

Roy Rosenzweig: A Life in History

Jim O'Brien¹

The following is a chronologically arranged account, in the words of some of those who knew him, of the life of Roy Rosenzweig (1950-2007), with primary attention to his work as a historian. In all but one case (the quotation in a box), the words are excerpted from longer tributes, with links provided to the full text.

This piece originated as a short article (“A Champion of Democratic History”) in Issue No. 102 of the Radical History Review, Fall 2008. In planning to expand this article as an on-line document, I decided that the story could most effectively be conveyed by quoting some of the many written and spoken appreciations that have appeared since Roy’s death in October 2007. These together tell the story of his creativity, his energy, his political commitment, and his fundamental decency.

Except where otherwise noted, the quoted words are from the Thanks, Roy web site (<http://thanksroy.org>). The full texts are well worth reading, and in fact the entire Thanks, Roy site is well worth a close reading.

Along with the present piece, I’ve posted a copy of Roy’s [CV](#), with some additions.

Roy was born in Bayside, Queens, in 1950 and spent his whole childhood there. He attended Francis Lewis High School, a large, diverse public school and graduated in 1967.

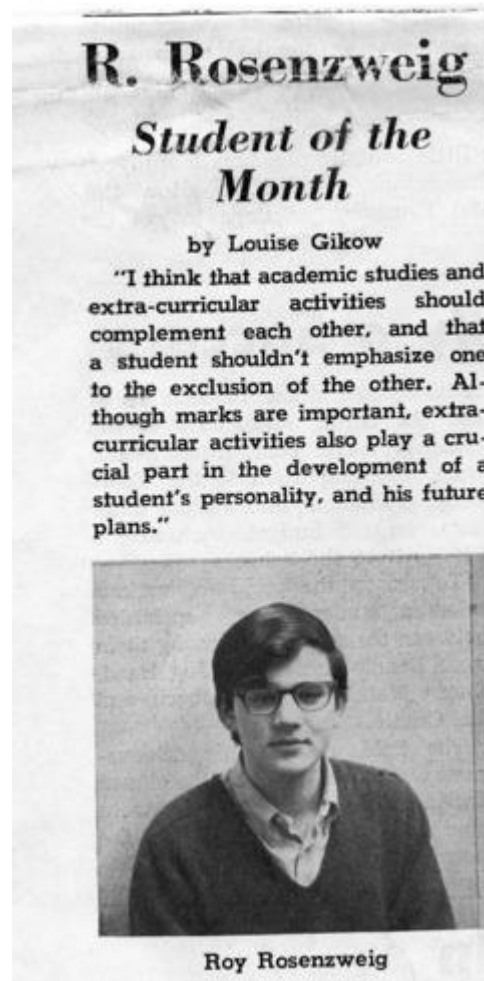
He was bright and tenacious – if there was something he didn’t know he would find out. I remember going off together on Saturdays to the 42nd street library in Manhattan, even in junior high, to research various topics. In retrospect, it was my very first study group, and who better to have in it than the boy leader of the national honor society!! ... But it was not his intellect that made Roy such a good friend. It was his compassion, his loyalty, and his integrity that made him special. He was always there for you, and he was always sticking up for the “less-talented” kid, be it in the classroom or out in the schoolyard. He would always do the “right” thing, and most importantly, for the right reasons.

from Louis Wang, “[Untitled](#)” [as noted earlier, all the excerpts not otherwise designated are from tributes appearing on the Thanks, Roy web site, <http://www.thanksroy.org>]

His father, Max Rosenzweig, helped to nurture Roy’s sly funny bone – introducing him to the Marx Brothers and Bob and Ray at an early age. – from Beth Bernick, “[Roy, Back in the 60s and 70s](#)”

¹ Any correspondence should go to jimbrien48@gmail.com. The site was last updated October 10, 2008.

Stickball, a product of the urban streets, suited Roy's temperament perfectly: it was an unpretentious, broadly democratic game, playable anywhere by anyone, flexible and adaptable; organized from the bottom up by the people who played it; with rules derived from custom and not authority, it blended teamwork and individual effort in equal measure.
from "[Spaldeen](#)"



["Student of the Month"](#)

He attended Columbia University, and graduated magna cum laude in 1971.

