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Revising history to show America's 'Secret Heroes'

By Ashley Strickland, Special to CNN
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Inez Boissevain is one of the women detailed within "Secret Heroes" as the "American Joan of Arc." Boissevain was a suffragist, labor lawyer, WWI correspondent and public speaker.

Our forgotten Americans

<< < 1 2 3 4 > >>

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Authors: Everyday Americans have influenced history as much as presidents, generals

Revising forgotten history allows people to connect with their pasts

Author Kenneth C. Davis believes history must be constantly revised

(CNN) -- For Paul Martin, fascinating history is a loud discovery in a quiet library.

The stories sneak up on him while he's on other quests, such as the time Martin was trying to find the first American awarded a military medal and found Hercules Mulligan, a forgotten spy who saved George Washington's life twice.

Martin has collected the stories of 30 Americans left out of the history textbooks in his new book, "Secret Heroes: Everyday Americans Who Shaped Our World."

Some other characters Martin brings to life include Henry Beachell, whose invention of "miracle rice" fed and supported Asia, Cynthia Ann Parker's steadfast endurance of 24 years of Native American captivity and Jonathan Letterman, whose medical organization on the battlefield revolutionized the treatment of wounded soldiers and saved countless lives during the Civil War.

"These characters were relatively unknown, but what they did has had ripples that continue to affect us," Martin said. "Hercules Mulligan saved the life of the father of our country. Think of what

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would have happened if he hadn't been a tailor in New York City.

"Everyday Americans have had a huge impact on our history -- it isn't always presidents and generals who set the course for the country."

The characters called to him from the pages of history books, whispered from brief mentions of TV shows and clambered from the pages of historical society records, all begging to share their stories with someone who would listen.

"Secret Heroes" is the latest offering in a continuous genre of books that aim to remind us of our forgotten past and changes how we understand it.

Martin has lived through history and has been captivated by it. He worked as a journalist during the Vietnam War, chronicling Vietnam's struggle to reconnect itself. Then he worked for the National Geographic Society for 30 years, the last 10 as executive editor for National Geographic Traveler.

Throughout the years, a single running theme has connected his experiences: lifting the underdog. Unearthing forgotten stories from the country's founding is a way to remind us what everyday people are capable of accomplishing.

But why do people care today?

[Kenneth C. Davis](#), author of the famed "Don't Know Much About ..." series and "America's Hidden History," says that history isn't a dead thing of the past but an actively created and revised thing that affects our decisions every day.

"In school, we focus on the 'important people' and Founding Fathers, but what that 'great man version' of history does is really leave out an awful lot of people who have tremendous impact," Davis said.

When Davis was in high school history class in 1968, women, African-Americans and Native Americans were noticeably absent from the textbook. Revisionism is a dirty word to some, but Davis said it's an important aspect of history.

Teachers and textbook writers still struggle today to include ethnic heritage, but some school districts aim to keep the same version of history we've always been taught, case being [Tuscon's suspension of Mexican-American studies](#).

"We need to revise history because we learn things all of the time about the stories and people who were left out," he said.

This is especially the case in elementary school history classes, he said. Myths about George Washington chopping down a cherry tree are taught in the place of truth, so history starts on a shaky foundation of fiction, Davis said. Learning truth in the place of fiction later in high school makes history harder to grasp.

"People want to paint a picture of the past that is filled with pride and patriotism, especially for children, and that is a valuable thing," he said. "It gives us a sense of national identity and character, but it creates a very false history that is sanitized of the stories that don't fit in neatly with the real history."

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Retired American history teacher Jane Serkedakis watched textbooks change dramatically during her 33-year career. She doesn't believe that children are necessarily taught "wrong" information at a young age, she said, but there's an unbalanced emphasis on certain aspects of American history.

"It would be difficult to deal with third-graders and American history's real nuances of slavery," she said. "It is in high school where we examine Thomas Jefferson as a paradox -- he owned slaves but was a complete champion of democracy. They aren't taught wrong, it's just that they can't go into all of that detail at such a young age."

The emphasis on military history consumes the curriculum for high school history classes. The emphasis turned off students who wanted to learn more than dates and battles; people, places and facts, not dates, make history come to life, Serkedakis said.

