

UNC's Hugh Talmage Lefler

The Rocky Road Of A Dedicated Historian

Few Are Content With Plain Facts

By ROY THOMPSON
In The Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel

Dr. Hugh Talmage Lefler has been accused of being pro-Anglican, pro-Democratic party, anti-Quaker and even anti-North Carolina.

But when word came that one of his history books had been considered too sexy in Levittown, Pa., Dr. Lefler was flabbergasted. After a moment's thought, however, the University of North Carolina history professor just chuckled and said, "This is where I came in. I've been in this fight before."

Life in the historian's ivory tower can be livelier than outsiders would ever dream. Take the Levittown controversy for example.

One of the 19 books written, edited or co-edited by Lefler had attracted the attention of a school-teacher there. Although the book was not school issue, the teacher had asked his students to buy it, and they had.

One small section of the book was devoted to the early American custom of bundling. The head of the department of social studies happened to read this section late last year. He didn't like the section, and he tore the offending pages out of the books.

Later, the school board banned the book. The NEW YORK TIMES told the story and Lefler was involved in another controversy.

He still doesn't see what the excitement is all about, but his only complaint at the moment is that the department head—in tearing pages out of privately-owned books—was probably overstepping his authority.

Even this, however, Lefler says with a smile.

AN OLD STORY TO HIM

He's been in this fight before. It all has to do, Lefler says, with the six major problems that confront any professional historian. "The Six Ps," Lefler calls them:

"Pride, prejudice, patriotism,

provincialism, politics, and pressure groups."

Before meeting his problems, meet the man.

Hugh Lefler is a native of Cooleemee, Davie County, North Carolina—a fact often overlooked when critics find fault with his comments on state history.

His education began in the public schools of North Carolina and was uneventful. Then Lefler became something of a scholastic jinx.

He attended Weaver Junior College in Weaverville. It closed soon after he left it.

He took his bachelor's and master's degrees at Trinity, which soon changed its name to Duke.

He got his doctorate at the University of Pennsylvania, and, since this is the only institution that has survived his attendance, he considers it his alma mater.

Lefler is a balding man with heavy black brows that are a trademark of the family.

He's something of a novelty in his field, for Lefler is both highly respected by other historians and adored by a majority of the 15,000 to 16,000 students who have passed through his classes during a 36-year teaching career.

All North Carolina grade school students are eventually exposed to a course in the history of their state.

The text is Lefler's. A few of them continue their study in college. The text, once more, is Lefler's: "North Carolina: The History of a Southern State."

This one—which he wrote with a colleague, the late Dr. Albert Ray Newsome—is the only North Carolina history book available for the college-level student. Lefler likes to describe it as "the best, the sorriest and the only one."

He is busy at the moment bringing this book up to date. By the time the new edition comes out in the spring of 1963, it will cover the state's history up to last November's bond election. Lefler says this is his "swan song" in writing state history.

This book is generally regarded

Leflerisms

Most college students find it difficult to remember what their professors said in class.

Dr. Hugh Talmage Lefler has a way of saying things unforgettably.

A few samples from a recent lecture to his noon class on North Carolina history:

"Dollar bills used to be larger than they are now. I guess they're making them smaller now because they don't buy as much."

"The most miserable failures in public life have been the college professors of history and political science who have gotten into it."

In the period around 1830 "if a man ran for public office and he was educated, it was held against him. I'm not so sure that it's not true today."

"Federal aid started North Carolina's public schools. I don't like to say that because I don't believe in federal aid to education."

In 1817, the state's tax revenue was \$98,000. Lefler said, "It makes me drool at the mouth to think that people ever paid so little in taxes."

At about that time, "North Carolina was ignorant—and proud of its ignorance."

"No other country in the world is so niggardly in paying public officials as the United States of America. . . . The president of a small cotton mill makes more money than the governor of North Carolina does. I don't know a governor in my lifetime who's broken even on the job."

On the subject of his specialty—state history—Lefler said:

"There are certain inherited ideas or beliefs in the history of every state that all loyal and patriotic citizens are supposed to accept without question."

A state's heritage often includes "a combination of fact and fancy with an occasional myth thrown in for good measure."

