influence on his life and career. Professors Lathrop and Webb served together at the University of Texas in Austin, for two generations. Ralph Ancil Wooster is one of their

descendants. In looking at the life of Dr. Wooster it is possible to understand the man as individual and scholar by using Lathrop and Webb and their salient characteristics as guidons.

Certainly Wooster is his own man, and a synthesis of the fine educators and historians he has known. He has been a foundation of Lamar University at Beaumont, Texas, since 1955. He is the father of a gifted 19th century historian and the fortunate husband of Edna Jones Wooster. Professor Wooster appears as if he has always been a scholar filled with lively ideas and a desire to educate. Wooster's ability to walk among the generations, to appear only as himself without airs or attitude speaks volumes about the man and why

there are now hundreds, perhaps thousands, who know him fondly. The extent of his scholarship may not be known to his students. They may not know what labors he went through to educate himself. What they do know is that he is a gentleman with genuine concern for them and their education. He has a code of "personal honor"¹ and a "moral integrity"² that can make a student optimistic about learning something remarkable from him. He is a man who will not be pushed and people sense this quickly.

Lathrop might ask, "Who were your people and where did they come from; exactly what have you done?" and Webb might ask, "What was the environment you grew up in, what places did you live, and what did you do to adapt to a changing world; how did that make you who you are?"

April 9, 1865 late at night near Robert E. Lee's tent:

.....through the darkness came a voice and a scrap of doggerel.....

*"The race is not to them that's got the longest legs to run
Nor the battle to that people that shoots the biggest gun."*

The intonation was unmistakable, and the words were familiar in the army as part of the so-called "Texas Bible."³

Ralph Ancil Wooster was born at home in November, 1928, on Market

Street in Wooster, Texas, close enough to the San Jacinto battlefield to hold a boy's imagination in stolen hours. A Texan to the bone, his ancestry included a Mayflower passenger and a militia man in Iowa at the time of the Civil War. The Woosters settled their community in Texas through the pioneering of Quincy Adams Wooster of the Northeast and the Midwest.⁴ The land was included in one of the grants to impresario Stephen F. Austin on Scotts Bay, near present-day Houston. In 1891, Quincy Adams Wooster began a town that struggled to survive. It gained and lost a rail stop on the Beaumont, Sour Lake, and Western Railway. It had its own post office for a time. The Wooster Baptist Church became the center of the rural town where people like John, Ralph's father, could make a modest living. John Wooster operated a filling and service station for Humble Oil.⁵ The Woosters of the 1930s formed a network of uncles and aunts for Ralph, who calmly accepted the divorce and subsequent remarriage of both parents. He lived with his father on Weaver Street but always had good relations with his mother.

In an atmosphere of peace and work and the Wooster Baptist Church, Ralph studied, especially his hero Robert E. Lee. For a while he seriously considered becoming a preacher, but he never heard the call. Ralph explored the qualities of integrity, self control and denial, loyalty and honor through Lee, qualities that were reinforced by his father and his church. He was not interested in the art of war although he did play 'The Battle of Sabine Pass' with other children, sometimes defeating a thousand Yankees with a handful of Con-



The young Dr. Ralph Wooster in a characteristic pose, debating his colleagues on the nuances of Civil War history.

PHOTO BY RONALD C. ELLISOR, COURTESY OF THE WOOSTER FAMILY

federates.⁶ Ralph was fascinated not by the soldier that was Lee but the man and spirit, his dignity and tragedy. War was not something Ralph wished to experience. The military was not something to which he aspired.

A man of great character who was pivotal in the history of the world also affected young Ralph. Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke to America as if he spoke to each American individually. Wooster recalled an occasion in which he heard the President speak at the dedication of the San Jacinto Monument.

Even though I was way in the back I could see him. He was still talking about the Depression, these things that we

needed to do and he wanted to enlist our help. I was convinced, "Yes, I'm going to help you." You know, I was just a kid and I didn't know what he was talking about, but he very much impressed me, he surely did.⁷

In "Rather Than by Means of War," the speech he gave at the San Jacinto Battleground, President Roosevelt dedicated the monument with a heartfelt history lesson on Texas and the "cradle of Texas liberty." What young Ralph said, "Yes" to was this:

Men fought here for principles they loved more dearly than their own lives. Liberty-loving people will always do battle for principles that they believe to be

right. Civilization, alas has not yet made it unnecessary for men to die in battle to sustain principle. It is, however, my hope that in this generation the United States, by its own example, can maintain and help to maintain principle by means of peace rather than by means of war.⁸

Ralph Wooster, at the age of eight, could grasp and digest this message.

father's filling station and with the family animals. John Wooster believed in having one of every kind of hoofed beast. The immediate Wooster clan lived in homes close together and shaped a kind of compound where they could keep their connection to the solid ground of Texas. Ralph even had a pet alligator.