In her Advanced Placement U.S. history class for 11th-graders, Serkedakis included a "visitors" assignment for each era, where students played the part of important figures in American history and brought them to life in the classroom. Books such as "Secret Heroes" can be a resource for teachers to use in this way, she said.

It is this approach to teaching history that [Rick Beyer](#), author of "The Greatest Stories Never Told" and "The Ghost Army of World War II," finds most beneficial to students. Realizing that names and figures of the past were living, breathing human beings makes them as relatable as finding your grandfather's address in the [newly released the 1940 census documents](#), he said.

John Quincy Adams, son of second President John Adams, is a prime example, Beyer said. Fact tells us that Adams walked out of the White House and went skinny-dipping in the Potomac River each day.

"It doesn't change your understanding of American history, but suddenly that guy seems less like an old black-and-white photograph, and a little more like a person," Beyer said. "If you restrict yourself to the Wikipedia version of history, you lose all of the color, delight and excitement of the adventure that is the lives of each one of these people."

Because history is everything that ever happened, from every war to every love affair, the untold stories that turn expectations upside down are the ones worth exploring, Beyer said. And because what we care about at 26 or 36 differs greatly from the portrait of our interest at 16, discovering history for the first time a decade or two after high school can make those stories even more important.

That is what Davis, Beyer and Martin aim to remind us with their books, bursting with the people and places lost to time and rekindled in lifelike detail. Every good story is one worth retelling, and our own history is full of them, many filled with the undeniable spirit and tenacity of the patriotic principles we learn from myths.

"There really are two large categories of heroes," Martin said of his book's title. "Most of us think of someone as a hero who risks his or her life when there is some immediate danger -- a soldier rescuing a fellow on the battlefield.

"But the other type of hero is one who simply perseveres, who overcomes overwhelming odds, even if it might take an entire

lifetime."

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boatrocker

The only imprisonment Cynthia Anne Parker "endured" was that of her own family, after being "rescued" by the Texas Rangers. She starved herself to death out of grief because her relatives refused to let her return to her Numuu (Comanche) people. As a distant relative of Cynthia Anne, I find this portrayal tremendously offensive on behalf of the Parker family.

4 days ago 1 Like

Like



CactusThorn

Ah, revisionist history.

4 days ago

Like



CactusThorn

Guess your correct Paul.

4 days ago in reply to CactusThorn

Like



CedarRapids

Hmm, in what way is it revisionist?

4 days ago in reply to CactusThorn 1 Like

Like



Paul232

As was the previous version, and the one before that, and as is all written history.

4 days ago in reply to CactusThorn 1 Like

Like



alherrle

what would the Nazis do? They would shine the light on those who meet their tests. The moral right determines what goes into the text books. I suppose it is ok to change history if you have a democratic vote of a majority of crackpots.
BTW did you see how quickly Dr. Werner Von Braun has disappeared?
Yep, just what the Nazi Party would do.

4 days ago

Like



Paul232

But what they are changing wasn't "history" either, just the previous version written by different people.

4 days ago in reply to alherrle 1 Like

Like



Obregon1104

Yes you are. Humanizing our leaders rather than deifying them is always better. It helps us have realistic expectations for the present, helps us discard our disappointments with the past (blaming the leaders of the past for not doing more than they really could) and lets us know just what we personally can also accomplish.

5 days ago

Like



CactusThorn

Gosh, I'm a much better person knowing John Quincy Adams went skinny dipping on the same river Barack Husein Obama walks on.

5 days ago 1 Like

Like



kamana

The five essentials of slavery are treachery, deceit, cowardice, violence and murder. No one can succeed as a slaver without those five essentials. The scoundrels that founded this country (Washington, Jefferson, Monroe, et al) were all successful slavers.

5 days ago 3 Likes

Like

**alherrle**

these are all the saint founding fathers that many would present as the model for us to follow. don't ya know that they are looking in mirrors. remember, these same people sought a right for all free men with at least 10 acres of land should vote. yep, the rich white guys ruled. Err rule.

4 days ago in reply to kamana 3 Likes

Like

**Johnnyleen**

All of the American history classes I had growing up were filled with a series of self-congratulatory stories one after the other. For example, the Allied Powers in WW II were presented as a group of nations begging the US for help and who then sat back and allowed the US to fight and win the war single handedly. The Founding Fathers never argued among themselves or disagreed with one another. The Vietnam War was completely left out, probably because we spent the entire term talking about how we won WW II.

