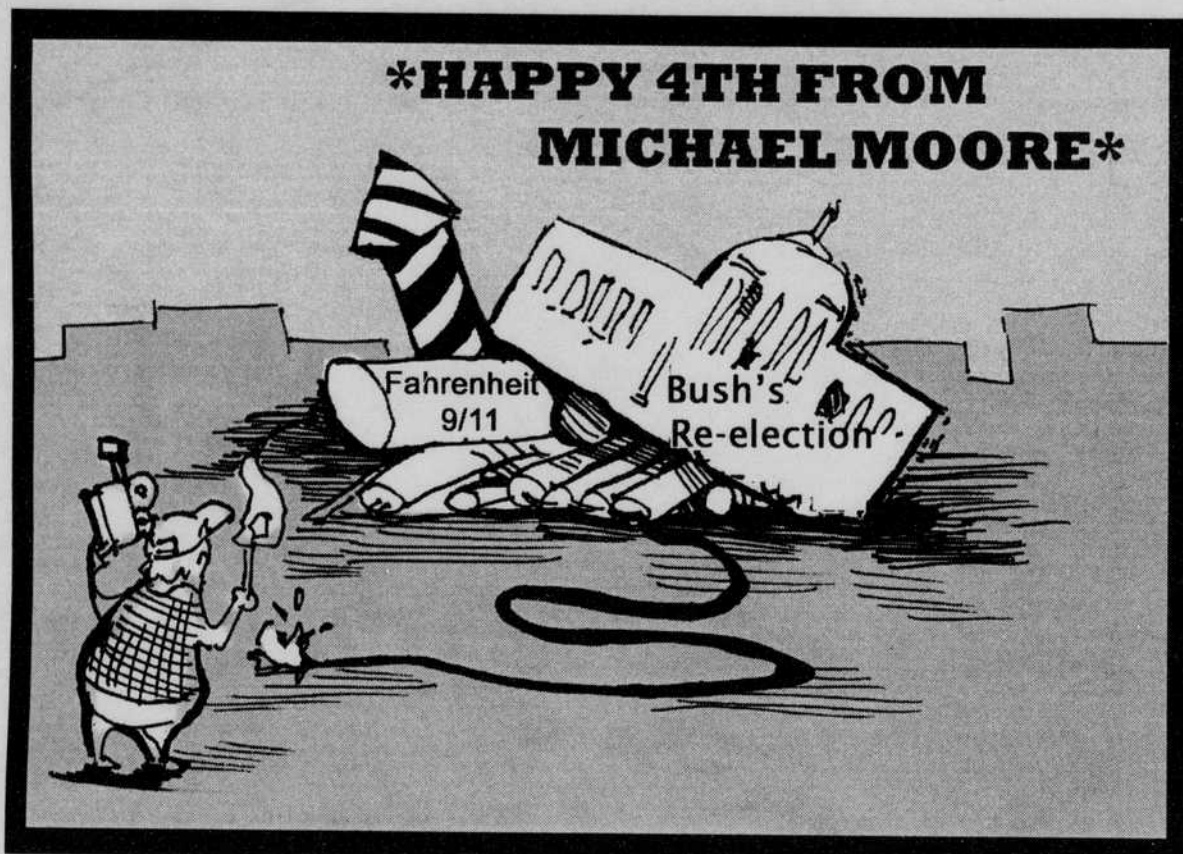


Thursday, July 8, 2004



Aaron Sullivan Illustrator

All in the family

In a bout of narcissism that only the free time of summer seems to afford, I've developed the poor habit of auto-Googleing. Searching for "willse," I stumbled on a few sites pieced together by mid-Atlantic local history wonks. Willse is an uncommon name (Yahoo! People Search returns only 62 results nationwide), but at least a few people have poured hours into excavating the stories and genealogies of Willses that came before. As it turns out, a Willse Hill Cemetery (populated, in part, by the eponymous bodies) sits in Stark, Herkimer County, N.Y., and in the closing decade of the 1700s, a farmhand named John Willse began building vessels in Poquott on Long Island, N.Y., launching a ship-building dynasty.

John Willse's nautical handiwork has little bearing on my life (Travis Willse's only recent carpentry accomplishment — fixing a bookshelf — was a less ambitious venture), and most East Coast local histories don't interest me. But, because of the name alone, reading about the 18th century entrepreneur invoked a sense of a nostalgia that I can't shake, even though I don't know whether there's a meaningful blood link.

This appeal is a powerful one: The burgeoning popularity of secularism and



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individualism has left family ties less socially influential than they were two centuries ago, but an interest in ancestral "family" — even very distant ancestors — lives on.

A case in point: During its 70-year rule, Mongolia's former communist government banned surnames (to weaken the influence of clans, in fact). During the 1990s, the nation's newly democratic government policy repealed the policy, and created a registry for surnames. Eventually, more than half of the population had chosen the name Borjigin (Master of the Blue Wolf), the name of 12th and 13th century Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan. Mongolians might not be far off: DNA evidence suggests, in fact, that 16 to 17 million men in Central Asia are likely descendants of the leader, whose empire once stretched across much of Eurasia.