"There seems to have been a strong determination on the part of certain individuals and groups to perpetuate the factual errors and false interpretations that they have been brought up on."

"The truth is that people believe what they want to believe, and the state historian is going to find it difficult, if not impossible, to make people unlearn what they have heard from infancy. Why not? In countless articles in newspapers and popular magazines, on radio and television programs and in the speeches of politicians and others, the citizen of the state reads, sees and hears so many 'facts' about his state which are not facts at all."

HE WANTS JUST THE FACTS

"The average person in North Carolina believes anybody else before he believes the professional historian."

"If you question these things, you get a reputation for debunking."

Lefler's interest is not in debunking history. He just wants to set it straight.

The best example for Tar Heels, he says, is the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence.

The state flag has on it the date May 20, 1775. On that date, according to legend or history (depending on your point of view), the citizens of Mecklenburg County declared themselves free of English rule. The story has been cherished by Tar Heels for nearly two centuries.

Lefler grinned and said, "You can get in some trouble with Charlotte here, Bud."

Lefler won't say that it didn't happen that way, but he does say that "no professional historian living or dead" has ever given the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence the historians' seal of approval.

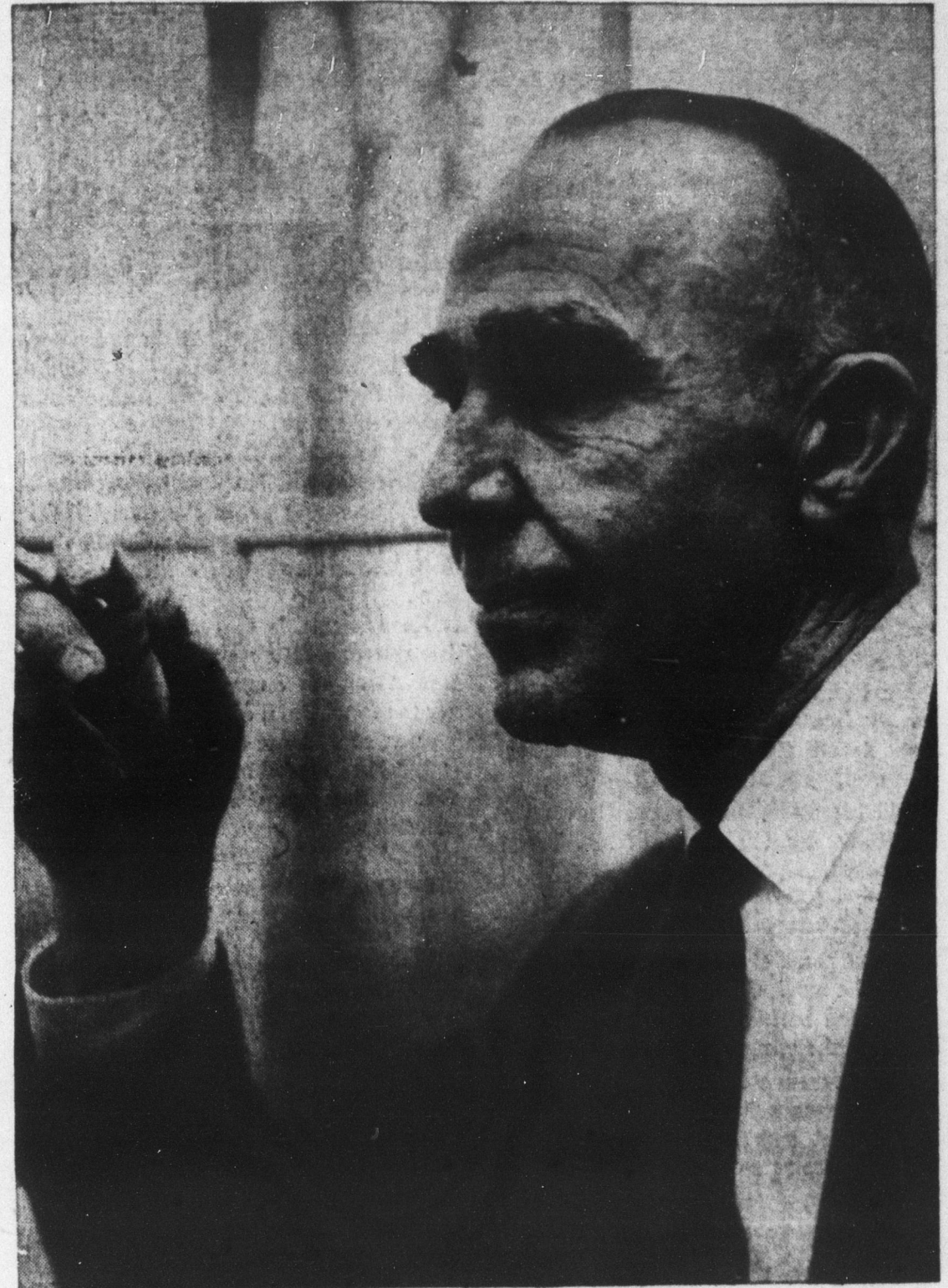
Sound like a lot of fuss over very little?