Not long after we moved into our sublet (two bedrooms for about \$100 a month, if that can be believed), we helped my girlfriend's family by taking one of a litter of kittens off their hands. Roy suggested the name – Rufus T. Firefly, after one of Groucho's characters – and she (as we later discovered) was both the joy and bane of our bachelor life. One night (very late, of course) Roy was writing a paper and crumpled up a sheet into a ball and threw it in the general direction of his wastepaper basket ... and a moment later Rufus was there with it in her mouth. She had taught herself to fetch, and fetch she did, for as long as either of us had the patience to play the game. We'd toss the paper ball, and she would tear off at the speed of light, grapple with the

object, and then come loping back, ready for the next round. She never tired of it – though we certainly did. Roy could not write a paper (and his were of legendary length) without starting and crumpling dozens of pages, and the mere sound of paper being balled up was enough to bring Rufus to plaintive, rapt vigilance at his feet. I can't think of Roy to this day without thinking of Rufus fetching balls of paper in the wee hours of the morning
from Fred Schwarzbach, "[Remembering Roy, c. 1970](#)"

Quoted in *Time Magazine* (in an article on poor job prospects for graduating seniors). "Just like Ceylon," says Columbia Senior Roy Rosenzweig, a history major, "where 10,000 people went to college and couldn't get jobs."
from "[Graduates and Jobs: A Grave New World](#)," *Time*, May 24, 1971

One summer during college he worked in a shoe factory in Brooklyn. Many days after work he would tell me stories about the social and financial obstacles faced by the workers. Personal stories, real stories – not textbook generalities. He knew full well how lucky he was that in September he got to go back to being a student and how relatively oppressive it would be to see nothing but more factory work in one's future. Roy noticed and cared.
from Beth Bernick, "[Roy, Back in the 60s and 70s](#)"

During the Vietnam War years Roy applied for and received conscientious objector status. But freeing himself from the potential horror of wartime military service didn't end the issue for Roy. Instead, once a week for two years Roy rose at 5:00am so that he could travel down to Whitehall St., New York's selective service headquarters, to try to find ways for those waiting on line to get out of service. I remember he was particularly upset that they were inducting junkies who weren't able to protect themselves from the Selective Service madness. Roy did what he could to help.
from Beth Bernick, "[Roy, Back in the 60s and 70s](#)"

After two years at Cambridge University, on a research fellowship, Roy showed up as a history graduate student at Harvard in the fall of 1973. During his five years there, besides writing a dissertation that later became a still-influential book,¹ he engaged in a number of projects that stretched the concept of what graduate students do. He co-produced a documentary film, *Mission Hill and the Miracle of Boston*, conveying history by giving a voice to residents of a working-class neighborhood.² He organized film colloquia exploring the depiction of history in movies. He joined his close friend Warren Leon and three others in a Harvard-Danforth project called "Experiments in History Teaching," sponsoring conferences and drawing together more than eighty people's diverse experiences with high school, college-level, and public history into an exciting book.³ He helped to form the Boston Collective of the Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians Organization (MARHO) and thus became an editor of the *Radical History Review*. A theme running through all these activities was his zest for collaborating with other people, and for combining common effort with lasting friendship.

I am one of the many people in this room who arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the early 1970s very uncertain as to what exactly we were doing. Roy helped us figure that out. What do you do when you don't know what you are doing? You organize a reading group; you form a collective to produce a journal, you make sure that all of your friends know each other – whether in person or as legends. You give other people drafts of your work to read and read theirs and talk to them. Roy helped us all collectively to gain the confidence to do our creative work, and he helped many of us find jobs, housing, roommates, and life-long friends.
from Betsy Blackmar, "[Untitled](#)"

We were searching for something Harvard didn't seem to think important. In those days right after the tumultuous strikes, demonstrations, picket lines, we were odd, sometimes frustrated by what seemed like a faculty out of touch. We were all reading Thompson, Gutman, (early) Genovese; we were arguing about the value – or lack thereof – of quantitative history: Time on the Cross; we were reading voraciously, literature that was ignored by our professors. We all gravitated to those few faculty we thought would put up with us. We were consumed by history "from the bottom up."
from David Rosner, "[The Memorial Day Picnic](#)"

[A Roy Story](#)

by Chris Clark

It would be exaggerating to say that Roy taught me to drive – I had learned the basics already. But it was Roy who saw to it that I got my first driver's license.

