

Joseph Alysious McGowan Oct. 18, 1912 – Aug.5, 1992

LOCAL HISTORIAN JOSEPH MCGOWAN DIES

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Joseph A. McGowan, a gutsy history professor who battled lack of interest in local history most of his career and who authored the highly acclaimed three-volume History of the Sacramento Valley, died Wednesday of cancer.

The professor emeritus from Sacramento State was 80 years old and lived in Sacramento. His wife, Mary, and several other family members were with him when he died at home.

He really was a trend setter, said Cindy Woodward, a historian for the state Office of Historic Preservation in Sacramento. At a time when most (academics) looked down on local history, Joe had the guts, as a Ph.D., to get involved with grass-roots history, which is respectable now.

As a professor, he was known for his stimulating classes. Considered helpful and sensitive by his students, he also was regarded as a demanding teacher and tough grader.

Anybody who took a class from him will tell you he was a spellbinding storyteller, said Woodward, who studied under McGowan. He used lots of anecdotes.

He'd take an incident and pick out a human story and talk about it. He made history interesting.

In a 1985 interview, McGowan discussed his philosophy of teaching, saying, "We used to say that history textbooks were like taking the juice out of the orange. My idea was to put the juice back into the orange, and I thought I was able to do that by teaching details."

McGowan frequently argued that a knowledge of local history is necessary to understand national and global trends.

"It provides the building blocks on which other people can erect a structure we call history," he told an interviewer. "In other words, history should be written from the bottom up, whereas (most) historians want to see history from the top down."

"I'm going against the grain," he acknowledged. "I always have. That's why I don't have much standing."

He also lamented difficulties in attracting young people to history courses. "People don't realize that history is the heritage of the past," he said. "Unfortunately, people who appreciate history the most are older people."

A native of Berkeley who earned graduate degrees at the University of California in his hometown, he used his master's and doctoral theses to deal with early forms of transportation in the Sacramento area.

He taught three years at Gridley High School in Butte County before joining the Navy in World War II. During the war, he served as an officer in the Pacific aboard the USS Pensacola. He joined the faculty of the then-Sacramento State College in 1949.

His *History of the Sacramento Valley*, published in 1961, is considered a classic on the subject. No longer in print, it is considered a collector's item.

McGowan's history covers 1808 to 1960 and concentrates on the Valley's economy.

Through his research he discovered that the first automobile to appear in the Valley was at a circus in Red Bluff in 1898. The first car owned in the Valley was in Sacramento in 1900. The first movie theater opened in Marysville in 1908 and the first citrus colony appeared in 1887 in Thermalito, near Oroville.

He was co-founder and first president of the Sacramento County Historical Society in 1954. He served on the organization's board of directors for three decades. He also was a member of the Pioneer Society, American Association of University Professors, California Historical Society and the American Historical Society.

In addition to his wife, survivors include daughters Joni McGowan of Las Vegas, Nev., Marcia Anne Caravello of Roseville and Louise McGowan Bezark of Sacramento, and two grandchildren.

At his request, no services will be held.