

Stanley Idzerda, A Remembrance



by

John Harvey
St Cloud State University

I was saddened to read the notice of the recent death of Stanley Idzerda, professor and college president. I had the fortune of interviewing Stan on several occasions over the past couple of years in his lovely home on the main street of St Joseph, adjacent to the college that brought him and his family back to central Minnesota. There have been very few historians who lived a life like that of Stan. In 2009 I interviewed Stan on his academic life, including his record as a college president at St. Benedicts, his Presidency of the SFHS in 1962, and especially his experience as a historian of France from the 1950s as a student of the Carl Becker generation, "once-removed" via John Hall Stewart. With his

passing, we have lost one of the last voices from a different world, and I think it fitting to offer this extended reflection on Stan.¹

Although these comments are longer, and perhaps more intimate, than a normal obituary, Professor Idzerda was the very last of his generation. With his passing in August 2013, Stan was perhaps the final of our few historians of European history who entered the armed forces before the American entry into the Second World War and then survived direct, and very deadly, combat before turning to the profession of French history in the decade before the formation of the Society for French Historical Studies. As well as being a college dean and then president from 1967 to 1968, with all the cultural context that comes with those years, this historian's life merits some attention.

Stan was a Brooklyn kid, the son of a rare multi-national immigrant family that comprised his secular Dutch father of Calvinist descent (Idzerda) and a faithful Roman Catholic mother of Bavaria (Kempf). Raised Catholic, to those who knew him religion in an open-minded sense was a defining thread within his life. His parents lived in a cityscape once enriched by European neighborhood diversity and dignified by that great temple of ethnic-racial openness, the long-lost Ebbets Field. He felt that the experience of being raised in an interfaith/multicultural family made him a more ecumenical-minded adult than many in his youth. Robert Crout recalls that Stan believed his Dutch ancestry derived from the Spanish occupation forces of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I think that it made him a more valued member of the profession by the 1960s, when university and college institutions were truly attempting to bridge the Protestant-Catholic divide.

He loved The Borough. But by his twentieth year, Stan, then a scrawny, gangly youth, wanted to see the world beyond. His father, Stan, and his brothers were lobstermen, working the waters in New York Lower Bay when the spring haul was measured in the thousands.² The European conflagration had also hit the family hard. His father and older brother were in the Netherlands in 1939, visiting family, and were trapped when the country was overrun the next spring. They found themselves eventually in German-run slave labor camps but fortunately survived the war. In 1940 Stan joined the navy, for the adventure, as an "F.3c" or an electrician-mechanical apprentice. He was proud to have as his first post not any old tug, tanker, or trawler but a pride of the Pacific Fleet, the battleship USS *West Virginia*.

At the end of my interviews with Stan around 2009, I had stopped by his small but comfortable home at idyllic St Joseph—the actual "Lake Wobegon" of Garrison Keillor's famous program—just to drop off some writings on historians for his pleasure. It was high summer, and at almost 90, he had just ended morning work on his impressive backyard garden, itself a source of love each year. I found him in his kitchen, a room set right out of the 1970s in color and furnishings. He was baking bread and cookies I think, for his wider

¹ I would like to thank Robert Crout and Lloyd Kramer for their important comments on this *mémoire*, and its better insights reflect the very generosity that so imbued Stan's own life.

² See the recollections of Clyde MacKenzie, *The Fisheries of Raritan Bay* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

family that totaled seven children alone. He had always shared household work with his wife Geraldine (Gerri was a dietician by training), long before it became more common in recent decades. A kind old man, with thick glasses, had on bright, orange oven mitts, matched to the room's countertop Formica and wall paint. Somehow, and perhaps with a sugar cookie in my hand, the navy and the war came up. He stopped chatting, and after a pause, he left me for a bit. Not that he departed the room. The bread was still baking; cookies were on the oven pans; sunlight and a pleasant Minnesota backyard breeze wisped through the open windows. But mentally, it seemed, Stan had gone back to 1941.