Less than 20 years ago, the North Carolina Legislature considered a bill which would have made it a crime to use any book in the public schools of North Carolina which denied the legitimacy of Mecklenburg's own Fourth of July. The bill was defeated, but the sentiment for it was strong.

Lefler and Newsome knew all this when they began to write their college-level history. So what did they do?

Lefler smiled and said, "We hedged on it a little. We gave both sides—or tried to."

While this is the best-known



He Learned To Dodge The Slings And Arrows

point of friction between the professional historians and the myth perpetrators, there are many others . . .

Descendants of Tar Heels with tarnished reputations, for example, are continually demanding that historians speak nothing but good of the dead.

Lefler's point of view: "The fact that they're dead has nothing to do with whether they were honest or dishonest when they were living."

Then there are "patriotic societies" with "their own ideas about history" that "occasionally insist that these ideas be presented in the . . . books and in the classroom."

And "politicians may applaud the historian who refers to corruption in the opposition's party," but they may give trouble to "the state historian who suggests that there had been a governor of the dominant party who mishandled state funds."

One of the touchiest problems, Lefler said, is the problem of writing about desegregation in the public schools of the South.

A North Carolina historian who includes "a mere factual statement about the Pearsall Plan," Lefler said, will be branded an integrationist by the Patriots of North Carolina—and a segregationist by the NAACP.

For the historian who writes books and hopes to sell them, the big market is with publishers of (Continued on Page 3-B)

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as a must for aspiring politicians of the state. There's a copy in Gov. Terry Sanford's office and in just about every other office in the state capitol building in Raleigh.

Nine out of 10 arguments over state history in North Carolina probably end in a quotation that begins:

"Lefler says . . ."

But take a look at the man in class. He strides into his large classroom (it has to be big to accommodate the crowd) with the last echoing peals of the bell, pulls his jacket off and starts talking.

It's not just a lecture when Lefler is talking. He has a face that can shift from a smile to a frown to an impish wink and into a deep scowl of indignation with the swiftness of thought.

His talk keeps pace with his expressions: you need shorthand training to keep satisfactory notes in a Lefler course.

His glasses are popped on when he reads but disappear when he's ready to face his class again.

A course under Lefler is a revelation to students who come to him with the opinion that history is dry stuff.

"Students," Lefler says, "don't want to be bored."

He doesn't bore them. He gives them the skeleton on which history is built—the names, dates and places which have plagued history students since long before the founding of the Lost Colony.

But Lefler sugar-coats his pills of history with frequent detours down the byways of history.

"Eisenhower, Adlai Stevenson and Alben Barkley all have common ancestors in Rowan County."

"We've named one of the buildings on this campus for one of the worst enemies this university ever had."

"The story on Thomas Hart Benton is that he stole money from the literary society here and was kicked out of the university. That's not true. He stole from his roommate."

CHOICE BETWEEN EXTREMES

Speaking of the early history of the state he said, "We had Little Government then. Now we have Big Government. Government does everything. I don't know which of the extremes is worse."

Then, with a grin, he said, "That's my sermon for today."

Lefler enjoys lecturing. Something he said about it may explain his zest for it:

"I can say things in class I wouldn't put into print. You can always deny what you've said orally."

