

Teaching History Truthfully

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Battle of New Bern, American Civil War, 1862.

Imagine that the items below are part of a true/false test. How would you respond to the following statements about American history?

T F “In daring to sail westward in 1492, hoping to reach the Indies, Christopher Columbus was challenging the prevailing belief of his day that the Earth was flat.”

T F “The [American] Founding Fathers believed in democracy.”

T F “In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Uncle Tom, the main character, was depicted as a meek, submissive, obsequious old slave.”

T F “After World War I, Henry Cabot Lodge led the fight in the U.S. Senate against Woodrow Wilson’s League of Nations primarily because he was an ‘isolationist’ who strongly opposed U.S. involvement in foreign wars.”

T F “Harry Truman was in obscurity when President Roosevelt picked him as his running mate in 1944.”¹

Although each of the above statements is false, many students come to history classes believing them to be true, and these concepts frequently show up as “facts” in textbooks. Such misinformation is only the tip of the iceberg. More serious issues involve the neglect of entire aspects of history, such as the story of the Spanish colonization of the American Southwest, or the distortion of past history to favor a group or nation, as when teachers fail to discuss the effects of American support for anti-Communist dictators such as the Shah of Iran. Indeed, to the extent that we as teachers allow students to be unquestioningly dependent upon textbooks, we may unwittingly perpetuate a version of history that has little relationship to reality.

By Gary Land

Criticisms of Textbooks

Over the past several decades, individuals and groups representing a variety of organizations and perspectives have examined the textbooks used in high school history classes. Overwhelmingly, they have reached negative conclusions. Evaluating both American and British textbooks during the mid-1960s, a group of prominent historians led by Ray Allen Billington, distinguished scholar of the

American West, concluded: “The repetition of half-truths, and the consistent monopolization of credit for the author’s country, creates in the reader an impression of one invincible nation, forever right, forever triumphant, and forever superior to its neighbors.”²²

During the 1970s, an organization concerned with portrayal of ethnic groups concluded that “the perspective dominating textbooks has always been white, upper-class and male” and when including information about minorities, the books seldom present the “*perspective* of the people described.”²³ Shortly thereafter, Frances FitzGerald, whose earlier work on the Vietnam War had won several prizes, observed in a widely read book that “the market sets limits to the publishers’ truth-giving powers.” Consequently, “What a textbook reflects is thus a compromise, an America sculpted and sanded down by the pressures of diverse constituents and interest groups.”²⁴

The emergence of the Religious Right in the 1980s created a new set of challenges for textbook publishers. Paul C. Vitz, professor of psychology at New York University, argued that a “liberal and secular mindset” had excluded “religion, traditional family values, and conservative political and economic positions . . . from children’s textbooks.” To cite specifics, he said that none of the books he examined “recognizes the continuity of the revival and evangelical movements

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throughout American history since the Colonial Period” and gave little serious attention to either Catholics or Jews.²⁵ About the same time, Paul Gagnon, an education professor at the University of Massachusetts, researched history texts for the American Federation of Teachers. He observed that the texts were “at one and the same time over-detailed and under-detailed: the first because they try to mention something about everything; the second because they fail to develop major themes in depth.” Furthermore, “they are weak on economic and intellectual history, on our place in the larger world, and on the importance of individual actions and character.”²⁶

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thinking and civic literacy.”²⁷

One would think that after all of this criticism, the writers and publishers of textbooks would have fixed things, but in 1995, James Loewen, professor of history at the University of Vermont, observed, “Frances FitzGerald’s 1979 study, *America Revised*, was a bestseller, but it made no impact on the industry.”²⁸ Much of the problem arises from the textbook production process. FitzGerald had observed: “Today, texts are written backward or inside out, as it were, beginning with public demand and ending with the historian.”²⁹ More than 15 years later, Loewen found the same problems: “History textbooks stand in a very different relationship to the discipline of history than most textbooks do to their respective fields. ‘Society’ determines what goes into history textbooks.”³⁰ As a result, textbooks distort history in several ways.