Ralph played sports; "I was one of those kids who was small and yet slow." He was an avid reader, and at fourteen he consumed adult histories that included

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Along with Lee, Roosevelt would move young Ralph through the rest of the Depression and the war years. The aspects of his character so notable in later life were planted by two men of peace who, when they saw it necessary, would stand at the gates of hell for principle.

While the country struggled to lift itself from the Depression, Texas oil represented hope and prosperity to many. In Wooster the Depression was soft and in 1939, Humble Oil and Refining Company set up a major processing center nearby.⁹ There was more employment than a kid needed but, Wooster worked mostly at his

books and biographies on Robert E. Lee. John Wooster was not a reader; he was a quiet man, and one that even during the hardest of times would make road trips into the interior of the country and once, in 1936, into Mexico. John's need to see America was passed along to his son. As so many parents scorched by the Great Depression, Ralph's people preached the gospel of education, the best defense against hard times. Ralph picked up that ball and ran with it far beyond what his parents or relatives ever imagined.¹⁰

John and Ralph served the homefront during World War II. They participated in

rationing and recycling. John was an Air Raid Warden, and Ralph, who was agile on a bicycle, was the messenger during air raid drills. The economy flourished on wartime petroleum and chemicals. Ralph had books, pocket money and meaningful work. He paid close attention to the war's progress on the radio. His love for athletics led him to the Robert E. Lee High School paper where he became the sports editor. He dreamed of being a journalist and a sports writer.

..... *The Heart of Texas.....*
(comes from Oklahoma)

In 1944, a new girl moved to town, into a house on Weaver Street. She began to attend the Wooster Baptist Church where the Wooster clan were members. Her family had come away from Oklahoma and the Depression to make good. Edna Jones was a year older than Ralph. She had no intentions, but Ralph did. His determination knew no bounds. He had to be in the thick of things, no matter what it was. If he wanted to be part of something then he took the lead. If he wanted something, he was very persistent; he never gave up. It is said that even before Edna knew who Ralph really was, he had told a friend that he was going to marry her. He was eighteen and she nineteen when they married in 1947.¹¹

Ralph had not determined what he was going to do with his life, but he knew it was going to involve college. Nearby in Baytown was Lee College, a two year school that was then called a "junior college." Fortunately, Edna had finished her business training in Houston and began

working at a Goose Creek bank. John Wooster built for them a tiny house on Weaver Street. It was especially small because so soon after the war it was very difficult to get materials. Ralph continued at his father's filling station and studied to be a journalist.

Edna shared the dream of college as all in her family did. She would wait her turn and see what happened. Modestly, Ralph began to explore what was to become his real trade, teaching, at Lee College with Mr. James C. Chamberlain. As a young man Ralph saw that good teaching required great preparation and a method of delivery that made a student feel full by the end of the class. Ralph believed he would take advantage of the new Gilmer-Aiken act that established a minimum foundation for public education. He would make a living as a school teacher. The dream of being a journalist faded as Ralph came to understand the life-style required of a newspaperman. As an educator he could provide a reliable income and enjoy regular hours. His heart was set on the University of Texas at Austin. The more the Woosters considered living separately, she working in Baytown and he in Austin, the less they liked it. Opportunity held hard choices. They bought an old 1936 Ford, and Ralph drove it daily to the University of Houston. They would not be separated.

Wooster had a few history credits transferred to the University of Houston. The University, at that time a relatively small private institution, had a less than sterling reputation. It did have some very fine history teachers. Professor C.K. Ransom taught "The West" and introduced Ralph to the world of Frederick Jackson

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Turner. Professor Ernest Shearer stepped in and became Ralph's mentor at the University. He taught Mexican and Texas History. He also recognized that Ralph had great potential. At the University of Houston, Ralph gathered his foundations for teaching, not through the required education classes that he considered a waste of time, but by watching Professor Shearer and remembering Mr. Chamberlain's inspired teaching. Ralph disliked the seminar-discussion format where, "you just sat around and shot the bull."¹² Wooster would teach as Spencer Tracy acted, straightforward, honest, and compelling.

.....Hell-bent for Leather.....

