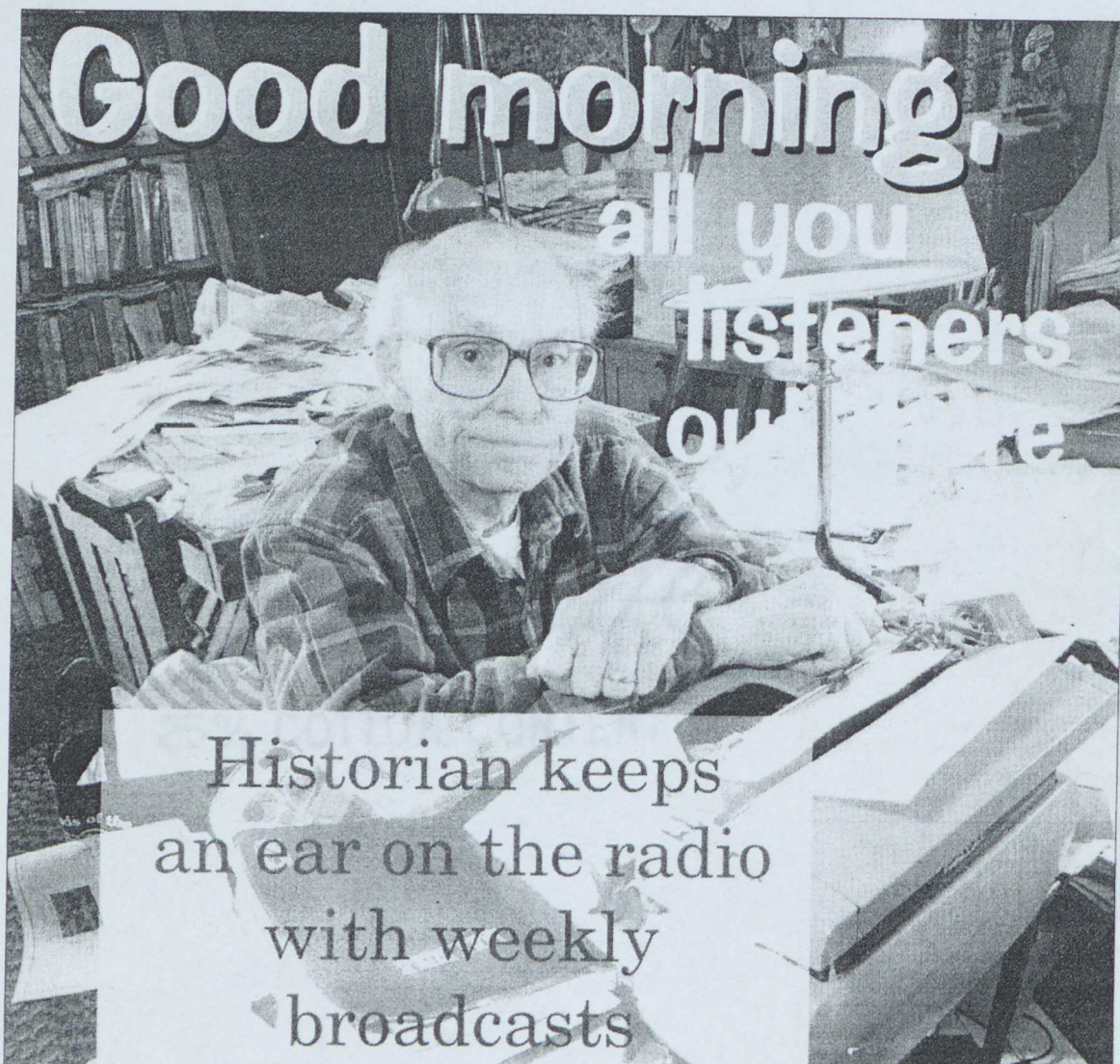


PRIME *times*

The magazine for today's active seniors



PRIME TIMES PHOTO BY DAVID ROLFE

Wake Forest University history and religion professor David Smiley, Ph.D., prepares for his weekly reading on radio station WFDD.

By Jo Woestendiek
PRIME TIMES EDITOR

"Good morning and welcome to the Reid Staton Bible Class. My dearly beloved. Ladies. Gentlemen. Boys and girls."