Although he was speaking about British and American textbooks, Billington’s categorizations remain useful: (1) “Bias by Inertia” presents outdated information and interpretations; (2) “Unconscious Falsification” emphasizes what is good about one’s country; (3) “Bias by Omission” tends to overlook unfavorable facts and interpretations; (4) “Bias in the Use of Language” uses words that favor one side over another; and (5) “Bias Through Cumulative Implication” suggests that one’s nation won all the wars and invented all the new technologies.³¹ As Loewen points out, the problems with American history textbooks often begin with their grandiose titles: *The Great Republic*, *The American Way*, *Land of Promise*, *Rise of the American Nation*.³²

These problems are not limited to American portrayals of

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An artist’s rendition of Columbus “discovering” America.

history. The Billington study, for instance, found biases in both British and American textbooks. The Soviet Union altered photographs and periodically rewrote its history in accordance with changing political demands.¹³ And recently, an Indian official stated: “All references in history books that hurt the feelings of people of any caste, religion, region or language will be removed. Schools will not be allowed to teach history that hurts the sentiments of our people. . . . I want history books to contain only what is acceptable to all.”¹⁴

Because a society’s history is intimately connected to issues of identity and purpose, all historical accounts involve bias. Textbooks in particular are subject to social pressure. Consequently, teachers need to approach their subject critically.

The Necessity for Truth-Telling

The problem of truthful history should concern historians and Christians for at least two reasons. First, as Christians, we have a moral responsibility to speak the truth as best we can. Because those who came before us were also fellow creatures made in the image of God, they deserve to be represented as accurately as possible. Jesus’ words are instructive: “For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:2, NIV). Applying His words to history, we might say, “For in the same way you remember others, you will be remembered.” Christ’s statement, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), offers guidance if we realize that our “neighbor” includes our predecessors as well as our contemporaries.

Second, since history makes a significant contribution to the civic education of young people,¹⁵ it is important that students gain an accurate understanding of the past. If their future decisions as citizens are based on myths, half-truths, and lies learned in history classes, those decisions are likely to be ill-formed and perhaps even dangerous. “Students need an honest, rigorous education,” Gagnon argues, “that allows them to penetrate Orwellian rhetoric and accurately compare the claims and realities of our own society and those of others.”¹⁶ Loewen makes a similar point:

“For history is central to our ongoing understanding of ourselves and our society. We need to produce Americans of all social-class and racial backgrounds of both genders who command the power of history—the ability to use one’s understanding of the past to inspire and legitimize one’s actions in the present. Then the past will seriously inform Americans

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as individuals and as a nation, instead of serving as a source of weary clichés. Products of successful American history courses know basic social facts about the United States and understand the historical processes that have shaped these facts. They can locate themselves in the social structure, and they know some of the societal and ideological forces that have influenced their lives. Such Americans are ready to become citizens because they understand how to effect change in our society. They know how to check out historical assertions and are suspicious of archetypal ‘truths.’ They can rebut the charge that history is irrelevant, because they realize ways that the past influences the present, including their own present.”¹⁷

Although both of these authors are writing specifically about American history, their arguments are no less applicable to the histories of other countries, world history, and church history. As Loewen’s statement implies, telling the truth about history requires not only factual accuracy but also attention to the experiences and perspectives of diverse peoples. No longer can we focus only on the social and political elite; a balanced history must include, among other things, the working classes, ethnic minorities, and women. The Christian teacher should add to this triumvirate (often called “class, race, and gender”) the frequently neglected subjects of religion and religious

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Popular accounts about historical figures may be filled with myths and half-truths.

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Stereotyping of certain groups, such as Native Americans, is common in history textbooks.

minorities. Truthful history further requires attention to slowly changing structures (i.e., social, economic, and political systems) that help students understand ongoing processes instead of the “events” that tend to dominate most historical thinking. Finally, honest history looks at the role of the historian’s or teacher’s values and beliefs in reconstructing the past. Our students need to understand why knowledgeable people often disagree in their accounts of the past and how to effectively critique varying interpretations.¹⁸

Telling the truth about history is a moral obligation that requires effort. As Christians who are committed to teaching

our students well, we must not be like those Indiana teachers of whom a survey “revealed that fewer than one in five stay current by reading books or articles in American history.”³² We need to demonstrate to our classes that history is not a cut-and-dried collection of facts, but a multi-faceted story whose meaning is much contested and therefore open to continued discovery and critical scrutiny. Although the challenge is great, the history teacher today has available a great many resources that make it possible to move beyond textbooks and conventional wisdom toward a broader and more accurate understanding of the past. The work required to incorpo-

General Resources for Truth-Telling

How do teachers arrive at the “truths” of history? How are they to know whether the history presented in the textbook, or even in their college classes, is accurate? History courses cover such broad areas that it is impossible for the teacher to keep up with the thousands of articles and books that appear every year. But don’t despair, for there are an increasing number of resources that will help you access the findings of modern scholarship and apply them to your teaching.