While Ralph used his energy and stamina to complete his studies, he worked a regular job with his father. He was also compelled from the inside to always be early, to meet every deadline, to always take on more. The down side of this activity level was that Ralph spent very little time reflecting or savoring his successes. Ralph received his bachelor's degree. He was in a hurry when he decided to pursue his master's. There was work to be found in the fall. He took 18 hours in the spring, 12 in the summer. He wrote his thesis on Sam Houston and received his master's

degree in August of 1950, nine months from start to finish.

None of the Woosters had ever been to college. Ralph knew nothing of a doctorate, except his professors at Houston had them. Professor Shearer told Ralph he had to go on and get one. Ralph questioned his judgment, "You know, you got to be a genius to have a Ph.D."¹³ Professor Shearer assured him that hard work and a willingness to do anything asked was all Ralph needed. Edna threw in her support. She would work their way through the doctorate at the University of Texas at Austin. Together they formed a team that fulfilled the dreams of their parents and resulted in accomplishments beyond their expectations.

History caught up to the young historian as the United States reinstated the draft during the Korean War. Wooster went to his local board to ask for a deferment of three years. The university catalog seemed to suggest that a three-year doctorate was possible, and Ralph expected it to be accurate. The draft board gave him exactly three years.

At 108 East Fourteenth Street in Austin, Edna set up house in a rented apartment near the university and capitol. Fred Hartman, a newspaper publisher from Baytown helped Edna find work with

Harris County State Senator Bracewell and the State Insurance Commission. She battled heat, laundry, ironing and the constant dust from the gravel road below their apartment. Almost nightly she and Ralph went to the movies. That was his time to rest his mind. They saw everything, but Ralph particularly loved musical comedies. On weekends Ralph studied. They took Sunday drives to keep the car battery charged and occasionally they would travel to Brenham to see John Wooster who lived his "retirement" dream of running a small dairy farm. Ralph and Edna did not join the local Baptist church in Austin. Here Ralph began a cyclical pattern of church membership. Nothing was allowed to get in the way of his studies. He quickly became a teaching fellow and continued to press forward with the three year deadline in mind.¹⁴

.....*A Tale of Two Texans and a Man From Harvard*.....

The world of the University of Texas at Austin held new opportunities for Wooster. He quickly came to understand the inner workings of the history department. Eugene C. Barker had been the cornerstone of the department but was in semi-retirement when Ralph arrived. Replacing Barker as a Professor of American History was Fulmer Mood, who had been a student of Frederick Jackson Turner. He had learned from Turner not only the seminal "Frontier Thesis" but the ins and outs of collective biography. Mood was interested in the early American period, especially the Confederation years. Ralph took the course on the Con-

federation and a seminar on the Jackson era. He caught the eye of Mood and was offered a research assistantship. Opportunity arose, and Ralph grabbed it. Mood intended to examine the early United States congress in a similar manner to the revolutionary work of Charles Beard in his *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913). Ralph was to do all the spade work on who exactly those members of congress were.

Once a graduate student is fortunate enough to find a mentor, one is ill advised to change horses, but fate would have its way. Fulmer Mood was an unstable personality, brilliant and a Harvard graduate. He began demonstrating irregular behavior and soon had to take a leave of absence. Mood's mental illness freed Wooster to find his true mentor and lifelong friend.¹⁵

Ralph knew his interest in history belonged to America of the 19th century and while he was uncertain about the era he would specialize in, he could not deny his interest in military history. However, between the world wars, American culture and historical scholarship shied away from military history. In teaching about American wars there was an emphasis on economic and cultural factors, not the campaigns and the strategies. Military history would not make a career.

In the post war period and into the 1950's, cliometrics, or the application of quantification to historical investigation, was just in its infancy. At the front of this movement was Barnes F. Lathrop. The United States had been conducting a census since 1790. Lathrop recognized the value of such detailed material. The census records had been a resource for genealogists, but were

generally ignored by historians. They were hard to get to, hard to read and decipher, but promised to be a treasure to the historian who learned to use them. Lathrop was quite clear about the challenges that such studies would offer. To Lathrop the labor of comparison between one census and another in the same area would be most revealing and would present a real picture of change over time.¹⁶ The manuscript returns of the census for 1860 had only been available since 1920, as the information was confidential for an average lifetime. The census had become sophisticated and revealing in 1850. As Lathrop put it, "He who would explain behavior—speech and lore, food and frolic, voting and worship, codes and values, building and farming—must know whence the people came."¹⁷

The hero, the villain, the fool, even the diarist or the journalist, were only samplings of history. A small amount of evidence was all historians had. They believed such small evidence and creative thinking could speak for a generation, or for a whole people. Lathrop would teach a technique of scholarship that would give voice to tens of thousands who were until then lost to history. In Ralph Wooster, Lathrop would find a student who said "Yes" to all of it, including comparisons from one area to another and comparisons over time, and "Yes" to the mountains of labor it required.