Every Sunday, one minute after 10 a.m., David Smiley, Ph.D., begins his weekly Bible lesson.

reading from one piece of paper that is carefully typewritten, front and back with almost nonexistent margins.

"I read it because I don't want to be caught grasping for a word," he explained recently.

Consider his unusual non-denominational "class," and you

will understand. Seated before him in Wingate Hall's Davis Chapel at Wake Forest University are 20-25 class members who regularly meet there. But listening to the 77-year-old history

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professor emeritus are hundreds who every Sunday morning tune into WFDD, 88.5 FM public radio.

Some of his listeners, Dr. Smiley knows, are listening as they get ready to go to their various churches. Others may be munching on their cereal or ensconced in their favorite easy chair. And some may be in bed, sick, hospitalized or simply having a lazy morning.

Few listeners realize that he is reading. "Reading in a way that seems to be talking is a trick that you learn," he said.

At exactly 10:45 a.m., Dr. Smiley will cut off his microphone. In his assigned time, many minutes longer than most ministers have for church services, he will have delivered his usual erudite mixture of theology, history, philosophy and language, lightly sprinkled with humor.

"He has the most incredible mind for connecting things," said one member who has attended the class for more than 15 years.

While Dr. Smiley uses the International Bible Lessons Series as the basis for his classes, the lessons he teaches are uniquely his own. Little is predictable except for his repeated challenges to his listeners to know and participate in something more than what he calls

"luke-warm" or "choice-filled" Christianity.

In one recent lesson, he described some contemporary religion as "a salad bowl of indigestive mishmash."

He promotes what he calls "the old-fashioned gospel" — undiluted, unpopularized and very demanding. "Sound theology equals sound morality," he tells them.

He repeatedly points out that being Christian takes some thinking. "A faith not carefully thought out stands on shifting sand."

Current movies, plays or events are often springboards to his messages. He does it artfully.

"I begin and close with something current," he said. "I call them tie-ins." A two-week gap between the writing of the lesson and the delivering of it guarantees him that the "tie-in" isn't something that might change momentarily.

After making a powerful point, he is known for crisply beseeching his listeners: "Think about it." "Remember it." "Believe it." "Note it." "Memorize it." "Use it." "Live by it."

Dr. Smiley is a self-effacing man, and that characteristic often sneaks into his Sunday messages. One of his favorite minister critics says that the Mississippi-born professor is humble to a fault.

Examples from recent classes: "I am in my own worst company when I go into my closet and close the door." "My mouth is large; it gets a lot of exercise."

Now and then, he takes a gentle poke at churches or pastors. Example: "Why do churches like to name themselves 'First' ... as if numerical order mattered!"

He has as little use for the "take your choice, cafeteria-type religion," as he does for the idea that forgiveness comes easy. Too many believe, he said, that "since all is forgiven, let us sin mightily. God will pardon me. That's his job."

He likes to quote Richard Niebuhr: "A God without wrath, brought men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of Christ without a cross."

"That is a satire on the 19th-century liberal Christianity," he said, "suitable also for our time and place."

Who is this man who soon will be on the air with his Bible lessons for 20 years?

He is perhaps better known as a popular Wake Forest University history professor. He also has written several books and articles about history.

"But don't think that history is my vocation and religion my avocation," he said. "It is the other way around. ... Teaching a Bible class is not an avocation; that would mean it is secondary.

'Thou shalt have no other Gods before thee,' and that means history, too!"

He had been teaching the Bible Class at Wake Forest for almost a decade before one of the class presidents, Reid Staton, decided that Dr. Smiley needed to be heard by more than just the members of the class. Mr. Staton helped make the financial arrangements to put the class on air through the university station. After Mr. Staton's death, the class was named for him.

While his Bible students often quote him, many of his former history students remember even better the way he opened his history classes at the beginning of each term:

"My dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the presence of God to marry you off to this course in history. If there be any person present who can show cause why these nuptials should not take place, let him speak now or forever hold his F." During all the decades that he taught, he said, no student responded.

History, he told his students, is explaining how the present got to be the way it is. "The world didn't just come into existence this morning!"

History does not change, he told them, only our understanding of it does.

He taught history at Wake Forest from 1950 to 1991, the year he turned 70.