Writing history is quite a different matter. World history is difficult. National history is more so. City, county and church histories are worst of all, Lefler says. Whatever the field, one major problem lies in finding time for the writing. Lefler's production has been prodigious, and some

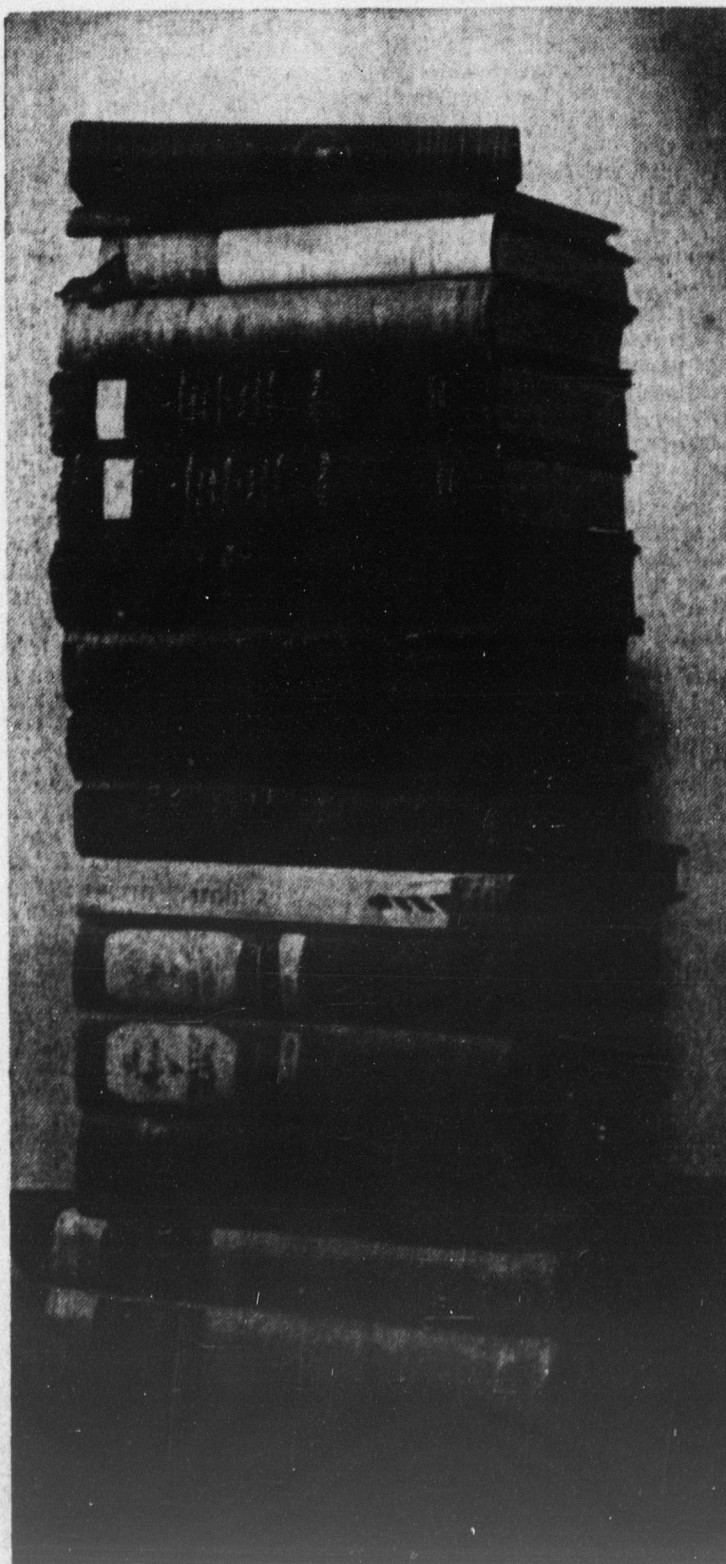
have wondered how a man with a full teaching load ever found time to do so much writing.

Lefler said, "I don't know—looking back on it—how I did it either. I've just worked all the time. Nights, and vacations. A great deal of the time in summers."

Recently, plagued by poor health, he's had to cut out the night work.

He says he has no regular writing schedule and has just turned to the typewriter when he had some spare time.

It's surprising, Lefler said, how much a man can get done just using the bits and pieces of time he has available day in and day out.



Books By Hugh Lefler

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