Barnes F. Lathrop began his career at the University of Texas at Austin as a research associate in 1937. He worked alongside the noted Southern historian Charles W. Ramsdell. His wife was an integral part of his career. Descriptive of Lathrop are words such as diligent and dedicated, driven, and, at times, downright

hard on a student. If he thought a student was not thinking or performing up to par, then he certainly made it clear how he felt. Precision was required at all times. His demands were never as tough on his students or colleagues as they were on himself.

His standards of scholarship and his pure critical analysis stood in the way of publishing. He produced one book and several articles. When Ralph Wooster arrived at Austin, Lathrop was working on a study of the Pugh Plantations of Louisiana. When Wooster graduated and on into the 1970s, Lathrop was still working on that study.¹⁸ In some ways Lathrop might seem crystallized and inflexible. He was also lavish in his loyalty.

Wooster had earlier done a research paper for a class of Lathrop's on the secession movement in Louisiana. Lathrop encouraged him to do the entire Lower South in the same manner. The professor theorized that a secession convention study would reveal that the wealthy members were not generally in favor of secession. Economic considerations determined Southern opinion on the Union. The student Wooster discovered otherwise. The basic element that pulled together those in favor of secession was not wealth or class or anything else, but the population of slaves in the area a man represented. Lathrop had a ringer. He encouraged Ralph to develop a clear and pragmatic view of research.

Through the history department at Austin and throughout the university itself, Walter P. Webb permeated the atmosphere. He had students, followers, detractors and worshipers. He was a natural force, and he liked it that way. In Texas

and in the West, Webb carried the banner of pride and heritage dating back to his seminal work, *The Great Plains* (1931). He was a man of the people, close to the earth and a high intellect.¹⁹ He did not tolerate the rarefied air of academia or the hoops and formalities. He never really had much in common with his colleagues; he preferred the company of folklorist Frank Dobie or an old Texas Ranger. To the students of the University of Texas at Austin, he could be grumpy, salty, or just distant because his reputation made him seem unapproachable. He was made for the frontier, and without one he made a frontier of his own in his mind. Webb's theories and sweeping vision could turn the profession on its ear and at the same time win him popular support. To Webb, if an old-time Texan felt he was well represented by a work of Webb's, then the job was well done. This does not mean he was not hurt by criticism; in fact it affected him deeply as Gregory M. Tobin described in *The Making of a History: Walter Prescott Webb and the Great Plains* (1976). Tobin also underscored the fact that Webb indeed did some extensive research, but for the tastes of the public reader much of the scholarly notations were deleted. For Webb, the uniqueness of an environment changed the course of a people and its culture as they adapted to their new world. After endless efforts Webb could be struck by a moment of clear vision and the rest was history.

Wooster had only one class with Webb, "The Great Plains." Webb would hold discussions and enjoyed show and tell if a student brought to class an interesting item. This seems to have bored

Wooster and besides his interests were elsewhere. It was Webb's spirit that got under Wooster's skin. Wooster came to know him better in later years as they met at conferences. Webb rarely went to a session but could be found in the coffee shop visiting. He was a gentle, friendly man.²⁰

Webb wrote and published everywhere he could. His *The Texas Rangers* (1935), was made into a movie. He refused to be limited by scholarly expectations. In *An Honest Preface* (1959) Webb revealed his inner workings. He had no liking for the German bred school of history. Followers of Von Ranke had reduced history to a gutless and bloodless assembly of footnotes. Webb also railed against the influence of academia on the young mind:

He is encouraged to write without benefit of imagination, to avoid any statement based on perception and insight unless he can prove by documents that he is not original. He is trained to believe that he can be objective, and that the best way to be objective is to be so colorless as to give the reader something akin to snow blindness.²¹

In Wooster's copy of Webb's essays this passage and passages throughout are heavily marked in ink. Overwhelmingly, the noted writings concern freedom of thought and expression in the face of academic narrowness and formality. Fortunately, there was no animosity between Lathrop and Webb. Lathrop had real respect for Webb; Wooster worked his way through three years of classes, research, and a teaching fellowship. With the habit of waking at 5 a.m., he never put in an all nighter. When

Lathrop offered his support for a university fellowship for Ralph the next year—all money and no work, Lathrop was shocked when Wooster turned it down. Wooster was grateful, but he had a deadline with the U.S. Army and had to complete his graduate work by September, 1953.

