

Primarily, It's Serendipity

James A. Percoco

"My darling sheik," so opens a flurry of letters that my grandmother, Catherine Borup, sent to my grandfather, Anthony DiLieto, in 1923. "What a gold mine," I thought as I pored through a box of this correspondence that my mother gave me in 1986, shortly after my grandfather died. Not only did these words of a star-struck lover tell me something about my maternal grandparents, but they also shed light onto life in the Roaring Twenties. The euphemism of calling my grandfather "sheik" clearly indicated that my grandmother was smitten by the role made popular by silent film star Rudolph Valentino. Now, whenever I use these letters to teach the 1920s, Nana and Poppie seem present with me in the class.

Over the course of my career I have had a number of people ask me, "How do you come up with this stuff?" To be honest I have to say it is almost a product of serendipity. That in and of itself is the beauty of working with history, people often stumble on to something that they never expected.

Since 1981, when I was a novice teacher enrolled in the National Archives Summer Institute, *Primarily Teaching*, I have used all manner of primary source material to teach history. Some of the documents I use are from the collection of the National Archives, while others come from a more personal space like the box my mother entrusted to me.

No matter where I find them, uncovering these primary sources, in their myriad of forms, is one of the best parts of the journey of being a high school history teacher. Permit me to share with you some other stories.

A number of years ago I was going through a "baseball craze" using America's pastime as a means of exploring American social history. While reading *They Also*

Served by Bill Gilbert, I learned that in early 1942, shortly after the United States entered World War II, Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis wrote to President Franklin Roosevelt asking his opinion on the wartime status of professional baseball. Roosevelt responded with his "unofficial" position that baseball should continue to be played, if only for the sole purpose of serving as a morale booster. This letter has become known as Roosevelt's "Greenlight Letter." Immediately I knew the kind of power this letter would have in a classroom of high school juniors, particularly given that I teach World War II in the spring, roughly when baseball season begins. I contacted the archival staff at the Franklin Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, New York, and explained my mission. They were only too happy to help. A week later copies of both Landis's and Roosevelt's letters arrived. Shortly thereafter, I used these letters in my classroom as part of a lesson on the home front during the second world war. Like most primary sources the letters can be used on several different levels. The letter Landis wrote is on baseball stationery and is handwritten. Roosevelt's reply is typed, on White House stationery, but is not signed. The obvious question that arises is why did Roosevelt not sign the letter? But he did sign the original letter I tell students, and then launch into telling, these denizens of cyber-space, about something called carbon paper, which likely was used for the typing process.

In a moving twist of fate, shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, I found myself using these letters much earlier than I had anticipated. Sitting in Jiffy Lube, while my car's oil was being changed, I was flipping through the recent issue of *Sports Illustrated* magazine. At the

back of this issue was an opinion piece by Rick Reilly about the relevance of sports in a time of national crisis. If you recall the National Football League suspended play for one week after the terrorist attacks. Reilly's message about the power of sports in society was only too clear. That week I had students read Reilly's column and then look at the Landis-Roosevelt correspondence. Somehow in that moment, in my classroom, in that context the past suddenly had great relevance.

Having since moved from the baseball diamond to the battlefields of the Civil War, my most recent intellectual quest has to do with our sixteenth president, Abraham Lincoln, particularly as he is depicted in public sculpture. Last summer, I undertook a Lincoln Legacy Road Trip in an effort to see and research several of the more than two hundred statues on the American landscape. Part of my journey took me to Fort Wayne, Indiana, home of the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company. In 1932, a statue by sculptor Paul Manship, Lincoln the Hoosier Youth, was unveiled on the steps of the insurance company's corporate headquarters. After studying the statue, which is also a primary source, I visited the archives and library of the nearby Lincoln Museum of Fort Wayne. This museum houses the Lincoln collection which was formerly under the provenance of the insurance company. Archivist Cindy Van Horn directed me to the files on Lincoln the Hoosier Youth. In these files I found wonderful archival photographs of the September 16, 1932 dedication of the statue.

Again, as with so many documents, there are numerous historical clues available provided one wants to be a bit of a detective. The photos show throngs of people gaily clothed, women decked out

BASEBALL

KENESAW M. LANDIS
COMMISSIONER
LESLIE H. O'CONNOR
SECRETARY-TREASURER

333 NORTH MICHIGAN AVENUE
CHICAGO

January 14 1942

Dear Mr. President:

The time is approaching when, in ordinary conditions, our tennis would be heading for Spring training camps. However, inasmuch as these are not ordinary times, I venture to ask what you have in mind as to whether professional baseball should continue to operate. Of course my inquiry does not relate at all to individual members of this organization whose status in this emergency, is fixed by law depending upon all citizens.

