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In Memoriam: James Milton Smallwood
By Kenneth Howell

James M. Smallwood, Professor Emeritus of History at Oklahoma State University, died November 25, 2013, at his home in Gainesville, Texas. He was 69.

In 1965, Kenneth Stampp wrote in the introduction to his *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* that “A half century ago, most historians were extremely critical of the reconstruction measures that congressional Republicans forced upon the defeated South. They used terms such as ‘military despotism,’ ‘federal tyranny,’ ‘Negro rule,’ and ‘Africanization’ to describe what white Southerners were forced to endure. . . . Yet, during the past generation, historians have written numerous books and articles which demonstrate that many of the popular notions about the era of reconstruction are distorted or untrue.” James M. Smallwood was among those early revisionist scholars who labored to correct the historical record of the Reconstruction era.

Focusing primarily on African American experiences in post-Civil War Texas, Smallwood’s most enduring contribution to Reconstruction historiography was his *Time of Hope, Time of Despair: Black Texans during Reconstruction*, published in 1981. This work was instrumental in highlighting African Americans struggles and achievements during the Reconstruction years. The Texas State Historical Association recognized the importance of this work by awarding it the prestigious Coral H. Tullis Award in 1982 for best book of the year on Texas history.

Later in his career, Smallwood published three books that focused on Reconstruction violence in Texas. Published in 2003, *Murder and Mayhem: The War of Reconstruction in Texas*, written with co-authors Barry A. Crouch and Larry Peacock, placed the infamous Lee-Peacock feud in the historical context of a continued Civil War in Northeast Texas. This work revealed that the terrorist groups preying on blacks and their white allies in North Texas were able to operate in the shadows of the South's Lost Cause. In 2007, Smallwood with co-authors Kenneth Howell and Carol Taylor published *The Devil's Triangle: Ben Bickerstaff, Northeast Texans, and the War of Reconstruction in Texas*. Smallwood and his co-authors were able to expand upon the ideas first presented in *Murder and Mayhem* by focusing on the terrorist groups associated with Ben Bickerstaff, the notorious Texas outlaw responsible for the death of numerous African Americans, Republican sympathizers, and federal troops stationed in the northern part of the state. Both books have led to new interpretations of Reconstruction violence in Texas and a better understanding of the plight of blacks and whites who supported the federal government's attempt to bring social and political change to the Lone Star State. Finally, in 2008, Smallwood published *The Feud That Wasn't: The Taylor Ring, Bill Sutton, John Wesley Hardin, and Violence in Texas*. This work placed the so-called Taylor-Sutton feud in the context of the Reconstruction era, concluding that the same patterns of violence found in the northern part of the state were also present in South Texas. The importance of this work was evident in the accolades that it garnered, including the East Texas Historical Association's Otis Lock Award for the Best Book of the Year (2008), the Texas Institute of Letters' Best Scholarly Book Award (2008), and the Texas State Historical Association's Coral H. Tullis Award (2008). Smallwood remains the only scholar to win the Coral H. Tullis Award twice in the 45-year history of the award. In 2008, he was also inducted as a member into the Texas Institute of Letters. Aside from his these books, Smallwood wrote numerous articles and delivered a multitude of lectures on the Reconstruction era, focusing primarily on African American experiences and violence in Texas during these tumultuous years.

In addition to his work on Reconstruction Texas and African American history, Smallwood published on a broad range of topics related to United States history. During his early years at Oklahoma State University, he authored or edited more than ten volumes on Oklahoma history,

including several publications on the famous humorist Will Rogers. Additionally, Smallwood wrote several local and county histories, including his highly acclaimed two volume study of Smith County titled *Born in Dixie: The history of Smith County, Texas* (1999). *Born in Dixie* continues to set the standard for the way county histories should be written. He was also a contributor to the Texas history textbook, *Beyond Myth and Legends: A Narrative History of Texas* (2008). Moreover, Smallwood published books and articles on Native Americans in Texas, FDR's New Deal program, Lyndon B. Johnson political career, and a full-length biography of Virginia Durr, a noted twentieth-century liberal reformer from Alabama. In sum, Smallwood leaves behind an impressive array of publication that will continue to influence students of American and Texas history for many decades to come.

