

LIBRARY RESEARCH NEWSLETTER

Snapshots from librarian research activities

In this issue:

- David Smith discusses his new book, *Cowboy Presidents: The Frontier Myth and US Politics since 1900*

Book chat with David Smith

Published in February 2021, David's new book, *Cowboy Presidents: The Frontier Myth and US Politics since 1900* looks at the evolution of the frontier myth through the ideologies and polices of four U.S. presidents: Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon B. Johnson, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. The research explores how the frontier began as a progressive idea, yet shifted over time to an image of conservatism.

In this issue, we hear from David about the highs and lows of researching and writing this book.

What drew you to the topic?

Since I was an undergrad student I've always been interested in myths and symbols of the American West and in 20th century US political history. I read an article in a publication called *Convergence* in 2008 on the topic of "Cowboys & Presidents": it was a museum exhibit in Los Angeles that year. My PhD supervisors and I discussed it and determined that it could be taken up as a scholarly, academic subject. The connection of the frontier myth to four presidents' personas and agendas and a comparison of the four—Theodore Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush—was to be the initial focus.

But two of the key arguments of the book: first that the powerful myths of the "Old West" as they relate to presidential politics are remarkably flexible, and second that major events in history caused the structure of this connection to American politics to shift from left to right, from liberal to conservative: these two contentions emerged from the interdisciplinary research and from the evidence itself. It was a discovery that I had not anticipated and that hadn't been identified previously.

Were there any especially noteworthy, interesting or challenging parts of the process?

A large project of academic inquiry can be a little scary at the outset because you don't know exactly where it's going to take you. Fortunately one of the things researchers often find is that definite patterns emerge and new discoveries can be made when you ask new questions and look at new evidence or at evidence in a way that it may not have been looked at before. So as a researcher you're going on faith that, on your journey, you're going to find something worthwhile and original to tell people about. If you ask questions that haven't been asked before and can get a good handle on your research then you are likely going to uncover some new answers and interpretations of the past.

My subject librarian colleagues in Murray helped me out a great deal. The book would never have happened without their help at key times during the PhD program and they provided a great deal of moral support as well. The Interlibrary loans folks were amazing, I don't know how they found some of the rare resources that I asked them for.

Permissions for photos was challenging, especially finding the copyright holders for: rare photos; next of kin relatives of deceased cartoonists; and artists who sometimes deployed pseudonyms on their creations decades ago (like the two gentlemen who created the “Bedtime for Brezhnev” poster in 1981). I learned quite a lot about how to track people down and sometimes I still needed help from other librarians, including our former business librarian Susan McConkey. So, as an author, if you are using a lot of images that aren’t owned by institutions you have to become a bit of a private investigator.



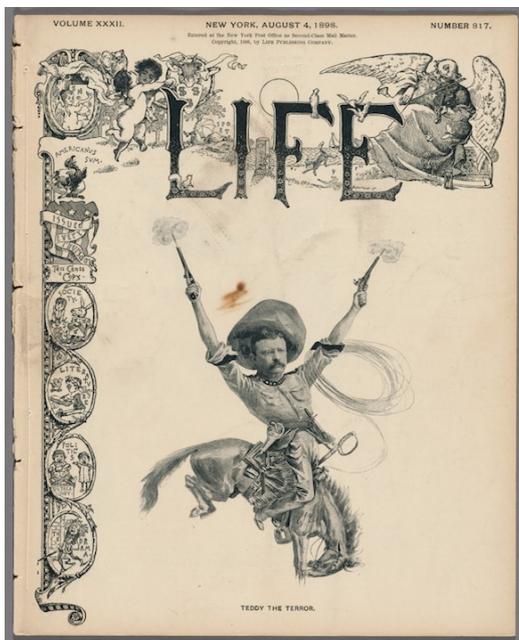
Right: The Lyndon B. Johnson presidential library in Austin, Texas.

Is there anything else you’d like to share about the book?

Writing a book has been a dream of mine since I was young. It’s a thrill to hold the actual thing in your hands.

I love books, history, doing research, and writing. And I find it fulfilling in my job to help others find the resources they need for their research and teaching, and to try to build solid collections for people to use now and into the future. That’s why I’m a history subject librarian and why I chose to do this for my career.

In terms of advice, I’d say be patient when taking on big projects, don’t get discouraged if things take some time and definitely expect that there will be hurdles along the way. Be true to yourself in what you write, believe in what you put down on paper based on the evidence that you find. And don’t be afraid to ask people for help if you need it because you will need help at times. And, if you’re able, try to help others along in their own publishing journey. If we can give people a hand when they need it then we all arrive at a better destination in the end.



Above: An image of Theodore Roosevelt on the cover of Life magazine, 1898, captioned “Teddy the Terror.”

Ideas, suggestions, and feedback for future issues welcome! Email katya.macdonald@usask.ca with your thoughts.