It was 1975, at the end of my first year of graduate school. I was to take a long summer trip across the country. I would travel mostly by Greyhound bus, but was to return with a friend by car from the West Coast and needed to be able to share the driving. I had obtained my learner's permit. Thoughtful, generous, kind as ever, Roy offered his time and his car to help me pass the road test.

He took me out once or twice for practice, observing me patiently and tactfully. No test appointment was available nearby in Cambridge, so we would have to spend a whole morning going for a test in Roslindale, the other side of Boston. Roy waved aside my apologies for this, though he surely had better things to do with half a day. At the start of the test he climbed into the rear seat, on hand to take over the wheel if I should flunk out.

The car had bench seats. The examiner, a bulky man, was not too impressed with my driving but passed me anyway. As we drove back to Cambridge, Roy let on that he had been anxious during the exam and was relieved it was over. The front seat, he now told me, was broken, and not fixed to the floor on the passenger side. Sitting as straight as he could so as not to attract attention, Roy had spent the entire test firmly gripping the underside of the front seat, hoping that I would not brake too hard or that if I did he would be strong enough to stop the examiner from sliding toward the windshield.

Roy was the heart of a wonderful group that came together during the late 1970s, the Boston “collective” of the Radical History Review. Most of us were working on our dissertations and teaching part-time. Somehow we found time to build RHR. None of us worked harder than Roy. I remember a party at Jean Agnew’s house. Roy fell asleep on the couch. I saw Betsy Blackmar carefully cover him with a blanket. I realized how much she cared for him, how much we all cared for each other.

from Jonathan Schneer, “[RHR Boston Collective](#)”

He could have stayed in the Boston area. After two years at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, he was offered a coveted position in the Boston College History Department. But when he was chosen for a job at George Mason University (GMU), which had no PhD program but where his partner Deborah Kaplan was already teaching, he accepted the less prestigious job; he and Deborah married in the summer of 1981.

Given Roy’s faith in mutuality and reciprocity, it matters to me to think that I may have given him back one thing: he met Deborah at a party at my Cambridge apartment. (Of course, given the principles of six degrees of separation on which he operated, they were destined to meet one way or another). And Deborah gave Roy back to us all a hundred fold by sharing his hospitality and wit, and, over the years – I think it took a long time – helping him see that he could do even more if he didn’t stay up all night or live on chocolate donuts and Tab or drive himself to exhaustion; she even taught Roy to take vacations, which just seems like a miracle.

from Betsy Blackmar, “[Untitled](#)”

In 1997, I was lucky to join Roy and Deborah on the ASA delegation of scholars to the Japanese Association for American Studies meeting.... [On one occasion, the Americans were all expected to sing karaoke songs, and Roy and Deborah sang together.] They looked pretty sheepish most of the time, actually, and Roy more sheepish than Deborah. But when they looked at one another, and sang the corny verses back and forth, they had this incredibly innocent sweetness about them. The performance itself was not memorable, but that sweetness was unforgettable. It’s not often that we see our friends or colleagues so publicly in love, so unabashed and sincere. That was Roy and Deborah on that night.

from Phil Deloria, “[Hey Paula](#)”

His first year at George Mason was 1981-82. He established himself, both as a colleague and as a teacher, in a way that carried-over throughout his 26 years as a member of the GMU History Department. Already by 1986 he had won an Outstanding Teaching award.

When I got there – George Mason is kind of a preposterous place in some ways. Well, all Universities are a little preposterous. But it reflected its origins as kind of a branch campus of UVA, and a lot of the faculty in that department had no pretensions to doing any research at all. They didn’t think of themselves as researchers, they were teachers primarily, and my training of course – I thought I was a hotshot academic – was to be contemptuous of that kind of thing. You

know – that’s not what it’s about, it’s about the research. And Roy never reflected that attitude: although he himself was prodigious in his work he always treated all his colleagues at George Mason with enormous courtesy and respect – he built a culture of mutual respect that was really striking. It wasn’t one of those two-tiered systems where one person gets all the influence...well actually it was: Roy got all the influence, but other than that it was pretty good!
from Michael O’Malley, “[Roy and George Mason University](#)”

It was an extraordinary experience to be in a department with him: it was for me a completely new way of looking at how academics can conduct themselves, and how the life of a department can be conducted. It was extraordinary – I thought you had to be sort of bitter and infighting – I thought it was a requirement for the job! And it was a revelation to see otherwise.
from Michael O’Malley, “[Roy and George Mason University](#)”

