Professor has taught (and made) history for 40 years

by Scott Boyle

“Walden” unpretentiously announces the carved metal sign over the door of the quaint but sturdy adobe building blissfully hugging the edge of Westwater Canyon at USU Eastern in Blanding (USUEB).

The building was originally built as an equipment shed from the same adobe bricks manufactured onsite and used to build the original science building on campus. For several years, it has been home to one of San Juan County’s most notable residents.

Walden is the name chosen by the building’s occupant, Dr. Robert S. McPherson, professor in the Department of History, College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Utah State University. The name is in homage partly to his native Massachusetts, as well as a reminder of the at-least 40 year journey of the San Juan Center. It is a nod to Henry David Thoreau and his attempt to follow the simple life in natural surroundings at Walden Pond and then write about it, a visual reminder of the teaching, mentoring, writing, research legacy of Bob himself.

Dr. McPherson, born and raised in Massachusetts, a mere 40 miles from Walden Pond, is retiring from USUEB this spring, after nearly 40 years of teaching and leading USUEB and the myriad institutions that preceded it.

He retires as an engaging, rigorous teacher of thousands of students, including this writer. But more than just teaching, McPherson is an integral part of the amazing success story that is USUEB. In the process, he has become a prolific writer and scholar in Native American studies and all things southeastern Utah.

How did he get here, all the way from Massachusetts? Let’s take a look.
After high school, where he acknowledged, “I didn’t do well,” McPherson headed to a military college, Norwich University in Vermont. “It was the best thing that ever happened to me,” he admits.

“It kinda turned my head around. I was a high school hot dog and all of a sudden its like, ‘Whoa, life is serious.’”

He flourished under the discipline of the school With a bachelor’s degree in English and a minor in history, McPherson was commissioned in the army and sent to serve in Vietnam. Wounded while serving, he returned to a Massachusetts hospital to recover where he was given a choice, go to Alaska or Germany. “Alaska fit me to a T,” he smiles, so to Alaska he went.

While in Alaska, he became an infantry company commander, and among other things, met Rick Maynard, a chaplain’s assistant. Maynard had served an LDS Mission in the Southwest Indian Mission and spoke Navajo.

From his earliest recollections, McPherson had had an interest in Native Americans. “I remember sitting on the couch with my mother,” he reminisces. “She was reading to me and the books about Native Americans were the books I wanted to read.

“As soon as I learned to read, that’s what I read. It’s been a life long interest.” Maynard and McPherson easily became the best of friends.

When McPherson retired from active duty military, he said, “I really didn’t have any place to go. But I knew I wanted to come to Utah, and Rick was here.”

Next stop was Utah for Bob and his Betsy and their family, which grew to six children. He soon began work on a Masters Degree at Brigham Young University (BYU).

“Just as I was completing it,” he said, “I got a call from Rick, who was down here in Blanding. He asked, ‘Are you interested in working for a Native American organization?’ I replied, ‘You bet, that’s what I want to do.’”

Utah Navajo Development Council (UNDC) hired him. He arrived in 1976 and worked with Cleal Bradford, Notah Tahy and others.

College classes began within a year. He was officially hired as the first full time faculty member at the College of Eastern Utah (CEU) in 1978, beginning an
illustrious teaching career.

During his tenure on campus, entities that he worked with include USU, UNDC, CEU, BYU, University of Utah, and Weber State. He has served as a curriculum specialist, adult education supervisor, instructor, vice-president of CEU-SJC, and adjunct and associate professor.

In 2012, McPherson became the first teacher not on the Logan USU campus to become a tenured and full professor of History.

He remarks now, “I couldn’t have moved to a better place, worked with better people and been in better circumstances. This has been a lifelong interest. It sounds kind of corny, but that’s how it ended up. I love teaching, writing and research.”

The research part of his life began later, after returning to BYU in the 1980s to become a better, more effective teacher and earn a doctorate degree.

While putting himself through graduate school using the GI Bill and other sources of funding, CEU saved a place for him on the Blanding campus.

“They committed, ‘as soon as you’re through, come on back, we have a place for you.’ That was comforting,” he marvels.

His initial motivation was to become a better teacher. However, when he got started doing writing and research, his life took another leap forward. “I found out I really, really enjoy writing and research. It was a chance to explore and learn.

“You don’t learn until you deal with it, until you write about it or until you think about it or put it under a microscope. That’s what writing did and does for me. It was very mind expanding.

“Truthfully, I didn’t like writing at all, but then I got into something I enjoyed and thought, ‘Wow this is neat, I’m interested in this’. I became very focused on doing research.”

“Focused” is an understatement, as McPherson is the author of numerous books, articles, book chapters, and monographs, with more on the way.

McPherson has written at least 19 books, most focused on Native Americans,
including “Comb Ridge and Its People” by USU Press, the 2009 Utah Book Award for Non-fiction winner.

“Writing helps one to focus,” he adds. “I had never even thought about writing a book. I often wondered ‘wouldn’t it be neat to write a history about this area.’ But, it was so far from my experience I didn’t think I was even capable of doing that.”

He finished a dissertation titled, The Northern Navajo Frontier, 1860-1900: Expansion through Adversity, which was subsequently published. It “put gasoline to the fire and boom, ‘Hey, I can do more here,’” he says now.

With a doctorate in hand, colleagues and professors at BYU urged McPherson to stay close to libraries, research grants and research assistants.

He said, “They were in essence saying, ‘Go bigger than that little San Juan Campus thing down there, CEU and an extension of a little school and head for the bright lights.’”

But he emotionally explains, “I love living down here. I love the people. So I’m just going to go back to San Juan and turn this place into my library, my research library.”

That’s just what he did, building his own library, writing his own research grants while doing a lot of oral history interviews.

“Those filing cabinets right there (eight of them) are filled with nearly 100 people I’ve interviewed that are now gone. That became my library.

“That’s why I write about this area because I’m so invested in it and experienced things with a lot of people. Its not just Navajo and its not just Ute. Right now I’m getting ready to send off a book about Finlay Bayles named Cowboy in Canyon Country: Life and Rhyme of Fin Bayles, Cowboy Poet.

“I interviewed him extensively. It’s a great opportunity to share his experiences and some of his cowboy poetry. It’s another expression of southeastern Utah. Writing and research have been phenomenal, cowboy culture, Navajo culture, and Ute culture. It represents us.”

And it represents the legacy of Bob McPherson, his humanity, research, understanding, writing, teaching about the heritage of San Juan County, and then
exploring with us these things, helping us grow and learn and understand and promote and help and heal.

The satisfaction runs deep for McPherson when he sees the evolution of USUEB from the old shirt factory to the campus today, and when he sees educators at county schools, including his wife, Betsy, who got all or much of their training there, many in his classrooms.

It runs deep in a life’s work of a humble man, dedicated to life-long learning and teaching and telling the compelling stories of marvelous people.

“There are a lot of stories here that still need to be told,” he maintains.

For now, he can tell them from “Walden,” as USUEB is OK with him staying in the building. The old building, built with dedicated, perseverant, local hands, rising from the dust of an old equipment shed, changed to an art studio and finally turned into a research library, is dedicated to telling honest, hardworking, inspiring stories.

Walden is the last of the old buildings on campus because “it represents us,” says McPherson, and the 40-year college history.

As Thoreau himself simply penned of his time at Walden Pond, “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only.”

Walden, the building, perfectly mirroring the growth and legacy of USU Eastern-Blanding, its students past and present, and Bob McPherson himself.

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