Without prompting, he recounted, in a subtle, but changed voice, how he had so loved his posting on that great ship. Then, on a Sunday morning, while preparing for quarters, suddenly his voice changed: BAM..BAM..BAM! The torpedoes hit in a succession of seconds, while he was in the ship's deepest bowels. He was here at this moment, captured on film in that instance.

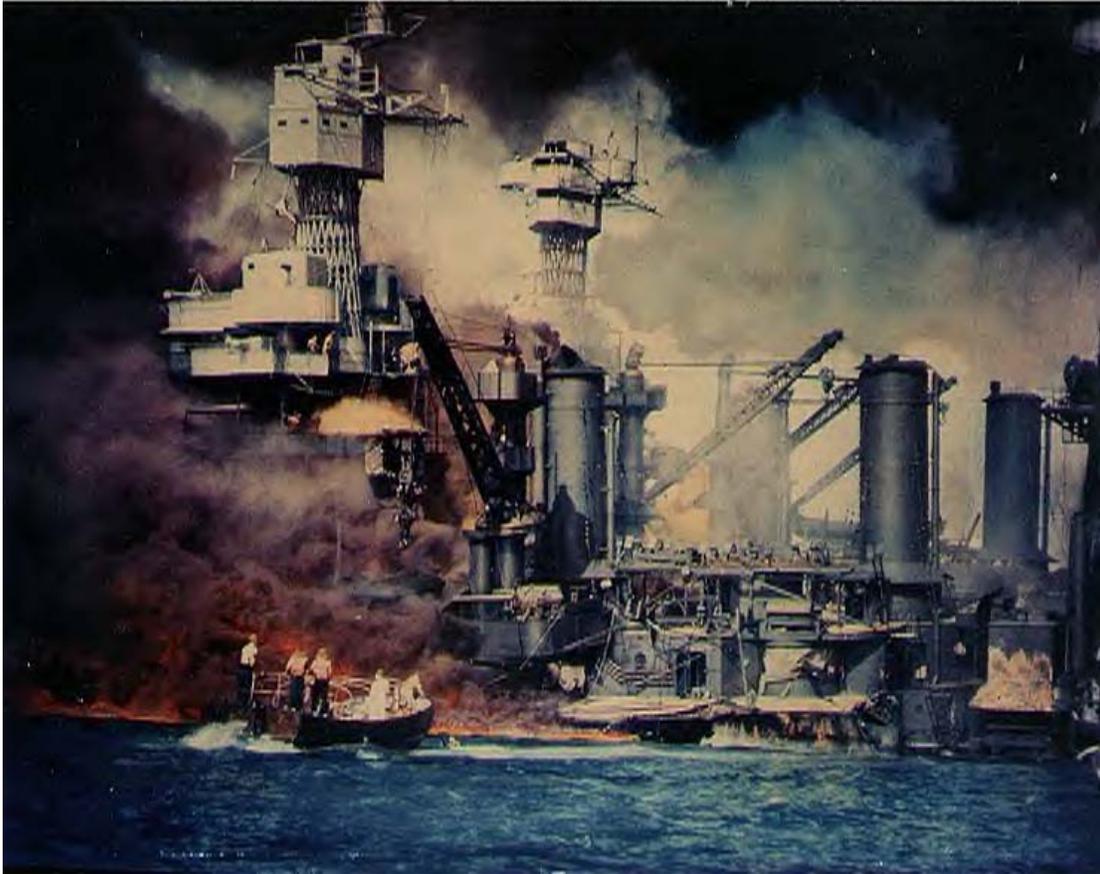
Photo # NH 50931 Japanese torpedo attack on "Battleship Row", Pearl Harbor, 7 Dec. 1941