Normally we have, in addition to the sixteen major teams, approximately three hundred and twenty minor teams - members of leagues playing in the United States and Canada. Health and strength to you - and whatever else it takes to do this job.

With great respect,
Very truly yours,
Kenesaw M. Landis

The President
Washington
D.C.

P.P.F.
227

January 15, 1942.

My dear Judge:-

Thank you for yours of January fourteenth. As you will, of course, realise the final decision about the baseball season must rest with you and the Baseball Club owners -- so what I am going to say is solely a personal and not an official point of view.

I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going. There will be fewer people unemployed and everybody will work longer hours and harder than ever before.

x170

And that means that they ought to have a chance for recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before.

xpp7468

Baseball provides a recreation which does not last over two hours or two hours and a half, and which can be got for very little cost. And, incidentally, I hope that night games can be extended because it gives an opportunity to the day shift to see a game occasionally.

As to the players themselves, I know you agree with me that individual players who are of active military or naval age should go, without question, into the services. Even if the actual quality of the teams is lowered by the greater use of older players, this will not dampen the popularity of the sport. Of course, if any individual has some particular aptitude in a trade or profession, he ought to serve the Government. That, however, is a matter which I know you can handle with complete justice.

Here is another way of looking at it -- if 300 teams use 5,000 or 6,000 players, these players are a definite recreational asset to at least 20,000,000 of their fellow citizens -- and that in my judgment is thoroughly worthwhile.

x189

With every best wish,

Very sincerely yours,

Hon. Kenesaw M. Landis, x4
233 North Michigan Avenue,
Chicago,
Illinois.

in dresses and men sporting fedoras or straw hats. Newsreel cameras, set up in the middle of the crowd, record the events. The images portray a happy scene. However, these photographs were also taken during the worst year of the Great Depression and the statue dedication occurred in the middle of the farm belt, which had been ravaged since the mid-1920s. Why would these people be so ebullient? Perhaps these folks found solace in the erection and celebration of an American icon, who also raised in poverty, might be a spiritual connection of sorts? We may never know the answer, but as historians we should raise the

questions and in our classrooms we should use vehicles such as letters, diary accounts, newspaper ads, photographs, and the like to challenge our students to think critically, historically, and objectively.

My experience at the Lincoln Museum was far from over. The archivist pulled out for me a 1905 letter from a different file, from Robert Todd Lincoln, son of the president, to Arthur F. Hall, the secretary of the Lincoln National Life Insurance Company. Hall had written to the younger Lincoln requesting permission to use a portrait of Abraham Lincoln on the letterhead of the insurance company named

in his honor. This letter is of interest for a few reasons. Given the corporate nature of present-day America, many of us may think that only recently have we begun to name institutions and structures, such as sports arenas, after American companies (e.g., the new football stadium built for the city of Philadelphia is named the Lincoln Financial Group Stadium and its logo sports the silhouette of our 16th president.). Surprisingly, this practice has been going on for many years and the correspondence between Arthur Hall and Robert Todd Lincoln confirms that time honored American tradition. The letter helps illustrate this fact for students.

Ironically, last summer as I was crisscrossing the Midwest in search of bronze and stone Lincolns, the July 29, 2002 issue of Newsweek sported a full-page advertisement for the Lincoln Financial Group. The ad displayed a photograph of Lincoln looking over the shoulder of a middle-aged golfer and bore the slogan: Retirement: It's A Lot More Enjoyable When Lincoln's Working With You. When made into an overhead transparency and shared with students it's a superb way of using a primary source to explain Lincoln's legacy and the power of public memory.

As the above examples illustrate, I have found the power of primary sources in the most unusual places. I am certain that educators who are open to allowing their personal experiences permeate their teaching world, will find, as I have, archival serendipity. 🍀

Note: The documents featured in this article come from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, N.Y. You may reproduce them in any quantity. Note that the letter from FDR is a carbon copy. The original "Greenlight Letter," signed by FDR is at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., and is available on their website at www.baseballhalloffame.org/education/primary%5Fsources/world%5Fwar%5Fii/letter%5F01%5Fsmall.htm

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