He always came to department events – all of them – and tried to come to your speaking engagements, even when they were off-campus. In hundreds of small ways, he reached out to people, connected with people, and affirmed other people’s contributions and dignity. His signature closing for an email was, “Take care.” He did care. And in doing so, he made the world a more caring place.
from Rosie Zagari, “[The Mouse](#)”

Roy was a perfect adviser – he was always there when I needed help yet did not demand any adoration or flattery in return. In fact, he found any expression of gratitude annoying.
from Elena Razlogova, “[Roy as Teacher](#)”

I left that conversation [with Roy] not thinking how far I had to go but rather how far I *could* go.
from Kurt Knoerl [PhD student] in The Underwater Blogger, [October 12, 2007](#).

At the same time as he made a home for himself at George Mason in the 1980s, he engaged in an extraordinary amount of long-distance collaboration. At one level it involved simple correspondence, as he took on responsibility for cultivating “regional associates” for MARHO. At another level it involved several book projects. Along with two other *Radical History Review* editors, Steve Brier and Susan Porter Benson, he expanded a special *RHR* issue, “Presenting the Past,” into a Temple University Press book by the same name,⁴ establishing a distinctive left voice in discussions of how history can be presented to a broad audience. Along the same lines, he and Warren Leon co-edited a book of essays on history museums.⁵ He began collaborating with another close Harvard friend, Betsy Blackmar, on the long-term project that became the multiple-prize-winning *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*.⁶ He and a third close graduate school friend, Jean-Christophe Agnew, began in 1984 a twenty-three-year collaboration on a regular column in the *RHR* entitled “The Abusable Past,” employing deadly wit against misuses of history in academia and the public sphere.⁷ He worked closely with Steve Brier and Josh Brown of the New York-based American Social History Project on its videos and other public-history undertakings, including the two-volume *Who*

Built America, which sought to tell the national story from the standpoint of those who did the work.⁸

Roy and I would often joke about the now long forgotten MARHO regional associates, a loose network of corresponding members – many of them isolated (by their own account) at various Midwestern and Southern colleges and universities. Wanting desperately to talk to someone, anyone, about, say, the impact of Daniel De Leon or the significance of the British General Strike of 1926. Had it not been for Roy’s empathy and his efforts over many years – all those letters and phone calls – this committee of correspondence among left historians would have disappeared. No one else in MARHO was willing to take that job. And so it fell to Roy, or rather Roy rose to it. – from Jean-Christophe Agnew, “[Roy](#)”

One of the greatest ironies of Roy’s life was that his own “eight hours for what we will” were incredibly jam-packed with work-related tasks and projects. Nevertheless, he was always there for his friends. I think one of the reasons he was such an advocate for collaboration was that it gave him a way to mix business with pleasure and enjoy the company of his friends and colleagues while he also pursued his professional and intellectual passions.
from Suzy Smith, “[“Eight Hours for What We Will”](#)”

Rosenzweig had a deep and abiding commitment to the collaborative process, a commitment he enthusiastically embraced in the face of the history profession’s dogged belief that only solitary scholarship counted. His collaborative efforts began after graduate school, when, like so many of his good friends, he served as a member of the editorial collective of the *Radical History Review*, a journal that is still published after more than three decades and helped shape a whole generation of labor, social, cultural, and public historical research, writing, and teaching.
from Stephen Brier, “[Roy Rosenzweig](#),” *AHA Perspectives*, March 2008

He taught me how to argue as a way of thinking a problem through and without getting cranky – well, he never got cranky, anyway. He taught me how to put some flesh and bones onto historical abstractions, how to find the people and think about what a difference they made to the story we were trying to tell. He taught me to have faith in people, who would go about making history, whatever the rules.
from Betsy Blackmar, “[Learning from Roy](#)”

Roy’s hunger for collaboration reflected in part Roy’s love of people. He loved to be with them, loved working with them, learning from them and about them. His curiosity about people was bottomless. He delighted in putting people in touch with each other. He was a master networker, a maestro of the annual meeting of the AHA, not because he saw it as an avenue of self promotion but because he so enjoyed being in the mix and wanted to maximize his opportunities to learn from others about all manner of things, large and small.
from Gary Gerstle, “[Remembering Roy](#)”

The end wasn’t the point so much as the process that got you to the conclusion of different projects. Roy was happiest when he was collaborating with people.