A first step in the pursuit of truthful teaching is simply to become more aware of the problem areas. Reading one or more of the textbook studies referred to above,¹⁹ even though most of them are now rather old, can suggest questions to ask about current textbooks. Books such as Loewen’s *Lies My Teacher Told Me* and Paul F. Boller’s *Not So!* go beyond criticism by providing substantive historical information that corrects common historical errors and improves our understanding of often-neglected topics. Critical evaluations of textbooks and other materials, including videos and CD-ROMs, appear in *The History Teacher*, *Teaching History*, and the *World History Bulletin*.²⁰

Unfortunately, there are few resources for teaching the history of Christianity or Seventh-day Adventism. One exception is Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett’s *Christianity on Trial*.²¹

Despite the lack of materials, however, we must commit ourselves to truth-telling, for church history courses

should be as rigorous and honest as other classes. Multiple perspectives, geographical balance, and factual accuracy are just as necessary for understanding the history of the church as for addressing secular history. And while they may be more difficult to access, primary sources are the best means by which teachers can achieve these objectives.

OAH Magazine of History

Two American history resources provide in-depth information and practical teaching aids. First, the Organization of American Historians publishes the quarterly *Magazine of History*.²² Each issue of this journal focuses on a particular topic in American history, such as “The Great Depression,” “Science and Technology,” or “Environmental History.” The Spring 2002 issue on the “World War II Homefront” is a good example of the content of this publication. First, after a general article surveying recent research on the homefront, three articles briefly examine the experience of women, African-Americans, and Japanese-Americans. These easily read essays offer a way for the busy teacher to “catch up” with recent scholarship about previously neglected groups.

The heart of the magazine then offers five lesson plans, including primary source material, on topics ranging from “Rosie the Riveter Remembers” to “Propaganda Posters” that enable the teacher to readily translate the scholarship into usable classroom activities. These lesson plans are followed by articles on ERIC/ChESS and

Internet resources on the World War II Homefront. After articles suggesting ways to introduce World War II oral history into the classroom and use the Internet to enhance student learning in history classes, the journal closes with reviews of two books on the teaching of history and social studies and a listing of seminars, conferences, and new Web resources. Accompanying a review of James Percoco’s *Divided We Stand* are materials for teaching about gender, race, and Anglo-American relations in a manner that recognizes their complexity.²³

National Center for History in the Schools

A second major resource is the National Center for History in the Schools, which produces a variety of materials for history teachers. In the mid-1990s, the center stirred a storm of controversy with its publication of national standards for both United States and world history.²⁴ Responding to the controversy, which largely revolved around the alleged lack of emphasis on “traditional” American heroes such as George Washington in favor of women and minorities, the Center published a revised set of standards for both American and world history.²⁵ Teachers will find the standards an invaluable tool as they seek themes to (1) help them organize and select from the mass of information that appears in textbooks and (2) give attention to multiple perspectives and minority experiences. In its section on “The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930),” for example, under

rate these materials and ideas into our teaching will bring its own rewards—including more knowledgeable and, quite possibly, more interested students and a feeling of confidence that we are doing the best possible job of communicating the past to a new generation. ✍



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thor of *Teaching History: A Seventh-day Adventist Approach* (Andrews University Press, 2000).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Not So! Popular Myths About America From Columbus to Clinton* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 3, 35, 66, 86, 144. Boller analyzes the sources of these and other beliefs as well as the evidence that reveals their mythic character.
2. Ray Allen Billington, et al., *The Historian's Contribution to Anglo-American Misunderstanding: Report of a Committee on National Bias in Anglo-American History Textbooks* (New York: Hobbs, Dorman & Co., 1966), p. 101.

General Resources for Truth-Telling

“Standard 1: How Progressives and Others Addressed Problems of Industrial Capitalism, Urbanization, and Political Corruption,” the authors suggest three themes (each of which is developed through further subpoints):

“1A. The student understands the origin of the Progressives and the coalitions they formed to deal with issues at the local and state levels;”

“1B. The student understands Progressivism at the national level,” and

“1C. The student understands the limitations of Progressivism and the alternatives offered by various groups.”²⁶

While the first two themes reflect traditional emphases, the third brings in the experiences of African-Americans, women, Native Americans, and other groups, all of which are necessary to a fuller and more balanced understanding of the period.