The Secession Conventions of the Lower South: A Study of Their Membership, the title of Wooster's dissertation, took form in the spring. Quantification and detail did not bother Ralph; he was by then well versed in the study of secession. The University held the manuscript returns of the census on microfilm or Ralph hunted them down. The tables, schedules, items that were folded into the volume, every bit was typed by hand without error by Edna. They rented an electric typewriter for her, and she did the work after her hours at the state senate.²² Lathrop was without mercy on Ralph's dissertation, revising and correcting every bit of it. Edna retyped the work to perfection and produced the final product for Ralph to turn in on a Friday. He reported to the Army the next Monday. With Ralph's departure, Fulmer Mood had corrections of his own that he wanted before he would accept the dissertation. Edna did those revisions while Lathrop tried to control Mood and get the dissertation finalized. Edna herself walked

the dissertation through the offices at the University to get the required signatures.

While Edna and Lathrop secured Ralph's dissertation, Ralph was quite busy in basic training at Fort Leonard Wood. Further training was slated for Fort Jackson. In the small interlude between assignments, Wooster hurried to Austin for his oral exam on the dissertation arranged by Lathrop. Certainly Wooster knew more about secession conventions than anyone. The committee was generally fair and included Webb who hated to put students through such grillings for formality's sake. Ralph then ran to Fort Jackson to finish his infantry training. He was a buck private with a doctorate.

Wooster was assigned as a squad leader of Tennessee and Kentucky boys attached to the Second Armored Division in Germany. The Korean War had ended while the Cold War raged on. Almost upon arrival Wooster was pulled from his squad to be a teacher at the Second Armored Division headquarters. Ralph sent a letter to the Chief of Military History requesting a position with a military history detachment. He did not really expect anything to come of it and was having a fairly pleasant time seeing the Rhineland, teaching first sergeants what they already knew.

However, in two months time Wooster was on his own, trying to navi-

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gate Paris, on his way to Orleans and the 9th Military History Detachment. Of course, when he arrived at Orleans shaken and overwhelmed, he was told that the 9th was in Germany, fifty miles from where he'd started. Worse, the Orleans' Command wanted to keep him as their historian for Communication Zone Headquarters which oversaw all the American troops in France. Wooster was relieved when the 9th insisted he report to them, back in Germany.

South of Heidelberg was Karlsruhe, home of the 9th Historical Detachment. A detachment consisted of a two man unit for information gathering, while the division carried out ongoing research projects. Wooster had his two man detachment, the foreign military studies assignment, mail clerk, jeep driver and the usual responsibilities of a new enlisted man. He did little original writing, mostly editing and the reworking of some of the materials produced by German officers who had so recently fought the Soviet Army. Colonel General Franz Halder, Chief of Staff from 1938 to 1942, led the project. As with so many things in Wooster's life, he moved so fast through his days that he did not realize or contemplate the significance of his own experience. He had Top Secret clearance, and Cosmic Clearance. Cosmic was a NATO designation, "I spent most of my military career getting clearances."²³

Edna was able to join him in Germany in October of 1954. They had been separated for seven months. The Woosters rented rooms from a German family named Frank, who made ends meet by billeting Americans. The head of the household had been executed after he was

implicated in a plot against Hitler in July of 1944. The Franks kept their large home by breaking it up into quarters for military men and their wives. For Edna it was a wonderful experience; she enjoyed the camaraderie of enlisted wives and the friendship of the Frank's. She took great pleasure in the snow and has kept her winter boots. She learned German and made the most of it. Ralph, on the other hand, was again biding his time and attempting to find work in the United States through the mail. Edna would have been happy to stay.²⁴ At the time she did not know that on a monthly basis Ralph practiced a mission which if he had ever had to carry it out, would have been tantamount to suicide. As Ralph described it,

Once a month they had a military alert. This would come without any prior warning and within a short period of time you had to be at your military post and had to have all of your equipment assembled in the event of an evacuation. And in our case in the historical division they were all going to fall back toward the Rhine River and cross there and fall back toward France, but as it turned out my detachment, the 9th, the major and I, we were to go in the opposite direction. We were to go forward and try to maintain some historical record of the enemy attack. We were to infiltrate the order said."²⁵

The two men would be on their own. Wooster had a carbine, and the major a .45 pistol; between them they had two hand

grenades, a field safe for the documents and a typewriter. Wooster and his major would infiltrate the Soviet invasion with a typewriter. Fortunately the real thing never happened.