Steve Brier, in “[History Conversations: In Memoriam Roy Rosenzweig](#),” November 15, 2007 (discussion with Steve Brier, Josh Brown, and Mike O’Malley, audio file)

If his collaborations in the 1980s were primarily with fellow radicals, the 1990s were a decade in which he became more deeply involved in the academic historical profession, notably the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. By then, they had changed notably, with a much larger representation of people interested in social history – in exploring the experiences of working people, women, minority groups, those who had traditionally been ignored in the narration of “history.” He used his growing influence in the mainstream profession, not so much to further the proliferation of social-history monographs, but more to encourage reflection on the interface between academic history and the ways in which ordinary people confront and understand the past. He helped to design and direct an ambitious survey of Americans’ uses of the past, embodied in *The Presence of the Past*, co-authored with David Thelen.⁹ Through it all, he had a radical-democratic view of the profession, wanting nobody to feel left out.

He was extremely skeptical about the profession – about snobbery masquerading as standards, about the bubble reputation, about the ways the familiar often obscured the talent. Lot of people feel ambivalent about their profession, but Roy’s skepticism never turned into alienation, and he never stopped working to improve customs he thought were useless and corrupt.
from Mike O’Malley, “[A Complex Guy](#)”

It wasn’t just that Roy acknowledged women’s history. He also embraced what I thought of as feminist process, though he didn’t articulate his style in those terms, or any terms – he just got things done in an incredibly collaborative and unassuming way. I remember especially a moment in 1991, when we served together on the OAH Program Committee. There were lots of proposals for complete sessions that year and a big stack of single paper proposals as well. Most of the committee was willing to focus on the complete sessions and only move to the single papers if we really needed to add speakers or sessions. But Roy cornered me at the first coffee break and said we should volunteer to go through all the single proposals and create sessions because otherwise lots of graduate students and young faculty who didn’t have the networks to produce full sessions would get lost. So we did just that – and it yielded some great sessions. On so many occasions like this one, Roy did the invisible work that makes such a difference and refused any special acknowledgement for his efforts. He was a mensch.
from Nancy Hewitt, “[A Few Good Men\(sches\)](#)”

In the beginning there was Roy Rosenzweig.... Roy read reams of our earliest prose, offered first-rate criticism, and gave encouragement and enthusiasm when it counted most. – from Ted Burrows and Mike Wallace, “Acknowledgements,” in *Gotham*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for History in 1999¹⁰

I began to suspect Roy was more than just a “big name” when I received notice that I had been rejected for a faculty position at Mason. Most search committees never take the time even to notify candidates that a position has been filled, but Roy wrote me personally. The letter was specific to me, not a form letter, and Roy included some handwritten personal remarks at the end. It was the nicest rejection letter I have ever received, so supportively written that it felt more like an affirmation of my work than a piece of unwelcome news. I mentioned the letter to an acquaintance of mine who had also unsuccessfully applied for the position. She replied that she too “had just gotten the world’s nicest rejection letter” specially tailored to her. He did it for

everyone. Two years later, after I had joined the faculty in a different position at Mason, I served on a search committee with Roy and saw the process from the other side. Despite that fact that he had served on dozens of such committees, that he had read the dossiers of hundreds, perhaps thousands of hopeful scholars, and that he had written too many rejection letters to count, Roy still worried over the feelings and careers of the bright young historians he could not employ – people he would never meet, people with no titles or grant money to bestow, individuals who might otherwise seem interchangeable in a profession so ruthlessly competitive. They mattered to Roy. And I will always remember, from that uncertain time in my life, how much it meant to me that I meant something to him. – from Meredith Lair, “[Untitled](#)”

I will always think of Roy as the most generous, selfless, and compassionate intellectual I have ever known. In a profession full of large and fragile egos, he always worked for the common good. – from Michael Kazin, in Dan Cohen’s Digital Campus blog, [Oct. 12, 2007](#)

The 1990s were a decade of extraordinary advance in digital history, and no historian was quicker than Roy to appreciate its potential. At the very start of the decade, with Steve Brier and Josh Brown, he accepted the challenge of translating a major section of *Who Built America?* into the first CD-ROM history text, a merger of oral history interviews, film clips, photographs, and music. Other CD-ROMs followed in this collaboration, but as the World Wide Web emerged in the early ‘90s he grasped its immense potential as a tool for historians. With Michael O’Malley he started the Center for History and New Media in 1994 at George Mason, on a small scale at first but so well grounded in the new technology that its potential for growth was enormous. Through the decade, he served as an interpreter of technological advances for fellow historians, through a series of articles in academic-history journals.

