

Charlie's 'court' convenes for the last time

The university atmosphere often casts history in an academic light — far removed from the actual experiences of real people. But some individuals live their life in a way that transcends these artificial limitations. Occasionally their experiences become legendary.

Charlie Smith was only 12 years old when he was kidnapped by white slave traders in Liberia.

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They shackled him within the belly of a slave ship bound for New Orleans and sold him off the auction block to a Texas rancher.

Charlie's iron shackles probably rusted away decades ago, and that slave ship has long since been eaten by the Atlantic's brine. But Charlie outlived all of the slavetraders' hardware. He died earlier this month at the tender age of 137.

Charlie never needed a family tree to trace his roots. His first-hand stories of Liberia in the 1850's always drew a spellbound crowd. Eventually, the

Florida nursing home where he spent his last few years became Charlie's court.

Charlie held court quite regularly, spinning yarns that grew to mythical dimensions with each passing year. We will never know whether Charlie actually rode with Jesse James, as he claimed, since all witnesses to such adventures have bitten the dusty trail. But Charlie's history isn't really geared for textbook treatment.

Charlie's history is best seen as a history we all share in, though we were not there to witness all of the changes Charlie must have experienced during his 137 years. He saw the US in its darkest days of Civil War strife, discovered the free-wheeling expansion of the western frontier as a young man, lived through two world wars, then witnessed the the burgeoning of the atomic age. During all that time, Charlie lived quietly beneath the veil of anonymity.

When he was first "discovered" by Social Security officials, Charlie was picking citrus fruit in central Florida. He was 113 years old at the time.

His age and former-slave status were officially confirmed by documents unearthed in New Orleans and Texas.

But no document could ever hold much of Charlie's legend. He kept his diary in his head. And for friends — who became his courtly attendants — the book was always open.

Those friends — including one surviving 70-year-old son — helped Charlie write his final chapter on Saturday, Oct. 6th, the day following his death. (Charlie had asked to be buried on a Saturday, because it was the day which brought him the most enjoyment in his younger years.)

As a crowd of 600 friends and admirers strolled past Charlie's casket, one young woman spoke for all who came as she rendered her last respects: "Good-bye, Charlie," she whispered.

Though the shackles rusted, the memory of their tenacious grip lived on in Charlie. The result was a man who learned to survive in a white man's society, without being ruled by the bitterness he had every right to feel.

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System's blight

Most Americans today live with a great deal of personal pain. It is a pain that lasts and often threatens to tear apart the groups we form, our relationships and sometimes our individual selves. This pain is the central factor on the political scene. Call it the destruction of the social fabric or the "Me Decade." It is the pain and anguish most people feel in their personal lives, day to day — the pain they desperately try to escape.

Drug addiction, alcoholism, child abuse, divorce, teenage suicide, juvenile crime, utter apathy and frenzied violence are all on the upward swing. These signs of the time and many others indicate the tremendous sense of dislocation in this country. Just under the mellow surface, anxiety and frustration, (useful escapes from action) are bubbling with gusto. You see it in the relationships that don't last, in the pervasive sense most of us have of not quite making it in a country whose slogan is increasingly, "Get yours."

We must begin to deal with the tremendous sense of dislocation, isolation and worthlessness most of us feel today. Capitalism produces it. It produces those alcoholic husbands who beat their wives and children. Capitalism creates the alcoholic wives, too, and the children who get into petty crimes and hard drugs. It produces the desperate singles, the elderly near starvation, the stoned assembly line worker. But it doesn't produce them directly or obviously. Capitalism's misery appears to be our own fault or the fault of those nearest and allegedly dearest.

The lies of advertising, the pap of prime-time television and the mind boggling string of crises and disasters that serve for news create a sense of confusion and fear. People scramble for too few jobs that all too often stifle one's spirit with boredom and repetition.

The idea is taught and constantly reinforced that people by

nature are greedy, competitive and aggressive; that we must solve our problems and find success individually. We must expose the social roots of the misery we feel, and find social, instead of merely individual, solutions to these problems.

We need a new kind of responsibility for each other. Not the old style, with the extended or nuclear family held together by fear and based on subordination of women and children.

We need a new vision — a vision, to be sure, that can only fully work when we all control the resources of society. We can't just fall back on the old solutions: the pursuit of material success, old time religion (East or West), Proposition 13 type cuts in government spending and services, putting women back in the home, etc. Neither can we rely solely on the pursuit of admittedly much needed reforms such as the Equal Rights Amendment or National Health Insurance to fill the gaps in our personal lives. We also need a vision of how each of us can begin to care for each other, how we can rebuild relationships, neighborhoods, and communities on a basis of trust. How we deal with personal chaos and pain amidst a shredded social fabric must be one of the central questions of the coming decade.

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Support asked

It is difficult sometimes to understand why we find ourselves involved at all. For instance there are perhaps several hundred people on this campus who work in student programs and undoubtedly we all suffer somewhat from Copernican eyes. We work for something we enjoy or believe in and in accordance with our values we invest much energy and time in creating a program that will offer a worthwhile activity or alternative to mundane student life. Those alternatives are of



immeasurable directions: social, academic, political, religious, etc...

So here I find myself director of a program called SEARCH. I've been here more than a year and since I've come here I've tried to follow an active policy of increasing SEARCH's activities on campus. Basically, SEARCH is a program that offers courses each term. Our courses are by and large different from those of the standard University curriculum for two reasons: the topics and the instructors.

The topics we cover aren't available anywhere else on campus. Courses in chiropractic, dentistry, mime, crisis intervention, Portuguese, Arabic, polarity therapy, and piano improvisation are only a few. The really interesting and stimulating aspect of SEARCH (for me anyway), however, is that students are almost always instructors. When a student switches roles and becomes the teacher with all the concomitant responsibilities, it sets up a fascinating dynamic within the classroom. Roles of authority breakdown, individual exploration is encouraged and it has been often been said that SEARCH classes are some of

the most stimulating because everyone in the class wants to be there. The energy of the class is incredibly vibrant.

The purpose of me writing this letter isn't really to explain SEARCH classes. It is rather to publicly request more support from the University community in our fund-raising activities. In addition to student instructors, we have been involved in bringing people from the community into the University to teach courses that you and I can take for credit. Think of how nice it would be to take a course in hot-air ballooning, acupuncture, or gold mining. To attract people into the University we need to offer a small honorarium in support of the time and energy it takes when someone commits themselves to teaching a course.

The only way SEARCH can offer a small honorarium is through fundraising. On Sunday nights, SEARCH sponsors a year long film series. The films are excellent and include titles that aren't seen year after year on campus. Unless we can raise the money, we can't pay prospective teachers and so we can't offer the kinds of alternatives that are out there waiting

to be grabbed.

I am asking for your support. See a movie and provide yourself with some interesting, unique courses. Remember, the movies are usually on Sunday nights. Thanks!

Wayne Miller
Director, SEARCH

letters policy

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