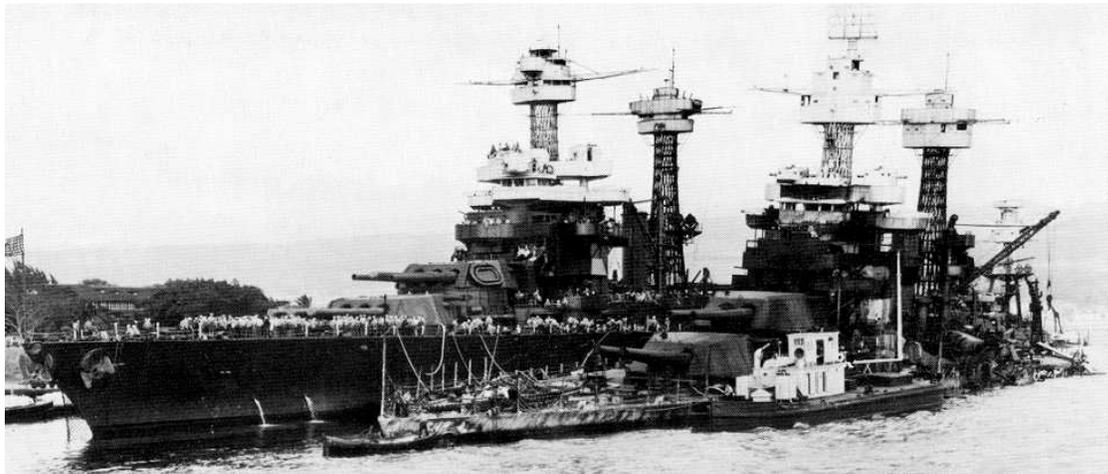
In this famous photo, you can see the torpedo wakes and the oil slick already enveloping the ship (at the very center of the photo). Stan was an excellent swimmer. He told me that as the ocean poured in, those who could wormed their way out of the hull—through the torpedoes holes if necessary. The strong tried to reach the surface and find gaps of open water not yet covered by flaming oil where they could gasp at breath. (Movies about Pearl Harbor just cannot capture this.) He recounted how he struggled his way around the dying ship, then past her twin, the battleship *Tennessee*. After that, Stan and his fellow sailors had to heave themselves over the wall that separated "Battleship Row" from Ford Island,

finally to collapse on the island's shoreline. He didn't know how he made it. Photos of the flaming *West Virginia* and the listing *Tennessee* shows what he went through.

Photo # U.S. Army C-5904 Rescuing survivor near USS *West Virginia*, during Pearl Harbor raid



The USS *Tennessee* and the shore behind.



Ford Island was chaos. The only personnel who seemed to "keep it together," he recalled, were the nurses. They laid out the survivors, and began triage where they could. The men did not then have tags, so the sailors were asked "names and ship." Stan was mute with shock. (In the kitchen, his voice was soft by this time.) Then, somehow, he arched his head over to see the harbor. There he witnessed his beloved *WeeVee*. His home, as sailors felt about their ships, was aflame and grounded on the bottom. He told me that all he could do was burst into tears and cry inconsolably. His voice cracked as he told me it was the only time that he could never pronounce the name of his ship.

The nurses put him and others on stretchers as help arrived from the far end of the island installations. He and others were placed across the beds of pickup trucks that were speeding across the airfield. Strapped on to the stretcher, and then bound to others like logs on a raft, they started off. As he looked toward the sky, the air filled again with shellfire and the whine of dive bombers and strafing Zeros. The second wave had arrived. I can still remember his face and his voice, but mostly it was those orange oven mitts that waved as he motioned his way through the web of personal memory. It was an extraordinary contrast between the most wholesome coziness of an aromatic kitchen and the nature of the story.

Stan survived and recovered from injury. By late summer, he was assigned an electrician's mate to his second navy family, the USS *Drayton*, a five year old Mahan-class destroyer. After training and overhaul on the West Coast, the *Drayton* set sail in early November to join a task force off Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. Literally, Stan had been at sea again only a few days when the ship was posted to screen a mixed cruiser force that patrolled "Iron Bottom Sound." That first night witnessed another fearsome moment in the annals of naval combat: the dreadful Battle of Tassafaronga. It was one of the worst defeats ever suffered by the U.S. Navy, and when I asked him about it, he reverted in temperament to a hardnosed "tar," using language (esteemed historian, college president) best left "on the waterfront." He talked about gathering the dead and wounded from the USS *Northampton* and his second experience of terrifying midnight surface combat.