.....*Two years and
a Wake Up*.....

Ralph was invited to stay in Germany to teach the United States military forces as a civilian educator. However, he was ready to get on with his life in Texas or at any college that would have him. Edna would have liked to stay a while longer, but once again Professor Lathrop's loyalty to his students changed the direction of their lives. The Woosters began receiving telegrams from Lathrop; one read, "AWAIT OFFER FROM LAMAR COLLEGE." A later telegram read "LAMAR OFFER PROBABLE BUT NO [sic] CERTAIN IF CONWAY MAKES OFFER TRY TO STALL THROUGH THIS WEEK B F LATHROP"

Behind the scenes Barnes F. Lathrop knew that the State of Texas in 1955 started requiring American History of all its college students. New history professors were needed to fill the ranks. Preston Williams, Head of the History department at Lamar State College of Technology, knew Lathrop. Williams sent a fellow faculty member who was a student of Lathrop's to Austin to ask him whom he would recommend. Lathrop's reputation for high standards and plain speech made him completely reliable in his recommendations. He told them that Ralph Wooster was their man. Ralph got the job and began his long association with Lamar.

Edna and Ralph took a troop ship home. Edna, an adventurous soul, enjoyed the voyage and the newness of everything. From Brooklyn they flew to Houston. They checked in at Lamar to say they had arrived, and then sped home to Wooster, now fully a part of Baytown. It was about two weeks from Army discharge to Lamar's fall semester, 1955. While they were pleased to be able to pick up their roles as family members they were hoping for a drier, cooler climate, but it certainly seemed that East Texas was where they belonged.

.....*Doing a Land Office
Business*.....

Lamar State College of Technology, as Lamar University was then known, boasted four history teachers. A new four-year college was not a research oriented facility, but in the history department, research was expected. Professor Wooster meant to deliver. He had managed to publish an article on "The Arkansas Secession Convention," in the summer issue of the *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, in 1954, while in Germany. At Lamar he flew into his research and taught five classes of American History for the first two semesters. After years of hurry-up-and-wait it was time for Wooster to dig in and get down to his own way of teaching and his own way of doing history.

Edna and Ralph settled in a garage apartment on Terrell Avenue. Robert Wooster arrived to complete the family in 1956. Ralph named him for Robert E. Lee. They took advantage of the GI loan program and bought the house on

Callaway Drive, where Robert would grow up. Also, in 1956, Ralph taught his first advanced class, "The West," granted because of his contact with Walter Webb. A year later he taught "The Civil War." These advanced classes began a tradition of excellence. Among his early students were future professors Charles Alexander, now of Ohio University, Archie McDonald of Stephen F. Austin State University, and John Storey, history department chairman at Lamar University.²⁶

In 1957, Beaumont and Lamar would come to grips with the issue and pains of integration. The campus was very small with defined entrances and exits. It was said that African American students were harassed, and some were injured as they made their way to classes and that the protesters were from Vidor or other outlying areas. Wooster believed that Beaumont citizens took part. There was some violence although Wooster was only jeered and not personally threatened. Ralph's home church in Wooster would be at the forefront of integration in Texas. He had served with African Americans in the newly integrated army, and while the protests were unpleasant, he was proud of his college and of President

McDonald, who convinced the mayor of Beaumont to arrest the protesters. Once arrests began the trouble ended. In the face of resistance the white students and black united and sped the process of social education on campus.²⁷

While Wooster taught and the family got comfortable in their community, history again caught up with him. In 1960, the pastor of the First Baptist Church spoke in outrage at the thought of a Roman Catholic as President of the United States. Wooster was faculty advisor for the Baptist Student Union and felt he had to counter those public remarks. The result was a debate carried out through the local newspapers.

Hardly 30 years old, Wooster took a powerful public figure to task, and then he left the church. He regretted the decision but could not back down from his principles. Wooster joined another church but left that as well. External changes of the late 1950s and early 60s brought out things in people Ralph felt he could not abide and so he left organized religion.

In the meantime, Wooster from March of 1956 to July of 1961, produced some ten scholarly articles.²⁸ He made the manuscript census returns surrender

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detailed examinations such as, "An Analysis of the Membership of Secession Conventions in the Lower South" in the *Journal of Southern History*, (1958) wherein the volume of research continued to be astounding, "... the writer conservatively estimates that he went through over sixty thousand pages of manuscript returns in Schedule No. 1 alone."²⁹ On the other hand, "The Secession of the Lower South: An Examination of Changing Interpretations" in *Civil War History*, (1961) presented a historiographic investigation of the question of who was in fact the driving force behind secession and why.

