

22 QUESTIONS: TTU HISTORY PROF MICHAEL BIRDWELL

Michael E. "Birdie" Birdwell, professor of History at Tennessee Tech, enjoys a sunny day on campus.

Herald-Citizen Photo/Ty Kernea

Name: Michael E. Birdwell, better known as "Birdie."



Hometown: Cookevegas. I was born in the old wing of the Cookeville hospital.

Now living in: Physically living in Cookeville, but in my mind I am in Belgium, Prague, Kathmandu or some place exotic.

Family: My parents are dead. I have two sisters: Diane in Virginia, and Brenda in California. The most important family member is my beautiful wife, Tammy O'Dell.

First job: Working for my uncle, Toots Herd, in a series of capacities for the Cumberland Valley Shows. It was not glamorous, but it turned me into a night owl.

Current occupation (and since when): Professor of History at TTU. I've been teaching at Tech since 2004, and was promoted to full professor last year.

What I love about my job: The fact that almost every day is different. I love research, and I enjoy interacting with good students. Clever students challenge me as much as I try to challenge them. It is the research that I enjoy most. As a cultural historian, almost anything is fair game. Tracking down leads and following the evidence is exciting, and it often leads to unexpected surprises. Each new research project spawns several others.

Part of my job I could do without: Committee work in general.

What drew me to this occupation was: The realization that I would never be able to make a living as an artist, though I did try. I love history and everyone should be fortunate enough to do something they truly enjoy.

Dream job: Working full time in the research department at Warner Bros., and interacting with a wide-ranging group of creative people, and making cinematic magic.

When I'm not working I'm: Reading, writing, watching movies, hanging out with friends, traveling, avoiding housework, solving the world's problems, etc. I'm most proud of: Being the only person from the United States invited to participate in a symposium about how the Holocaust has been depicted in film and media at Yad Vashem, the International Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem. It is the greatest honor that has ever been bestowed upon me, and a validation of my work.

Something most people don't know about me: If they don't know, why would I tell them now?

Favorite movie: It changes depending on a number of factors. I write and teach about film history, so it varies. Films that I can watch over and over include "Duck Soup," "Casablanca," "Dr. Strangelove," Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies cartoons, Ikiru, "The Treasure of Sierra Madre," "Amelie," "Cinema Paradiso," "Manhattan," "My Favorite Year," "The Adventures of Robin Hood," "Sweet Smell of Success," "The Leopard," "The Man Who Would Be King," "The African Queen," "Wise Blood," and so many more.

Favorite food: I am particularly drawn to Asian food of almost any variety.

My hero (and why): I know that most people think that it is Sergeant Alvin York, but it is not. He was an incredible man and has played a key role in my professional life, but he is secondary to two other people.

Harry Warner is my hero. He was willing to sacrifice profits for the sake of principles, and he made tough decisions in spite of peer pressure to do otherwise. My other hero is Doug Bates. He taught me how to deal with cancer with dignity and humor, and I truly miss having lunch with him each week.

As a child, I thought I'd grow up to be: I wanted to be a park ranger, and still find that attractive. They have great jobs and never retire. Failing that, I really wanted to be a cartoonist.

What I watch on TV: My wife says too much. Among the things I watch are "Justified," "Homeland," "Jeopardy," "Sons of Anarchy," "The Daily Show," "Masterpiece Theatre," "American Experience," etc.

Favorite childhood memory: I loved being a Boy Scout, camping, hiking, and the like.

If I could do it all over again I'd: Spend more time with people who had a real influence on my life and record the conversations and stories.

I'd love to meet (living or dead): There are so many, most of them are iconoclasts. I'd love to put a weekend retreat together with the following people and they cannot escape each other for at least 72 hours: Mark Twain, Hunter S. Thompson, John Huston, Flannery O'Connor, Peter O'Toole, Rene Magritte, Hedy Lamar, Orson Welles, Bishop Shelby Spong, Bill Maher, Dorothy Parker, Groucho Marx, Voltaire, Oscar Wilde, Frank Zappa, Tom Waits, Elvis Costello, Chuck Jones, Coco Chanel, Abigail Adams, H.L. Mencken, Richard Feynman, Gustav Klimt, Robert Graves, Akira Kurosawa, Cole Porter, Calvin Trilling, Sarah Vowell, Dmitri Shostakovich, Woody Allen, Vladimir Nabokov, and Mae West, and maybe a few others. Let them go at it for a while, and then throw some of my friends into the mix, including Steve Gwilt, Tom Furtch, Becky Magura, John Nisbet, Carl Owens, Hank Mannle, and just see what happens.

Advice I'd pass on to future generations: Make friends, find something that you love to do and do it, and don't eat yellow snow.

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: 18 December 2011