How did he become a historian? The captain of the *Drayton* had seen promise in the able seaman and offered him a spot for advancement training to become an officer later in the Pacific Campaign. Stan took that offer, found himself enrolled in officer candidate preparation, and ended the war with a new appreciation for education. Through the navy, he completed a B.N.S. from Notre Dame in 1945, then a B.A. from Baldwin Wallace two years later. The G.I. Bill helped him to an M.A. program at Western Reserve in 1950, where he began his specialization in French history under John H. Stewart, himself an understudy of Carl Becker at Cornell. Stewart was, thus, a member of the "Becker crowd," comprising Gottshalk, Gershoy, Palmer, Bruun, and Wilma Pugh, who defined (much of) the American study of the French Revolution for a generation. Stan recounted what Stewart's seminar was like for the new students. He sat all of the enrolled students in his class and simply passed out bound volumes of eighteenth-century or Revolutionary-era French texts. The students were told to translate random pages there; no preparation, no latitude. If you couldn't pass the test, you were dismissed from the study. But the young women and men who survived were nurtured for life by dissertation directors who

practically adopted them. He recalled how the A.H.A. meetings were often undertaken in hotel suites, which Gottschalk or Stewart or others might rent, for their friends and understudies to attend in an atmosphere that was far more informal and personel than the experience has held for many perhaps over more recent decades.

Idzerda completed his doctorate by 1952. Formally, it was under Stewart, but the thesis was distinct from most of his colleagues in the 1940s and 1950s. Stan's dissertation was heavily influenced by Cleveland's Museum of Art, where he took coursework removed from Stewart's politically moderate conservatism. "Art and the State in the French Revolution" was "cutting edge" historiography in the year of Cold War McCarthyism. Rather than focusing on political biography, the history of an "idea," or a single political issue, Stan took to the analysis of iconoclasm through Revolutionary art and the degree to which these symbols portrayed the cultural tenor of the era as an arm of the government from 1789 to the rise of the Directory. This was new ground, which he shared in exploring with David Dowd, who had just completed his equally classic study of Jacques-Louis David and propaganda art. Reading the works of Crow, Landes, and Hunt on French revolutionary art in the 1990s, it is interesting to see how Dowd and Idzerda were trying to understand some of these same issues (minus gender as a category), but without any real historiographic basis from which to guide art into what we now call cultural studies. Even French historiography on the Revolution was of little assistance. French art history that studied iconography in a historical-social setting tended to focus on the pre-Enlightenment centuries, such as that of Émile Mâle.

His career as a historian centered on Michigan State College from 1952 (after a brief instructorship at Western Michigan), and within a decade he was Director of the Honors College at East Lansing. Stan also served as secretary to the Midwest region of the American Society for Aesthetics—he was one of the few historians of the group. And he was an active member of the newly-formed Society for French Historical Studies, including his term as President in 1961-1962. Although his real heart was with teaching, Stan's focus increased over the 1960s to administration, especially the recruitment of students and the degree to which education had to adapt in the 1960s to a period of rapid change. His scholarship rather dropped to book reviews and occasional short essays related to teaching and the general public.

His writings, such as his "Blue Book" pamphlet for the A.H.A.'s Service Center for Teachers of History, *The Background to the French Revolution* (1959), tended to consensual interpretation. It wasn't in his nature to be argumentative or sharply critical to an American colleague who, he felt, was part of the family of European scholarship in a period of exciting growth and optimism. Thus he could lend equal praise for Leo Gershey's empathetic revision of the life of Bertrand Barère, as well as Christopher Dawson's defense of "Christian civilization in the West." Politically, Stan was what one might call a liberal Catholic who placed mutual understandings above strict loyalties to a self-identity. He was a great admirer of George Lefebvre, Carl Becker, Beatrice Hyslop, and Robert Palmer. The very rare time that he wrote contested remarks about a book occurred in his response to Peter Gay's (polemical?) idealization of a secular Enlightenment as the proper "Heavenly City" for twentieth-century society in America.

