

2011

Lewis Lavell Cole

S. Ray Granade

Ouachita Baptist University, granade@obu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Granade, S. Ray, "Lewis Lavell Cole" (2011). *Creative Works*. 13.
https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/creative_work/13

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LEWIS LAVELL COLE

S. Ray Granade

Lavell Cole was born and reared near Hodges Gardens, Louisiana and thrived on “making do” in a rural world that centered on the land and its activities and rhythms. He attended Northwestern State University near home, where he prepared to teach high school history and acquired a Masters degree. He taught and worked as an electrician for Brown and Root before getting the 1969 call that brought him to Ouachita Baptist University in his mid-twenties to teach history. He stayed until increasingly poor health invalidated him out of the academy in his mid-fifties and then took his life on November 8, 2004.

A bibliophile and simultaneously a technophile, Lavell by inclination became an early adopter for technology and by default the History Department’s resident computer expert. He learned the hard way about crashes and corrupted 3.5-inch floppy disks, but was always glad to share what he’d learned and how he’d learned it. His eager helpfulness extended Lavell’s influence far beyond the Department.

Lavell’s technophilia pushed his reading into science to keep abreast of general trends in social applications of technology—residential, medical, and manufacturing. He was a generalist in a land where graduate work meant specializing, learning more and more about less and less. In that, he emulated his idol, Thomas Jefferson. Students and colleagues alike joked that his early US History classes never even approached the Civil War because he spent so much time on Jefferson. Most of Lavell’s interest in technology was natural, but a great deal also must have originated in the model Jefferson provided and to which Lavell aspired.

Ultimately, Lavell’s historical interests focused more on place than time, on broadly the South but particularly west of the Mississippi River. He wrote about the levee system and used to say that one day flood waters coming down the Mississippi would meet a storm coming up the river and nothing would be able to save New Orleans—an apt description of Katrina’s devastation. But his career’s two great research interests were Hansen’s disease and Carville, Louisiana, and “The Great Land Pirate” John A. Murrell. He spent years gathering information on each long before general Internet use simplified research.

Despite much research, Lavell wrote little and never finished the Ph.D. he began. His reading and research aimed more at broadening and deepening information for use in the classroom, where he excelled. Nature equipped him with a storyteller's voice, a voice he modified distinctively by constant smoking despite years of using every imaginable scheme to quit. His upbringing equipped him with a storyteller's cadence and sense of timing. His wide-ranging reading gave him an extraordinary store of tidbits upon which to draw. And so he walked into classrooms without a note visible, asked where he had left off, and launched into the next portion of the tale he was telling. Students would listen raptly, sometimes forgetting to take notes. His classes always filled first, and students formally and informally rewarded his storytelling by ranking him as a master, inspiring teacher.

Lavell's storytelling helped make him a campus leader. Not that his oratory swayed his peers. Instead, the human connection upon which his storytelling rested bound him to a wide swath of colleagues among teachers and staff. Even though he never let the truth get in the way of a good story, everyone recognized the integrity, warmth, and genuineness of the man who told those stories. Lavell had favorites that he told on friends again and again. None ever objected, for it gave him pleasure to tell the stories and everyone recognized the affection behind each telling.

A gifted individual, Lavell was blessed with humility and Christian compassion. He earned the respect of students, administrators, and colleagues, and the campus rejoiced when the University not only tenured him, but later took the rare step of promoting this man without a terminal degree to Professor of History in recognition of his campus leadership and classroom superiority.

It is ironic that, despite Lavell's contributions to campus life, culture, and the classroom experience of generations of students, what defined him most was an off-campus educational experience. In 1981, three of us launched an experimental summer program officially titled Folkways of the Arkansas Red River Region but universally called "Old Washington." It engaged Ouachita professors and groups of students in the history, literature, music, and folk arts and crafts of southwestern Arkansas and northwestern Louisiana. Each early morning for a month, Lavell and fellow Louisiana native Tom Greer drove vans from campus to

Washington, Arkansas and its environs. Lavell talked history and Tom literature on the land and in the structures where the stories took place. Students ate the food, heard the sounds, smelled the smells, and saw the crafts practiced as they stepped back in time. Lavell was in his element and never stopped telling stories from the time he cranked the van each morning until he turned it off each evening. Some were professional, others personal. He told them throughout the roughly twenty years that the program lasted. People who took his classes still speak of him and that experience fondly. But those who took his classes and also took Old Washington remember him from the latter in a way that makes the former pale by comparison. For them, that experience defines Lavell.