James Milton Smallwood was born on July 10, 1944, in Terrell, Texas. His formative years were spent in Terrell, where he became a local sports legend, excelling in football and baseball. After leaving Terrell High School, Smallwood attended Henderson County Community College (now known as Trinity Valley Community College), where he earned an A. A. degree in General Education, in 1965. From Henderson County, Smallwood went to East Texas State University (now Texas A&M University—Commerce), where he double majored in History and English, earning a Bachelor's of Science degree in 1967. He remained at East Texas State for two more years, while completing his M. A. degree in History and Political Science. Shortly after earning his Master's degree, he moved to Lubbock, Texas, where he attended Texas Tech University, earning his Ph.D. in History and Political Science in 1974.

Professionally, Smallwood held numerous positions as either instructor or visiting professor before accepting the position of Assistant Professor of History at Oklahoma State University in 1975. He became an Associate Professor of History at OSU in 1981, a Professor of History in 1992, and Professor Emeritus of History in 2003. While teaching at OSU, Smallwood served as the Director of the Will Rogers Research Project (1875-1983); and on special occasions, he temporarily served as a Visiting Professor of History at other institutions, including Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey (1987), the University of Texas at Tyler (1989-1991); and University of Kyoto, Japan (1995). Smallwood was also active in both the Texas State Historical Association and the East Texas Historical

Association. For the ETHA, he served on numerous committees, and held different leadership positions, including memberships on the Board of Directors and the Editorial Board.

At the time of his death, Smallwood was working with Jim Kearney, a Texas history scholar and German language specialist, to complete a manuscript on another famous Texas feud that took place in Columbus, Texas. Kearney will complete the study, publishing the work with the University of North Texas Press. The study promises to shed new light on the violence erupting along the Lower Colorado River during the late nineteenth century, and will be Smallwood's final word on the subject.

Jim Kearney in a personal note, probably best summarized how most will remember Smallwood, stating "He was a most remarkable and wonderfully eccentric man, who not only leaves a legacy of important historical writing that few of us will ever be able to match, but who also offers the example of a human being whose own life experiences had honed a keen awareness for injustice, wherever encountered, and an accompanying compassion for the downtrodden, whether in the past or in the present. These sensibilities, combined with a first class critical intelligence, inform all his works. He was a Roosevelt Democrat at heart."

Kearney also wrote, "One of my fondest memories of Jim is of after-conference socializing when we often gather for drinks and fellowship. I remember vividly the company of Jim after the first Korean War conference in Victoria in particular. Jim was buoyant, witty, and at his best. He held the whole group spellbound with stories of his youth from the small East Texas town where he grew up. Though from an impoverished background, Jim apparently was quite a blade in his youth: athletic, handsome, and mischievous; and he made a mark for himself at an early age. Some of his stories though were bittersweet, and one experience in particular that he related was deeply formative to his outlook on life. One night his father received a knock on the door. A black man had asked his father for help in a whispered interchange. His father told Jim to get a couple of sheets and some twine. Without a word of explanation, the two then drove in his old pickup along backcountry roads to a remote spot. They got out and walked a short distance and there was a black man hanging from a tree. Jim had to climb up the tree and cut the man down, whom they then wrapped and tied in the sheets.

They then carried him to the truck and transported him to a shack on the black side of town and turned him over to the relatives who had sought help. His father went to the sheriff but was told in no uncertain terms not to make a fuss. I often think Jim's deep sympathy for the injustices suffered by black people, which led to his scholarly interest in reinterpreting Reconstruction, derived from the deep imprint this episode left on the emotions of a teen age boy. Jim was also part Cherokee Indian, a fact about which he was very proud, and which also contributed to his consciousness for racial injustice." Kearney's words ring true for all who knew Dr. Smallwood. Most of his friends will remember similar visits in similar surroundings, falling under the captive spell of his mesmerizing stories of the past.

Dr. James M. Smallwood is survived by his daughter and son-in-law, Martha and Scott O'Rear, and two sons, James and Steven. Deciding against a traditional memorial service, Smallwood requested that his body be cremated and his ashes spread over a beautiful and majestic Alabama mountain top where his daughter and son-in-law were married a few years ago. It is a peaceful location that held a special place in James' heart, a place where a free spirit can swirl in eternal winds, roaming the lands that our nation's forefathers (red, black, and white) once traversed.