In 1965, he accepted a move back east to Wesleyan University as its dean of the college. By the fall of 1968, an opportunity arose for greater “tranquility and contemplation” with an offer to accept the presidency of the College of St. Benedict, a Benedictine “girl’s school” (to use an obsolete term) that was the sibling “boy’s institution” of St John’s College in central Minnesota. As with many small gendered religious colleges, by the late 1960s St Ben’s faced a dangerous decline in reputation and enrollment due to the limited funding and more pluralistic religious culture that had reached even the shores of “Lake Wobegon,” (or Stearns County). Best told by Annette Atkins, Flynn Professor in the Humanities at SJ/SB, in her memoirs of the college:

"[I] was surprised to discover what a huge financial obligation the nuns took on in order to found, develop and run the college. Amid so many other obligations, such as staffing grade schools and high schools, nursing at hospitals and other locations and various types of missions, the nuns kept the college going...The first male president of the college, Stan Idzerda...was appointed in 1968 and brought new perspectives. [Though] not Benedictine and from the area...he both promoted the college outside and also persuaded the people in the college it was really good....Idzerda saw the future of women's colleges and knew CSB needed to increase enrollment to thrive. At the time, many women's colleges tried to make accommodations to "brother" schools but didn't survive or were absorbed. During his time, enrollment at the college increased by almost 650 students."³

After half a decade, during the height of the Vietnam War and its impact on campuses across Minnesota, Stan took up a new opportunity to serve as editor of the papers of the Marquis de Lafayette deposited at Cornell. For five years, he worked at Cornell to organize the vast collection and plan its publication before returning to St Joseph in 1979 to resume his duties as a European historian until his retirement from teaching in 1990. Stan was assisted by Robert Crout, Linda Pike, Mary Ann Quinn, Kramer and others to produce five full volumes over the years 1977 to 1983 on "Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution." Robert Crout noted for this piece that one of his real strengths (often downplayed perhaps in the review of scholars’ careers) was his critical importance

in raising money for the publication of the Lafayette series. Stan's contacts with foundations (many made through his previous administrative posts) allowed him to locate the matching funding that allowed the Lafayette Project to proceed until 1981. He spent much of his time not only in editing documents but out "on the hustings" fundraising. Stan's Lafayette volumes also set a pattern of "selected papers editions" that resulted from federal cutbacks that made earlier comprehensive printed editions both unfeasible financially and logistically. Many of the older documentary editions eventually adopted his selective edition concept in a funding world of increasingly limited means. So on many fronts Stan was a trend-setter of new

³ Cori Hilsgen, “Atkins Tells History of CBS Women and Times,” *The Newsleaders*, 1 August 2013 <http://www.thenewsleaders.net/2013/08/01/challenging-women/> (accessed 28 August 2013).

directions even in this emerging field of the Association for Documentary Editing that scholars have come to depend on.

A coda to this work became a collection of essays on the Marquis for an exhibition on the figure for the bicentennial in 1989. Clearly, it was in part a labor of love, in which perhaps Stan was recognizing the generation of Becker at Cornell and Gottschalk's transatlanticism that had so much influence over his own professional life.

There are of course many different reasons to pause and reflect on historians as they pass from our theater of the living. Often, we focus on the intellectual achievement in a field. Sometimes, historians come to symbolize a greater social ideal of a generation, often through public engagement that reflects the better conscience of the present in our guild. In truth, it would be wrong to place Stan Idzerda on top of such a pedestal. He lived a more humble life than that. But his experience truly represents that last of a kind, in terms of [the] both the interwar generation who experienced the trauma of battle in a war so fortunately removed from those who followed in academia, and as one of the founding planks of "bridges of tolerance" that was so needed in the first years of postwar professional history in the United States.

Without exaggerating the legacy, we won't see his like again.

John Harvey
St Cloud State University
jlharvey@stcloudstate.edu