To help teachers incorporate the history standards into their classroom teaching, the Center also publishes two “source books,” one for United States history, the other for world history.²⁷ These books are organized chronologically by era and include introductory material, an essay summarizing the findings of recent scholarship, and several student activities identified by appropriate grade levels. The section on “Intensified Hemispheric Interactions, 1000-1500 CE,” for example, identifies four “big stories” that give shape to the era: “China and Europe—Two Centers of Growth,” “The Long Reach of Islam,” “The Age of Mongol Dominance,” and “Empires of the Americas.” The essay for this section, “Islam

as a Special World-System” by Georgetown University historian John Voll, discusses the relationship between the Islamic and capitalist world systems. Although this is a sophisticated article drawn from the *Journal of World History*, it enables the teacher to better understand the developing relationship of the West and Middle East. The accompanying student activities appear under seven major topics, including “Patterns of Crisis and Recovery in Afro-Eurasia, 1300-1450.”²⁸ A sample grade 9-12 activity illustrates how the authors encourage teachers and students to understand multiple perspectives: “Read and discuss accounts of the effects of the Black Death by Boccaccio or other 14th century European writers. Read Ibn Battuta’s accounts of its effects on Syria and Egypt. Compare these accounts. *What aspects of the disease and its effects did contemporaries focus on?*”²⁹ These “source books” help identify organizing themes, bring the teacher into contact with recent scholarship, and suggest many questions and issues to pursue in the classroom.

The center also publishes a series of “Teaching Units.” This ongoing series now comprises 30 titles in world history and 34 in American history addressing topics as varied as “The Code of Hammurabi: Law of Mesopotamia,” “The Crusades From Muslim and Christian Perspectives,” and “Lights of Liberty: Philadelphia’s Revolutionary Experience.” The reproducible classroom materials enable the teacher to apply some of the creative ideas contained in the “source books.”

*Three Worlds Meet: The Columbian Encounter and Its Legacy*³⁰ is typical of what one finds in the “Teaching Units.” After some “Teacher Background Materials,” the authors give six lesson plans, two of which address the “Many Peoples of America” and “Relations Among the Races.” Included are such items as primary source documents, maps, pictures, charts, activities, and questions for students (including in one case a “Reader’s Theatre” dramatizing the meeting between Hernando Cortés and Montezuma), and a bibliography. Among the interesting reproducible documents are both European and Meso-American maps that encourage students to contrast two ways of looking at the world. Another primary source is an excerpt from Bartolomé de Las Casas’s account of how the Europeans treated the native peoples, which helps students understand that not all Europeans supported cruelty and enslavement.

For the teacher attempting to examine Christopher Columbus’s arrival in America from the viewpoints of the Europeans and the Native peoples (both of which are necessary to a full understanding of the story), this teaching unit offers not only ideas but also primary source materials that otherwise might be difficult to pull together. While no one teacher could use all of the available teaching units, selecting a few items will enable one to move well beyond the generalizations of textbooks and bring students face to face with the diversity of the human experience and the struggle of historians to honestly interpret its meaning.³¹

Telling the truth about history is a moral obligation that requires effort.

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Political cartoons and other original documents help students understand differing points of view.

3. Council on Interracial Books for Children, *Stereotypes, Distortions, and Omissions in U.S. History Textbooks* (New York: Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Educators, 1977), p. 125.
4. Frances FitzGerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1979), pp. 28, 46, 47.
5. Paul C. Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1986), pp. 1, 57.
6. Paul Gagnon, *Democracy's Half-Told Story: What American History Textbooks Should Add*, A Publication of the Education for Democracy Project (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 1989).
7. John Marciano, *Civic Illiteracy and Education: The Battle for the Hearts and Minds of American Youth*, Counterpoints: Studies in the Post-modern Theory of Education (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 26.
8. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995), pp. 4, 5.
9. FitzGerald, *America Revised*, p. 69.
10. Loewen, *Lies*, p. 286. Both FitzGerald, *America Revised*, pages 20-47, and Loewen, *Lies*, pages 265-279, extensively explain the writing, editing, and adoption process of American history textbooks.
11. Billington, et al., *Historian's Contribution*, pp. 94-101.
12. Loewen, *Lies*, p. 3.
13. See Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, & Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 350-352.
14. "Pundits, Mullahs Will Decide What Is History," *Asian Age* (December 4, 2001), p. 1. I wish to thank Beverly Rumble for bringing this article to my attention.
15. For example, see Gagnon, *Democracy's Half-Told Story*, pages 15-22. See also Paul Gagnon, ed., and the Bradley Commission on History in Schools, *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1989).
16. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

17. Loewen, *Lies*, p. 312.
18. I briefly address the issue of historical truth in *Teaching History: A Seventh-day Adventist Approach* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2000), pp. 25-37. For fuller discussion, see Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), pp. 241-270, and Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), pp. 193-220.
19. Additional studies of