Many of these articles were outgrowths of Ralph's dissertation and resulted in an invitation from the Princeton University Press to publish a monogram on secession conventions. The limitations of price and size made reproduction of the census returns impossible. Wooster did provide historical scholarship with the facts and figures they would need to synthesize a true story of secession conventions. In *Secession Conventions of the South* (1962) Wooster reluctantly did a small amount of interpretation. The secession conventions in the South were called to dismantle the United States. The members of this pivotal event were largely ignored by historians. Wooster saw what needed to be done and set about correcting a gap in scholarly investigations, who attended the conventions, their backgrounds, where they came from, their economic interests and slave holdings. These were facts that were, before Wooster, unknown in any comprehensive form.³⁰

The Lathrop influence made Ralph hold back his interpretations of what he

was producing. The Webb influence had him publish feverishly. There were thirty-two scholarly articles produced, twenty-two scholarly book reviews, as well a number of public book reviews for the local Beaumont paper.³¹ *The People in Power: Courthouse and Statehouse in the Lower South 1850-1860*, was the next monograph in published in 1969 by the University of Tennessee Press. Its sister volume was *Politicians, Planters and Plain Folk: Courthouse and Statehouse in the Upper South, 1850-1860* was also published by the University of Tennessee Press (1975). These works compare the Upper and Lower South and examine the realities of local and state governments as the South moved toward secession. With *Politicians, Planters and Plain Folk*, Wooster was reviewed and applauded by scholars in *History*, *The Journal of American History* and *The Journal of Southern History*, in 1976.³² Through these works Wooster became a force in the scholarly world. His reputation then not only rested on his qualities as an educator and as a promising historian, but at the age of forty-eight he was established. There were honors for his teaching and his publishing. He led historical associations and was active in improving the lives of college teachers in the State of Texas. Among the honors were, The Piper Foundation Award for Teaching (1964), Fellow of the State Historical Association (1964), and Regents Professor of History (1972), (which he later renounced in protest to what he saw as an inappropriate selection). He became head of the Department of History in 1966 and served until 1970.³³ Between 1969 and 1975 there were eight scholarly articles and the text-

book *Texas and Texans* (1972) which he authored with fellow Lamar faculty member, Adrian Anderson. The text was adopted by over half of the public schools in Texas and revised three times since. It was the textbook that paid some of the bills and helped with further research.

The three monographs and their compilations of data have been used over the years by researchers and interpreters. They have served the scholarly commu-

came before the Civil War and made their fortunes as Texans. After the Civil War the economy shifted, and many were wiped out financially, however those who did make the transition were wealthy businessmen and lawyers. The Civil War had changed how the wealthy in Texas made their fortunes, but they were certainly Texans.³⁴

History made itself present as the Viet Nam War dragged on. The Lamar campus

In 1960, the pastor of the First Baptist Church spoke in outrage at the thought of a Roman Catholic as President of the United States. Wooster was faculty advisor for the Baptist Student Union and felt he had to counter those public remarks. The result was a debate carried out through the local newspapers. Hardly 30 years old, Wooster took a powerful public figure to task, and then he left the church.

nity well. His methods continued to surrender valid and enlightening truth on historic assumptions and generalities. Certainly the facts and presentation of evidence in Wooster's census work would challenge some of the misinterpretations still popular in the public mind today about the causes of the Civil War and how and why the South succeeded in the first place.

Wooster used his fine toothed approach on Texas and produced, "Wealthy Texans of 1860" and "Wealthy Texans of 1870" in 1967 and 1970, respectively. Earlier impressions of the Reconstruction Era in Texas could now be put aside. Dr. Wooster underscored that there were indeed Yankees in Texas, but most of them

was calm when compared to many other colleges and universities. Golden Triangle rebels like Janis Joplin tried Lamar for a short time and then moved on to the more wide open cities across the country. Robert Wooster was in danger of the draft. Father and son were historians; they studied war but did not glory in it or wish for the experience. Robert was greatly influenced by the anti-war position of a high school teacher and the spirit of the times. He determined he would not go to war in Viet Nam. Ralph was a believer in the containment policy, but he could understand Robert's position. As father and son, they prepared to walk down that road together. The draft was ended just in time, and the Woosters were spared that heart rending

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decision. Edna cannot recall it without weeping.³⁵

Ralph's departure from the cliometrics and precision of Dr. Lathrop occurred now and again over the course of decades. Isaac Dunbar Affleck rode in from the Civil War and essentially became a part of the Wooster family. In a ghostly way Affleck told his story, a personal one, through letters to his parents. The correspondence described first-hand what it was like to go to Bastrop Military Institute and to serve as a cavalryman from Texas.