Al Gore may not have invented the Internet, but I think it is no exaggeration to claim that Roy invented Digital History as a field of serious scholarly endeavor. Before Roy got involved I’m sure there were others who were playing around with what digital media might mean to our professional practice. But it was Roy who made Digital History into a professional field. For that alone, the profession and many subsequent generations of history students will be forever indebted to this great man.

from Mills Kelly, “[Remembering Roy Rosenzweig](#)”

I first met Roy Rosenzweig at a 1999 conference sponsored by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation at Stanford University organized by David Kirsch and Timothy Lenoir about use of websites to capture recent history of science and technology.... Only eight years ago creating history on the web was radical and indeed very hard.... The breadth and depth of Roy’s vision for history and the new media elevated the Stanford conference, which assembled scattered, lonely and even clandestine practitioners. Roy saw that new kinds of history could be created and communicated, and that some strong institutions were needed to improve and spread the practice and to spur preservation and access.

From Jesse Ausubel, “[Untitled](#)”

Roy's understanding of digital history and its potential was spectacular. I'm not sure I know of anyone else who had quite such a handle on what might be achieved.
from Stephen Rhind-Tutt, "[In Appreciation](#)"

Every piece he wrote on "digital history" was a welcoming, careful, thoughtful look at how digital technologies are reshaping scholarly practice and opportunities.
from William G. Thomas, III, "Roy Rosenzweig and the Field of Digital History: A Tribute," Digital History web site, [October 15, 2007](#)

Roy discerned in the internet an extraordinary moment in the history of democracy. He dreamed about creating a series of globally interconnected digital databases about history, politics, and society that would put more information in the hands of more people than had ever been the case in human history. He wanted so much to seize this democratic moment, and to use it to strike a blow for democratic empowerment.
from Gary Gerstle, "[Remembering Roy](#)"

One way of looking at Roy in the 2000s, a decade that was cut short for him, is that it was a time in which he saw much of his work come to fruition. For three years he served as vice-president for research of the American Historical Association, which gave him a bully pulpit for his wedding of serious history and digital technology. He even succeeded in getting the AHA to make the articles in its journal, the *American Historical Review*, freely available on-line, contrary to the practice of nearly all present-day academic journals. The Center for History and New Media mushroomed starting in 2001-02, to the point that it had more than forty employees at the time of his death. Its September 11 Digital Archive, created in partnership with the American Social History Project, collected more than 150,000 first-hand accounts, e-mails, images, and other digital materials. He and Dan Cohen, who later succeeded him as the Institute's director, co-authored the extremely comprehensive book *Digital History*.¹¹ In 2003 he was the second person to be given the \$25,000 Richard W. Lyman Award by the National Humanities Center and the Rockefeller Foundation, honoring "outstanding achievement in the use of information technology to advance scholarship and teaching in the humanities."¹² The Organization of American Historians gave him a Distinguished Service Award in 2007. (After his death the name of the award was changed to the Roy Rosenzweig Distinguished Service Award.)

Roy has had lots of help along the way, and the Center's future leadership could not be in better hands, but if I had to say what Roy did in a sentence it would be this: he created a place where forty people now come to do things that are so exciting that I bet every single one of them has nights they can't sleep because what they really want is to be back at the Center. This is the payoff of all the budgets and forms, all the paperwork, all of the long, tedious hours of administrivia: you get to do things so exciting you can't sleep. Roy created a space where those forty people, and many more in the years to come, will meet, talk, and build things together. Amazing and wonderful and important things.

from Matthew Kirschenbaum, "[Who Built CHNM?](#)"

A typical but still remarkable moment occurred when Roy received the Richard W. Lyman Award (presented by the National Humanities Center and the Rockefeller Foundation) in 2003 for “outstanding achievement in the use of information technology to advance scholarship and teaching in the humanities.” He got up on stage, used his computer to project a giant list of names onto a screen, and said, “These are all of the people I collaborated with on the projects that this award honors. These are the people that did the work, and I want to thank them.”
from Dan Cohen, [“Remembering Roy Rosenzweig”](#)