5 days ago 6 Likes

Like

**IPadMyPockets**

Down here in Texas, our governor and his Republican buddies like to inject conservative Christian white folk stories into our history books at every opportunity because after all, conservative Christian white folks invented everything, discovered everything and owned everything...including some non-white, non-conservative Christians whom these selfsame conservative Christian white folks just can't admit to beating, murdering and enslaving in the selfsame history books.

To the victor go the spoils and the right to tell a baldfaced lie about history.

5 days ago 9 Likes

Like

**CvrtPilot**

You have no idea what you are talking about do you?

The history books in Texas today are almost identical to those I used when Ann Richards (Dem) was Governor.

Just trying to make some BS political spin aren't you?

Oh and out of 47 Texas Governors only 6 have been Republican and out of the last four 3 had democrat LT Governor's, including Bush.

5 days ago in reply to IPadMyPockets 7 Likes

Like

**BossMoney**

All the more reason education should be one of America's priorities....but why do the GOP wanna cut funding to public schools and wage wars on teachers?? Well, an ignorant public is easier to lie to and manipulate.....

5 days ago 7 Likes

Like

**drowlord**

Our education system is a joke. All of the industrialized world does it better. And here's the shocking bit: Most of them start school later (in Finland, for instance, where most of my family lives, they start at 8 years old, not 5), they have shorter school days, no homework, no parent involvement, and a fraction of our budget. America spends more per capita on education than any other country in the world. We just do it wrong. And the most notable difference is that we wildly emphasize history and art (literature). Nobody else does that. It hugely detracts from our education.

5 days ago in reply to BossMoney 2 Likes

Like

**TheMovieFan2**

Fortunately, we have the history channel to tell us all about ancient aliens & Nostradamus. With this information, we can have a better understanding of current events and make wise choices in the voting booth.

5 days ago 9 Likes

Like



Johnnyleen

Since the world is going to end this December according to the History Channel's programming about the Mayan calendar, it's probably better to not make any choices at all and just sit around a wait.

5 days ago in reply to TheMovieFan2 1 Like

Like



Pooua

A reason history is recited is to show how one's group got where it is. Quite often, that means leaving out a lot of interesting information. Classrooms, in particular, leave out a lot of information, due to lack of time, knowledge and resources. Most classes are mere introductions to the subjects discussed, even in college.

I live in a quiet area, Plano in Texas. The neighborhoods for miles around me are filled with modest family homes and unimposing businesses. Yet, I have discovered that we have extensive secret history here, too. The Muncey Massacre, of "Indians" from out West on early White settlers, took place about 4 miles from my home. The first train robbery in Texas history took place another 6 miles farther. We have the only known surviving reservoir retention dam made for steam trains in the nation. Our Chief "Spotted Tail," is hardly known on the Internet (in preference to a more famous chief of that name), but he appears to have persuaded other tribes not to attack the local White settlers, and he lost his life when he volunteered to bury dead Whites from a disease outbreak.

5 days ago 5 Likes

Like



Slider86

"Cynthia Ann Parker's steadfast endurance of 24 years of Native American captivity"

Spin much?

Cynthia Ann Parker was kidnapped by the Comanches when she was nine years old. She was adopted by them (not enslaved, as some captives were) and raised as one of them. She became the wife of a chief. She became Comanche. Then, 24 years later, she was stolen back, along with her infant daughter, by Texas Rangers. Her baby soon died, and then the grief-stricken Cynthia Ann also died. Her son, Quanah, went on to become the most famous Comanche Chief.

It's an amazing story, but I don't think it makes her an American hero.

5 days ago 10 Likes

Like



boatrocker

Absolutely true. Cynthia was stolen by the Texans, and held a prisoner by her family. She starved herself to death out of grief for her daughter and lost husband and son.

4 days ago in reply to Slider86 3 Likes

Like



pmichner

The best-kept secret heroes are the ones you never ever hear about because, well, they're *secret*.

5 days ago 5 Likes

Like



mrsalt

The fact people do not cares about history will change the world,and not in a good way.

5 days ago 4 Likes

Like

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