David Smiley grew up in the Delta area of the Mississippi. During the Depression, his father was a rural mail carrier who walked a 40-mile route. How long it took him to get around the entire route, Dr. Smiley doesn't remember.

His mother was a Baptist, his father, a Presbyterian.

It was a religious family, and his mother may have wanted him to become a minister, he said. But by the second grade, he was hooked on history. When a teacher named Miss Horne began telling her students about Christopher Columbus, he said, "It just bowled me over!"

"I wanted to learn about all of the things that happened in the world before I was born. I wanted to know it all."

He became an avid reader early on. "I read every book in the town's juvenile section before I knew what juvenile meant."

But it was in college that he first discovered the joy of teaching. Students who couldn't understand Chaucerian English would gather in his room to hear him read Chaucer in 14th-century English. He found it exhilarating, he said.

During World War II, he served in the U.S. Field artillery. He remembers watching ships unload. First off were the walking wounded, he said, then the wounded on stretchers, next the war prisoners and then the dead. Because they faced death,

too, the men hungered for religious services and Bible study that were not available to them, he said. They asked him to teach a Bible class.

After the war, he returned to the States, attended Baylor University, where he met his wife, Helen. They have been married 52 years and he affectionately refers to her as "my lady."

When he comes out of his study from preparing his Sunday morning message, he often says to her, "Boy, that was fun! It was fun to read [the text]; it was fun to think about; and it was fun to write."

In his retirement, he continues to teach his Bible classes and regularly visits four retirement homes to lecture or review books.

For fun, too, he works crossword puzzles, "reads everything," and is especially fond of mysteries.

His osteoporosis keeps him from gardening as much as he would like, but his gardening has brought him a certain amount of fame, he laughs. One year, his canned beets won second prize at the county fair; but no first prize was awarded. The university news bureau distributed a humorous story, headlined "Dr. Smiley: Second to None." The story was picked up by wire services and printed by newspapers around the country, bringing him many letters and phone calls from old friends and former students. Now, with characteristic humility, he calls his canned beets his main "claim to fame."

Army of Potomac, Not Generals of '61, Was Real Hero of War

COMMENDERS OF THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC. By Warren W. Hassler, Jr., Louisiana State University Press: \$6.00.

Reviewed by DAVID L. SMILEY, University of Wisconsin.

To celebrate the centennial of the Civil War a veritable flood of books is appearing. Authors, anxious to contribute to the commemoration, are examining the already well-told story from a variety of viewpoints.

Some have concentrated upon single battles, others upon single individuals.

This book is a re-telling of the military history of the war in the East through the personalities of the commanders of the major Union army. Its unstated theme is that the real hero of the war in Virginia was not a general, but the heroic Army of the Potomac itself.

No other army in the war fought so long and so well, and maintained its morale at so high a level, despite a succession of incompetent commanders.

The Army endured seven commanders in all.

First was the unlucky Irvin McDowell, who almost won the battle of First Manassas only to see his three-months' volunteers deteriorate into a panicky mob.

Then there was the dapper and popular George B. McClellan, cursed by an addiction to caution, faulty intelligence reports from detective Allan Pinkerton, and the attacks of Radical politicians.

Despite these difficulties, McClellan created the Army of the Potomac; he organized it and inspired it into the greatest Civil War armies.

McClellan, after the miserable Peninsula campaign, was replaced by the pathetic braggart John Pope, who allowed Robert

E. Lee completely to outclass him. McClellan again pulled the army together for the inconclusive action at Antietam, and again lost his command, this time to Ambrose E. Burnside.

Unsure of himself, Burnside badly mishandled the unfortunate army at Fredericksburg.

Then came another incompetent, Joe Hooker, and the mistakes at Chancellorsville. George G. Meade was able to resist Lee's onslaughts at Gettysburg, but not the attacks of his political enemies in Washington.

And after Meade came Grant and a modern command system for total war.

In this book the author briefly sketches the biographies of these seven men. His purpose is to measure the influence of their personalities upon their tenures in command.

Professor Hassler succeeds in his purpose. While his book contains little that is new to the Civil War student, it provides a handy summation of the major military campaigns in the East, and a useful re-telling of the lives of Union commanders in that theatre.