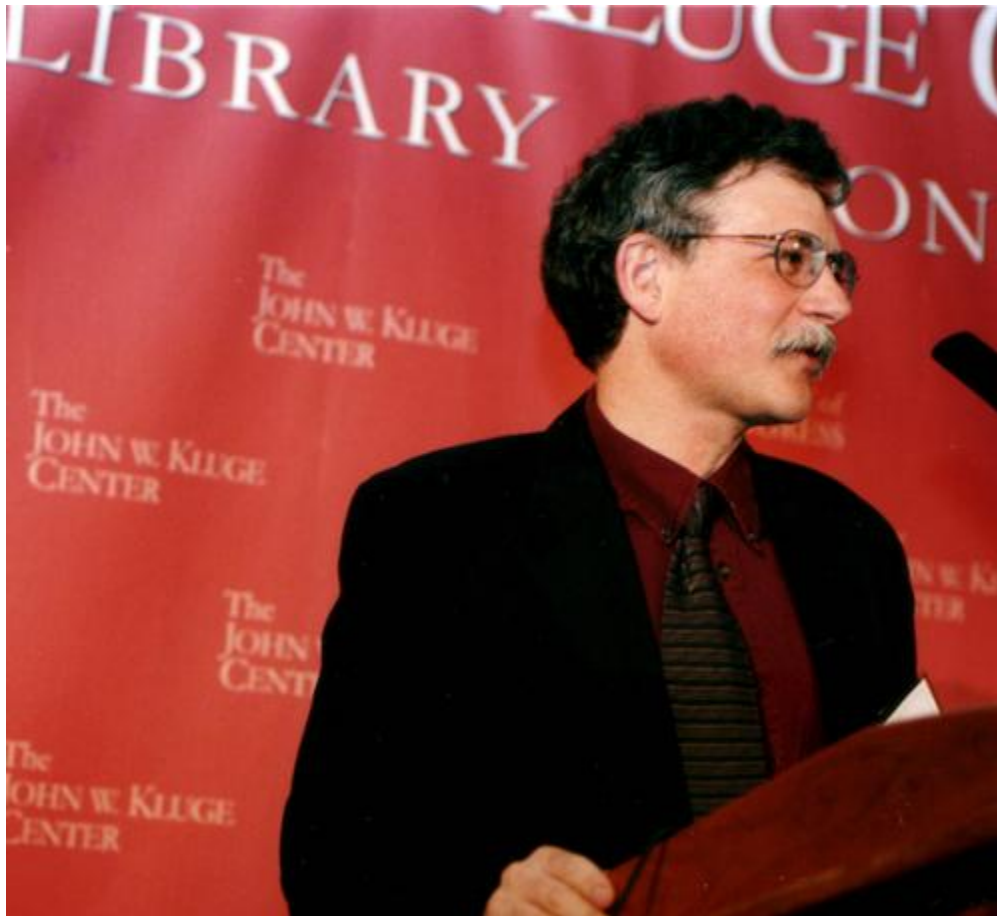


Photo by Eric Schkrutz

Now, as we focus on his contributions to digital history, I want to recall what he said in one of his last interviews. He said: “The key thing that drew me to working with ‘new media’ was the possibility of reaching new and diverse audiences.” There it was, his continuing quest for democratizing practice. To me Roy has left an inspiration in facing the difficult challenges of seeking creative new ways for democratizing the practice of history. Thank you, Roy. I hope your example can help light the way as we pick up your challenge. — from David Thelen, [“Untitled”](#)

He worried about the efforts of corporations and guilds to end open-sourcing and impose “gated communities” on the landscape of internet knowledge. So he became the implacable foe of these corporations and guilds, of Bill Gates, Google, and Bell and Howell, and of our very own AHA.

Yes, Roy led the fight to make all the articles in the AHR universally accessible on the web, available to all users whether or not they had paid a subscription fee. In this small struggle he emerged victorious. The larger struggle, of course, has yet to be won. In that regard, we must acknowledge that we have not only lost a friend. Democracy has lost a believer and a fighter. from Gary Gerstle, "[Remembering Roy](#)"

The seventeen months between his being diagnosed with an advanced form of cancer and his death in October 2007 were marked both by a determined effort to come out alive and by a determination to carry on his work in his accustomed energetic and generous manner.