Genghis Khan's legacy has seen a

renaissance in recent years, too. Most recently, in a bizarre fusion of "Brave New World" and "Cheers," the kebab restaurant and bar Shish is offering DNA tests at its London outlets to diners to learn whether they're descendants of the evidently prolific Mongol leader; those who are "win" a meal on the house. (The probably overlooked and ethically thorny issue of deciding whether to charge customers based on features like genetic heritage is interesting, but outside the scope of this column, because for scientific reasons, only men can be tested for Genghis Khan heritage.)

Still, for all of Genghis Khan's impressive accomplishments, he's a strange figure for nostalgia. When we can meaningfully criticize people from other historical contexts is a question that's been debated extensively elsewhere. But, it's likely that Genghis Khan hurt others in ways that any sane person in our culture would find reprehensible: rape, murder, theft and maybe horse thievery (the 13th century answer to grand theft auto, maybe).

So it is with ancestral reverence: The fact-sparse world of distant family histories and local tales is necessarily a romanticized one. We ought, however, to be careful of which facts we're romantic about.

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An unknown vet inspiring voters, Kerry first visited campus in 1972

May 11 marked a 32-year anniversary in Eugene which likely has been long forgotten. It was 1972 Democratic presidential primary campaign. The burning issue was the war in Vietnam. The enemy was President Nixon. The "Peace Candidate" was Senator George McGovern.

I was chairman of the University Students for McGovern. Eugene was charged with opposition to the war voiced by Senator Wayne Morse and Congressman Charlie Porter.

Our campus committee sponsored many surrogate speakers for McGovern. Some were famous, like John Kennedy's Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. Others were not well known, like a young Vietnam Veteran named John Kerry who spoke May 11 in an EMU meeting room. We billed Kerry as an anti-war spokesman with Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

Kerry arrived in his blue jeans and Vietnam war jacket. He was a warm, friendly guy — burning with

passion about the tragedy of the Vietnam War and in support of McGovern's campaign. Like most of the celebrity speakers he didn't require "special handling" for their egos. He was a regular guy. At our McGovern event Kerry had a full-house over-flow audience. The tall, thin young man with long dark hair gave an impassioned speech from a veteran's standpoint about the raging conflict and the paramount need to end that war. I remember him literally bringing those there to tears, reflecting on the great foreign policy debacle. Honestly you could see this was a great leader of humanity.

On our way leaving the EMU Kerry saw a large anti-war rally and wanted to know what this was about. The 'radicals' we told him — those so frustrated that they had abandoned hope in the 'system.' Kerry wanted to address the rally — to deliver our message and explain to them why it was worth voting and not to abandon hope.

We explained to Kerry this was very unlikely since the McGovern campaign was certainly not 'radical' enough for them. Kerry would not take 'no' for an answer.

So, Iain Moore, who was student body president, and I pleaded to let Kerry speak. Eventually the 'powers-that-be' gave way and consented to let Kerry speak, but only because he was a Vietnam veteran and providing he did

not mention voting or McGovern. I guess we didn't convey the 'conditions' to John very well.

As soon as Kerry took the stage he electrified the crowd moving them over and over to applause and ovation. All eyes were on the young war veteran whose name was unknown to the audience. Kerry exceeded the time allotted by the rally organizers and broke their terms as well. However, no one rose to take the mike away. Looking at them, the organizers were enraptured as well. The young man was telling the truth. He was someone that had been there.

If it was asked of those there that night if John Kerry "would" ever be President of the United States, I doubt if anyone would believe that was remotely possible. But, if it was asked if John Kerry "should" be President I know that idea would have electrified all of us.

I remember distinctly, Kerry wore his "Purple Heart."

John Stewart, who graduated from the University in 1976, lives in Antelope, Ore.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Jones's logic is unsound on First Amendment issue

The column "Check your hat at the door" (ODE, April 5) represented an astonishing new low for the commentary section of Emerald. In it, Marissa Jones states that she does not believe banning headscarves from public schools constitutes religious

discrimination. While she is certainly entitled to her opinion, Jones only manages to support her viewpoint by ignoring both the context surrounding this issue, as well as the rules of logic.

To begin with, Jones states that bandanas and hats "are often linked to current problems of gang activity in schools." However, many people who wear hats are not in gangs, and many people who are in gangs do not wear hats. And in a strange twist of logic,

Jones also manages to equate all religious groups to gangs, simply because some people kill other people based on religious differences. This is similar to saying that all shoes should be banned because criminals can run faster from the police when they have shoes on, which is obviously ridiculous. Therefore, her logic is completely unsound on both of these points.

The column also argues that religious headdresses and baseball caps

are the same. In reality, however, religious apparel carries a much greater significance than a baseball cap. For instance, to many Muslim women, wearing a hijab is a sign of modesty and faith; therefore, forcing those women to keep their heads uncovered essentially makes them dress in a way that could be too revealing for their emotional comfort.

Lastly, Jones states that banning religious headdresses is only fair when

she writes, "The rule either applies to all or none." While I would agree with this, I would argue that a rule already exists that fulfills this idea: the First Amendment. I suggest that next time, she should consult both the Bill of Rights and Supreme Court cases such as Tinker v. Des Moines before she writes another column.

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