

Regional

America still fascinated by its own Civil War

The Civil War ended in 1865, yet it still seems to loom large in the minds of the American people. This fascination grows even larger with events such as the release of Doris Kern Goodwin's "Team of Rivals" and Steven Spielberg's adaptation of that book into the film "Lincoln." But Hollywood is not alone in its fascination with this time period. A local expert on the war is Erik Alexander, an assistant professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

"What I think draws people to history are stories with people, individual characters," said Alexander. "When I was young I remember that I was always fascinated by Greek and Roman mythology. I always loved the stories. I went to college and I had high goals of becoming a classicist, but then I found out you have to learn ancient Greek and Latin." Instead, he became a historian.

"I figured in American history you don't have to learn a foreign language, but also with American history I got really interested in my own family's history," he said. "Once I started placing stories in context, for example, my great grandfather fought for the Union army during the Civil War, that got me hooked into learning more about those subjects and placing things within context."

A native of Appleton, Wis., he grew up in Champaign, Ill., and received his bachelor's degree in history from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and his master's and doctorate, also in history, from the University of Virginia. From an early age he was influenced in his decision to become a college professor by his family, which is almost entirely made up of musicians.

"My father is a professor of piano pedagogy at the University of Illinois," he said. "I had two grandfathers, one was a choral conductor and the other was a band director. So most of my family is made up of educators, although in music. Education was always a really natural choice for me



Dr. Erik Alexander

even though I went with the humanities instead of music."

Despite the fact that the American Civil War is a subject that has been studied

for decades and that thousands of books have been written about it, Alexander said he thinks that there is much yet to be learned.

Courtesy of Dr. Alexander

"Historical trends change and for the longest time the study of the Civil War was just the study of battles and generals," he explained. "I always joke with my students that when you think of military history you think of old maps with dotted lines and little rectangles. I don't do that." New trends in research have surfaced for historians.

"Within the Civil War we have seen this flourishing of scholarship about emancipation as a political and a legal process, but also as a social experience," he said. "There is a lot of great literature about how the war affected those who weren't fighting. It wasn't just battles and generals and fighting. It was women on the home front and the experience of African Americans embracing emancipation. Now we realize there are a lot of things we didn't know about." One of the most recent debates, he said, concerns whether or not the Civil War could have been avoided.

"I think even before the war started it has been the most persistent and prevalent debate," Alexander said. "You have essentially two camps of historians that have waxed and waned in popularity. One camp is known as the fundamentalists. These people believe that the Civil War represented a fundamental conflict between the North and the South. Slavery is typically at the center of that conflict. Some would say it was a fundamental clash of different economic styles, the North as capitalistic with free labor, the South more industrial, agrarian, rural and anti-capitalistic." There are other historians called the revisionists.

"Revisionists argue that not only was the war not inevitable, it was avoidable and oftentimes you could blame the war on politicians," Alexander explained. "A lot of these historians are writing in the context of World War I and World War II. They look at the tragic loss of lives in those conflicts and then they look at the Civil War. More Americans were killed in that war than all others combined. The standard number used to be about 620,000

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

Americans, but it has been updated to about 750,000 now." Another topic he has been working on is the group known as the "know-nothings."

"They were a third party that was devoted to an anti-immigration platform and anti-Catholicism platform. Between 1845 and 1854 there was a massive influx of immigration, primarily Irish residents who left Ireland in the wake of the potato famine and German residents who were leaving in the wake of political revolutions," he said. "In that period of time if you look at the proportions of immigrants to American citizens it remains the largest percentage of immigrants in United States history." This, like many other waves of immigration in history, caused great concern among some people.

"White Americans, especially in the North, in the cities, they saw all these immigrants and said that they were taking all the jobs, they are not learning English, they aren't Americans, and there was a political backlash," he said. "The 'know-nothings' were a group dedicated to a backlash against immigration, devoted to preventing citizenship and stopping immigration. They were called the 'know-nothings' because initially they were a secret organization, they would meet in secret, and when members were asked about it they were told to say 'I know nothing.' They then went from secret organizations into a political party." As the old saying goes, history does seem to have a way of repeating itself.

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.