A Man of Many Words

In his characteristic, dryly humorous fashion, Dr. William Cumberland, professor emeritus of history, says the greatest accomplishment of his 33-year career at Buena Vista was “perhaps, surviving.” His former students and colleagues credit him with inspiration, integrity and leadership across critical years in the history of the University.

“He truly was the single leader of the faculty for years and years and years,” says Dr. Paul Russell, professor emeritus of economics and a former dean of the Harold Walter Siebens School of Business.

“Bill has always represented the ethos of the university. If you wanted to get a reading of what campus thought on any particular issue, you’d go to Bill Cumberland.”

In this story, Buena Vista University records part of the tale of one of its great professors, the man who told its story in three editions of History of Buena Vista University.

The 29-year-old William H. Cumberland arrived at Buena Vista College in 1958, 67 years after the founding of the school. That year, BV would educate 454 undergraduates. It was two years after the campus’ Old Main had burned. The “New Building” (later named Dixon-Eilers) was under construction, as was BV’s presidential residence, the Miller-Stuart House, a structure from which Cumberland still owns several nails.

George Reynolds – like Cumberland, a teacher of history – was still typing lesson plans on a turn-of-the-century L.C. Smith typewriter.

When he came to BV, Cumberland had just completed his PhD at the University of Iowa. His dissertation was on the Jehovah’s Witnesses, a subject he continued to be an expert on throughout his career. His interest in the group grew out of the concern for social justice issues that marks his personal philosophy.

“I became interested when I learned of how much persecution they had undergone,” says Cumberland. “Some may consider the Jehovah’s Witnesses odd, but they expanded a lot of legal rights to religion, speech, and the press because they had to fight for them in court. Social justice is important to me, as is the right for people to freely express themselves. I believe in having some compassion for people who have problems, even if the problems may be of their own making.”

“Bill is absolutely the most principled person I ever worked with,” says Paul Russell. “He knew what principle was, and he wasn’t afraid to say it to me or any of our colleagues. When I got into a scrap once related to The Tack, he was the first to defend the newspaper. He’d say freedom of press is important, because without it you wouldn’t have freedom of thought.”

Cumberland’s career as a professor grew through the turbulent decade of the 1960s, a time when his social justice concerns often coincided with him teaching courses on the Civil Rights movement as history was happening.

“I remember he was outspoken in his opposition to the Vietnam War,” says his colleague Dr. John Madsen, professor emeritus of corporate communications.

“He felt that the draft was really corrupt and unfair. He despised the process and despised the war.”

“In my kidding way, I used to describe him as the most optimistic pessimist I’ve ever known,” says Russell. “He was always academically challenging people, and that sometimes sounded as if he might be pessimistic even when he supported the idea. He truly was open to everybody’s ideas.”

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serving faculty members. He has been a generous philanthropic supporter of BVU throughout the years.

“Bill has probably the lowest keyed sense of humor of anyone who’s that humorous,” says Madsen. “It’s a dry sense of humor, so sometimes it’s not as obvious, but if you think about what he says and walk away, 10 feet down the hall you laugh. And you think.”

In History of Buena Vista University, Cumberland describes a storied and contentious administrator as having “the unique ability of making people think he was insulting them when he was actually dispensing praise.” He describes himself as “pedestrian [but] stable.” In the classroom, Cumberland wove his humor into his teaching.

“People like Patty Hearst,” says Cumberland. “She translated them for me. I always thought about what he says and walk away, 10 feet down the hall you laugh. And you think.”

“One time I had a student, Rosalie (Pierce) Rhodes (Class of 1956) – she was a lot of a card and I liked her — dres up like Patty Hearst,” says Cumberland. “She kicked in the door of the classroom and I interviewed her in character.”

“When we had him in class, we had to do short questions,” says Steve Smith, Class of 1968. “It was the night before Thanksgiving and, because I had procrastinated, I had a bunch of research to finish before I went home. There were very few people in the library, and so I was gracing myself about my bad luck I ran into Dr. Cumberland. He asked why I was there and I said I was finishing up research. He said, ‘Well good, and then he passed a bit and continued. ‘I’m tired, I mean — really am,” said and then he went home. How hard he was working — and on that night — encouraged me to keep studying for a few more minutes. I’ve never forgotten that experience.”

— Steve Smith, Class of 1968

The Work of a Historian

With Darald R. Schultz, he wrote Sharing the Spirit: The History of Westminster Presbyterian Church (1853–2005). Cumberland is a member of the church, which is located in Cedar Rapids, where he lives with his wife of 57 years, Ingrid. Cumberland met Ingrid in Germany in the summer following his first year at BV. Ingrid completed a bachelor’s degree in German with a Spanish minor at BV in 1973. A native speaker, she taught German courses at BV throughout the 70s and 80s.

“Maybe it’s just because I’ve uncovered different material that sometimes gave the story a little different slant. For the 1991 edition, I interviewed a number of people on tape.”

As Cumberland forecast in 1991, he did write the continuing chapters of History of Buena Vista University with the book’s third edition, published in 2006. “No one ever knows what things will be like when you start out,” says Cumberland. “ ’B’ in 1958 was nowhere near what BV is today. Back then, the school was just trying to keep alive. But the faculty, students and administration did have goals in mind and they eventually realized them — or we did, I should say.”

In addition to periodically serving as chair of the Social Science Division and dean of the School of Social Science, Philosophy and Religion throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Cumberland was a member of important boards, including the Briscoe, convened in 1975 at the start of his presidency and the library planning committee in 1962 that helped produce the European interim travel course at a critical stage in its development as an example of the projects which he helped to advance. A speech Cumberland delivered to the faculty, “Survival Isn’t Net Enough,” helped inspire the University to build a better future in the midst of the financial challenges in the late 70s. Cumberland is one-half the namesake of the Order of Cumberland and Tollefsen, which recognizes highly-regarded, long-serving faculty members. He has been a generous philanthropic supporter of BVU throughout the years.