"Dunnie" Affleck was discovered by Robert Williams who was with Lamar for a short time. Williams did his doctoral research on Thomas Affleck, the father of Dunnie. Thomas became a planter in Washington County, Texas, just before the Civil War. He was well known for his agricultural experimentation. In Williams' research he came across the letters of the son Dunnie and asked Wooster for help editing them. In the end Williams had little interest in the Civil War. Williams left Lamar, and as long as Wooster gave credit where credit was due, Dunnie's correspondence belonged to Wooster.

Isaac Dunbar Affleck and his family

were regular correspondents. Dunnie was a spoiled boy who could not make himself into a fine soldier. He could not wean himself away from the riches he imagined his father withheld from him. He was no hero; he was an ordinary, if privileged, young man swept up in history. Most of the letters have been published in journals at one time or another across the Lower South. With ten articles derived from his letters, Dunnie gave Ralph a different mode of expression in the areas of document editing and descriptive writing. Edna came to feel Affleck was a part of the family and speaks of him that way. The Affleck home of "Glenblythe" is near Brenham, where John Wooster ran his dairy farm. Edna and Ralph visited and tended his grave. The transcribed Affleck papers that belong to Ralph Wooster may now be primary sources due to the tragic death of Dunnie's grandson in a fire on Galveston Island. It is believed the original letters were destroyed in that fire.³⁶

* * * * *

Edna never has attended college. By the time she was ready, Ralph had as-

sumed positions of authority at Lamar, and she felt it would be awkward for everyone. With all the Ph.Ds in the family (Robert's wife also has an earned doctorate), Ralph insists that Edna is the smartest on in the room. They look to her for guidance and accuracy in their work. She is now semi-retired from the law offices of William Townsley in Beaumont, who insists she may not retire entirely until he does. She volunteers and has served as the area President of the League of Women Voters. Presently she supports a number of organizations, especially environmental efforts. She and Ralph celebrated 50 years of marriage in 1997.

Robert Wooster gained his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin after graduating from Lamar University with his master's. His thesis at Lamar reflects a willingness to interpret and make conclusions in his work. He was a research assistant for James Michener and recently attended Michener's funeral. Father and son produced a few articles together, but the Wooster historians prefer to work alone. Robert has become a fixture at Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi and has a long list of scholarly articles and books to his credit. His wife is also a pro-

fessor at Corpus Christi.

Ralph Wooster, in 1976, began a long tour of duty as Dean of Graduate Studies and other high administrative offices at Lamar University. While in these positions he continued to teach and publish (presently a total of over 70 scholarly articles and 7 books and innumerable book reviews). He insists the key to good teaching is research and curiosity. He continued to love teaching so much that in the summers he taught without pay.

As an administrator he improved conditions for the faculty, staff and students. He was held in high esteem by the administrative assistants that worked around him because he never failed to respect them. Wooster never asked anyone to do anything he would not ask of himself. He always appreciated how hard people worked for so little money and, how dedicated some were for so little return. Ralph's modesty and kindness have won him the loyalty of people from each generation. He will only treat people as he wishes to be treated. While he enjoyed the work of administration, he felt hamstrung by the lack of research time. Nor did he and Edna enjoy the constant socializing and high-brow events that were required of them.

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In 1991 Wooster became semi-retired and freed himself of administrative work. He currently teaches one course per session, and his classes are always filled. He is presently working on a follow up to *Texas and Texans in the Civil War* (1995) with an examination of the Confederate Generals from Texas. He has rolls of microfilm of the manuscript returns of the United States Census on his desk to prove it. He researches with the precision and pragmatism of Lathrop. His lectures are his own and grounded in the finest teachers he has been privileged to know. His presentations are peppered with Webb anecdotes, and it is Walter Prescott Webb who still touches a nerve. Wooster's writing is increasingly accessible to the public. There are so many true stories to tell. Wooster feels that he is running out of time to learn and share all that he wants to.

For Professor Wooster it is hardly a time to slow down.

*"What I had seen General Lee to be at first - child-like in simplicity and unselfish in his character—he remained, unspoiled by praise and by success."*¹⁷

*The Honourable Alexander H. Stephens,
Vice-President of the Confederate States.*

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