American history textbooks include Irving Sloan, *The Negro in Modern American History Textbooks: A Study of the Negro in Selected Junior and Senior High History Textbooks* (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 1966 and subsequent editions); Rupert Costo and Jeanette Henry, *Textbooks and the American Indian* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1970); Nathan Glazer and Reed Ueda, *Ethnic Groups in History Textbooks* (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1983); 1982 to present *Michigan Social Studies Textbook Report* (Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State Board of Education, 1984); Robert Bryan, *History, Pseudo-History, Anti-History: How Public School Textbooks Treat Religion* (Washington, D.C.: Learn, Inc., Education Foundation, ca. 1984); O. L. Davis, Jr., et al., *Looking at History* (Washington, D.C.: People for the American Way, 1986); Gilbert Sewall, *American History Textbooks: An Assessment of Quality* (New York: Columbia University Teachers College, 1987); James Axtell, "Europeans, Indians, and the Age of Discovery in American History Textbooks," *American Historical Review* 92:3 (June 1987), pp. 621-632; Harriet Tyson-Bernstein, *A Conspiracy of Good Intentions: America's Textbook Fiasco* (Washington, D.C.: Council for Basic Education, 1988); and Michael W. Apple and Linda K. Christian-Smith, *The Politics of the Textbook* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Critics have given much less attention to world history textbooks. An exception is Paul Gagnon, *Democracy's Untold Story: What World History Textbooks Neglect*, A Publication of the Education for Democracy Project (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 1987).

20. *The History Teacher*, Connie George, General Manager, P.O. Box 1578, Borrego Springs, CA 92004, <http://www.csulb.edu/~histeach>, \$27; *Teaching History*, Chris Lovett, Campus Box 4032, Emporia State University, Emporia, KS 66801-5087, <http://www.emporia.edu/soesci/journal/main.htm>, \$10; *World History Bulletin*, World History Association, 2530 Dole St., Sakamati Hall A203, Honolulu, HI 96822, <http://www.thewha.org/>, \$60. Although they do not normally review textbooks and are not oriented to teaching, *The American Historical Review*, 400 A Street SE, Washington, DC 20003, <http://www.theaha.org/>, and *The Journal of American History*, 112 North Bryan Ave., Bloomington, IN 47408-4199, <http://www.oah.org/>, in recent years have given increasing space to critical reviews of films and videos, both documentary and theatrical. Subscriptions are included in organization memberships whose costs vary by income and employment status. *Teaching History* and the *World History Bulletin* are largely oriented toward college/university teaching but include some high school-level material.

21. Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett, *Christianity on Trial: Arguments Against Anti-Religious Bigotry* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002).

22. *OAH Magazine of History for Teachers of History*, Organization of American Historians, 112 North Bryan Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47408 <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/>, \$40 with OAH membership for high school teachers.

23. James Percoco, *Divided We Stand: Teaching About Conflict in U.S. History* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 2001). Although concerned with teaching techniques rather than truth-telling, Percoco's earlier work, *A Passion for the Past: Creative Teaching of U.S. History*, Foreword by Gary B. Nash (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998), should be in the personal library of every teacher of U.S. history. Another useful work that offers teaching techniques with diverse perspectives is Shelley Kintisch and Wilma Cordero, *Breaking Away From the Textbook: A New Approach to Teaching American History* (Lancaster, Penn.: Technomic Publishing Co., 1993).

24. *National Standards for United States History: Exploring the American Experience, Grades 5-12* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, 1994); *National Standards for World History: Exploring Paths to the Present, Grades 5-12* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, 1994). For a participants' view of the controversy, see Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Rosse E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

25. *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, 1996). A catalogue of the center's publications, including those discussed below, may be found at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs>.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112. *Lessons From History: Essential Understandings and Historical Perspectives Students Should Acquire* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, 1992) is a statement of history standards written in a largely narrative style.

27. Kirk Ankeney, et al., *Bring History Alive! A Sourcebook for Teaching United States History* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, 1996) and Ross E. Dunn and David Vigilante, *Bring History Alive! A Sourcebook for Teaching World History* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, Los Angeles, 1996).

28. Dunn and Vigilante, *World History*, pp. 142-168.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 164.

30. James Drake and Joseph Palumbo, *Three Worlds Meet: The Columbian Encounter and Its Legacy, A Unit of Study for Grades 5-9* (Los Angeles: National Center for History in the Schools, University of California, 1992). Most of the teaching units in this series are written for grades 9-12.

31. The "Women in World History Curriculum" also provides materials to help teachers integrate women's history into their courses. For information and a catalog, see <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com>.

32. Loewen, *Lies*, p. 280.

How do teachers arrive at the "truths" of history? How are they to know whether the history presented in the textbook, or even in their college classes, is accurate?

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First-person accounts written by minorities, women, and others whose stories rarely appear in textbooks can make history come alive for students.

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It is a little-known fact that seven blacks served in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives between 1869 and 1873.