

Houston Philosophical Society
Minutes of 618th Meeting, September 20th, 2007

CALL TO ORDER: 8:10 p.m.

President Newell Boyd called to order the 618th meeting of the Society in its 87th year. He announced that former member and Rice University President Norman Hackerman had passed away. He also called for applause for Jim Kinsey, the immediate past President of the Society, who was China.

President Boyd called that the members vote ‘yes’/’no’ votes on proposed changes to the Society’s bylaws and constitutional amendments received over the summer while guests were introduced. The changes were approved.

President Boyd introduced the speaker, American colonial historian Dr. Virginia Bernhard, Professor Emerita at the University of St. Thomas, author of a historical novel, and author and editor of several United States history and women’s history books. Professor Bernhard’s topic was “What History Can Teach Us About Fiction: And Vice Versa.”

Dr. Bernhard spoke on what Jamestown—the setting of her historical novel, *A Durable Fire*—ought to mean to us, namely: the birth of America; a racial tragedy, because slavery began there; and the obliteration of a culture, the Native American culture.

The Virginia Colony’s records of the Jamestown settlement, 1609-1619, were lost or destroyed, and the accounts written by the early settlers were few and fragmentary. The major source of the history of the colony, John Smith, left in 1609 and his book was not published until 1624. No records were left by the early Indians.

Professor Bernhard wrote her novel because she wanted to read it—to read, for example, what it was like during the starving time of the winter of 1609-10 when the settlers were reduced to eating cats, rats, and human flesh. Only 60 of 500 settlers were supposed to have been left in Virginia, but Dr. Bernhard discovered the numbers were not quite right.

As a novelist, Dr. Bernhard had to follow the settlers from day to day. She had come across records of early planter women in doing historical research and relied on these. Other sources included the history of the ill-fated

flagship *Sea Venture* of the “third supply,” the inspiration for Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, which was wrecked off the coast. All 150 people survived, but no one knew it. Captain George Yardley and his wife Temperance had sailed on different ships. Why? Temperance arrived in Virginia without her husband. If she thought him dead, what did she do during the 10 months she thought him dead? Her task in writing the novel was to know where her characters ate and slept, what they wore, and where they went every day. She followed them for three years, retracing their footsteps, bitten by the same flies, and watching the same sunsets.

Dr. Bernhard discovered that the powerful story of John Smith and Pocahontas, the princess who risked her life to save him, was both true and false. There is only one account—Smith’s own—of Smith’s capture by the Indians in the winter of 1607, his being taken to the home of Chief Powhatan surrounded by attendants in paint, beads, and feathers, and, after consultation, being ordered stoned, until Pocahontas laid her head on his to save him. Smith did not tell the story until 1624, when Pocahontas and Powhatan were both dead; nor did anyone else mention it. However, in 1616, when Pocahontas made her famous visit to England, Smith said in a letter to the queen that Pocahontas had risked her own brains to save his. The ceremony could have been an initiation ceremony, but then why did Pocahontas throw herself on him? Did he make it up? We know Pocahontas worked as a liaison and spy for her father.

Fiction can flesh out what is vague, but novelists who invent things and stretch the truth can do great damage. Therefore, Dr. Bernhard tried to make the record as close to the narrative as possible. Although she wanted to have a scene where Pocahontas would say she had always wanted to be Smith’s woman, the historical context was that she was a married woman with a child and famous in London and would never have thrown herself at Smith. Therefore, Dr. Bernhard set a scene at Zion House in London where Smith told Pocahontas he was getting old (he was 37 and she 22) and that she would be a good wife to John Rolfe and asked her to think of him.

Dr. Bernhard also wrote of the starving time that began in the fall of 1609. Smith, the President of the Colony in 1608, was mysteriously wounded by a bag of exploding gunpowder and had to return to England. He left the 500 colonists, including 50 women and children, well-supplied for the winter. In addition, the land was naturally abundant, with mulberries, gooseberries, cherries, groundnuts, and crabs and sturgeon well-stocked in the Jamestown

River. Nevertheless, George Percy, who followed Smith, said so much misery ensued after Smith left that some stole and were executed; there was famine; many were slain by savages; some dug up corpses and ate them; and one man murdered his wife, cut the child from her womb, and chopped the mother and pieces and salted her for his meat, and was burned at the stake.

No human bones have been found in Jamestown, but rat and snake bones have been found in excavation in a pit, and of the 500 colonists, only 60 survived the winter at Jamestown.

Percy wrote the only detailed eye witness account of the starving time, fifteen years later. He wrote that he sent Captain Radcliffe to build a new fort at Point Comfort and to keep a lookout for ships. William Strachey wrote that the new fort was kept by 40 men and that, while at Jamestown the people were starving, at Point Comfort, 30 miles downriver, there was so much food that the men fed crabs to their hogs. It remains a mystery why Percy sent the men there, but did not call to them until after hundreds had died.

Fiction requires forming an image in the mind. Professor Bernhard had to know the map of Virginia and where everyone was on it. She thought of what the sources did not say: How long did it take to go downriver? What kind of boats did they have? How long does it take to starve to death? Why did no one go down to Point Comfort? One reason they did not go outside the fort was that they were terrified of the Indians, but they should have had enough resources inside.

The fate of the colonists remains a mystery, but research is ongoing.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:12 p.m.

Submitted,

Evelyn Keyes
Recording Secretary