

# Tribute to Tom Showalter on His Retirement after 50 Years at Warren Wilson College

by Philip Otterness

May 18, 2018

Two weeks ago today as I was walking into Jensen, I ran into Tom Showalter who was coming out of his 8:30 am U.S. History survey class. There was nothing unusual about this except, perhaps, that I was actually in early enough to see the end of Tom's 8:30 class and that Tom's wife Sandy was with him as were his daughters. I went to my office without really thinking much of it, and it was only later that it dawned on me that that was Tom's last class at Warren Wilson, and his family had come to celebrate the occasion with him. After more than 12,000—12,000!—classes, Tom was putting down the chalk for the last time.

For 22 years I have been lucky to have my office next to Tom's. And, as long as that seems to me—(forever)—you have to realize it is not even half the time that Tom has been at the college. I asked Tom if he could give me some statistics on his teaching record at the college, and, like the good historian that he is, he went right to the primary sources—his gradebooks—and started counting. It turns out that in the fifty years since he first arrived on campus in the fall of 1968—before many of you were born—Tom has taught over 5,500 students in 322 courses. He also oversaw at least 30 independent studies and participated in four study-away courses in Alaska and China. His classes were always among the most popular at the college, averaging over 17 students a class. It is safe to say that Tom has taught more students, read more essays, and graded more exams than any other professor in the college's history.

Tom's mainstays were the two survey courses in United States history and the two Western Civilization courses that covered the period from the Renaissance to the present. His course on the Environmental History of the United States was one of the most popular courses on campus, and students also eagerly signed up for his courses on Russian history. For years, Tom built on his interest in Russian history and culture by teaching two-credit courses on Russian Literature as an overload, and he continued tying history to literature in the ten to twelve Great Books readings that he supervised each year. Tom has taught more first year seminars than any other member of the faculty, exploring the history of the Southern Highlands with his students not only in the classroom but out camping in the Smokies or on Mount Mitchell—arranging vans, hauling supplies, and teaching freshmen how to cook a meal over a campfire and how to crap in the woods. He has a resumé unlike any other historian I know.

Tom's work wasn't limited to the classroom. Early in his tenure at the college, he spent his summers helping to build houses on campus and in the surrounding neighborhoods. Most memorably, he served as the college's fire chief from 1969 to 1983, supervising a crew of a dozen volunteer students and driving a 1948 Ford truck outfitted for firefighting. He even served as the farm manager for a few weeks in the winter of 1995-96 so that Ernst Laursen could go on vacation. Despite what Tom reported to me as a few stressful moments, the farm—and the cattle—survived, although Tom said he would never volunteer for that duty again.

In recent years, Tom served as the Jensen building manager. Until we got the roof repaired that meant managing all the leaks that showed up whenever it rained. One of these, unfortunately located just outside our office doors, was so constant and long-lasting that Tom eventually constructed a permanent water feature on the wall, gently leading the water from one tiny trough to another until it splashed into a bucket below. Speaking of buckets, the floor was

covered with them, and Tom sometimes complained that it seemed a new leak emerged every night. What he didn't know—at least until now—was that John Casey would take a bucket every evening after Tom had gone home and fill it in the maintenance closet sink and place it in some random area of the third floor. So, Tom, most of those were real leaks, but not every one.

I know all of you have your favorite memories of Tom. For me, they are those of a good, supportive, friendly colleague in the office next door who was always happy to have somebody drop in for a chat. I suppose my most vivid memory of Tom's office was of a time when we held a rare departmental meeting there sometime in 1998 or '99. The meeting included our old colleagues, long retired, along with Tom and me. I won't go into the details but let me just say that it ended with a shouting match, a near heart attack, a slamming door, and Tom giving somebody the finger. Needless to say, that was our last department meeting for probably 10 years. But most times, Tom's office was an oasis of calm, and I have good memories of discussing history with Tom. Despite his years of teaching, he was always reviewing new books for his classes and often passing on suggestions, or the books themselves, to me. We also enjoyed talking about our families, our vacations, fishing, and, especially, about biking. As most of you know, Tom used to make almost weekly rides from the Folk Art Center up the Parkway and past Craggy Gardens and then up the grueling road to the top of Mount Mitchel. There he'd have breakfast and then zoom back down—a 60 to 70 mile ride—getting back home in time for lunch. He constantly encouraged me to do the same, but I have to say that ride is simply beyond my capabilities. But I do remember one glorious late winter day, when the temperature was relatively mild but the Parkway was still closed because of bad weather the previous week. I decided that day that I would see how far I could get. As I rode up the quiet and beautifully empty Parkway, I understood what these kinds of rides meant to Tom. If you're going to survive

50 years in the classroom, this is the kind of therapy you need. And as I came around a curve somewhere near Craggy Gardens, there was Tom sitting on the ground, leaning against a guardrail and enjoying a little sun. Tom was surprised to see me, but he welcomed me to his other office. We shared some water and a snack, and he told me about the view and even showed me a little spring where you could safely fill your water bottle without fear of coming down with some awful intestinal disease. Tom encouraged me to follow him the rest of the way to Mount Mitchell, but I was too tired and turned around. Still, I smiled all the way back. For a few moments I had been able to enter Tom's magical world, surrounded by quiet nature and awesome views on a Parkway that we had all to ourselves.

I could tell many more stories, but I think I'll leave it at that. Tom will leave his Warren Wilson office next week. He and Sandy don't plan to leave Warren Wilson anytime soon, and they'll still be living in their house on College View Road, the one Tom helped build in 1972. And if, like me, you're going to find Jensen awfully empty without Tom there in the fall, just remember, all you need to do is head north on the Parkway. You're almost bound to see him there. But don't forget—office hours start at 5 a.m. and are usually over by 10.