Last spring I had asked Prof. R. if he would be willing to do an 803 Major Field Readings with me during the fall semester (2007)... When it came time for our second meeting Prof. R. was in the hospital and he emailed me how sorry he was that we would probably not be able to continue with the sessions. Not fully appreciating the seriousness of his condition, I emailed back that I would be happy to meet whenever he felt well enough to come to work. His response was that I really needed to find another professor to help me with the readings. After I had done so, I emailed him that the problem was resolved. His final email expressed great relief that I had found a replacement because that was something he had been worrying about. That was five days before his death. – from Dick Harless, "[Random Thoughts](#)"

One memory has returned to me several times over the past two weeks. Roy and I met to discuss the status of the project late last summer, when he was just back from one of his treatments. We met in his office; seeing him for the first time in six weeks, I was taken aback for a moment. His optimistic (and prompt) e-mails over the summer had not given much indication about his physical deterioration. As we sat down to discuss the project, however, the extent of his fatigue became clearer; he labored to draw regular breaths. Roy explained that lately he tired in the afternoon, and that breathing became more difficult as a result. Would it be awkward for me, he asked, if he lay down on the floor to ease the effort? ... It might have been awkward with anyone else, but Roy made it seem completely natural – and for the next 45 minutes we talked about the status of the project, the work we'd already done, and details that remained to be sorted out, all from the floor of his office.... – from Christopher Hamner, "[Thanks](#)"

When in 2007 Roy received a Distinguished Service Award from the OAH, the program included a short film by a high school student. The very first thing Roy did after the ceremony ended was to turn to the student and talk to her at length about her project. from Elena Razlogova, "[Roy as Teacher](#)"

I realize, especially after reading all the posts here and seeing various tributes, that I was one of the hundreds of people who admired Roy and was touched by his kindness. I was also one of the lucky few who got to see him every month in a reading group here in DC. That reading group was my primary link to Roy, and for many years an intellectual home for a rather rag-tag assortment of historians. As of last fall, the group had been going 25 years, since Roy and a few others founded it. By the time I joined, almost ten years ago, it was a great but notoriously inconsistent group; our crowd varied from 4 to 14, depending on a range of somewhat

mysterious factors. During Roy's last year, however, people in the group tended to show up in force, whenever we thought Roy would be able to come. And when he was there, we'd linger long: nobody wanted to go home, fearful that he might not be at another meeting.
from Melani McAlister, "[Modeling](#)"

In the last week of Roy's life he mustered what energy he had to tell friends and family members that he was grateful to them. He thanked his doctors, he thanked the nurses who cared for him at the Virginia Hospital Center. He dictated emails of affection and appreciation that I sent for him to colleagues. A few people he was able to thank in person, and he asked me to call others and put him on the phone briefly. Had he been in perfect health that effort, given all his friends and colleagues, would have been herculean. But without much stamina he had to stop the phone calls and email long before he had intended. So I want to say on his behalf: thank you all for your friendship at whatever point in Roy's life you knew him and for the support you gave him in his last 17 months. He was determined to carry on as he always had, doing the work he enjoyed with the people that he loved. You accepted his determination and carried on with him.
from Deborah Kaplan, "[About Roy](#)"



Josh Brown, "[For Roy – Multitasker Extraordinaire](#)"

Appendix: A Partial Guide to Other Appreciations

[Thanks, Roy](#)

The Thanks, Roy site, source for most of the quotations in the preceding article, was set up shortly after Roy's death by colleagues at the Center for History and New Media. The whole site is full of treasures. Among the pieces that were not quoted earlier, the following are a personal selection of some of the most revealing. – Jim O'Brien

Stephen Brier, "[Roy Memorial Speech](#)": Speech given at the December 9 memorial service by Steve Brier, longtime director of the American Social History Project and close collaborator with Roy for nearly 30 years.

Chrissie Brodigan, "[He Actually Brewed Coffee During Class](#)": A nice appreciation by a former student and Center for History and New Media employee.

Kathi Brown, "[Tribute to Roy](#)": Eloquent remarks by a former student and research assistant at the December 9, 2007 memorial service, highlighting Roy's "complete and utter inability to say NO."

Debora Greger, "[For a Historian, Dying Young](#)": A beautiful poem.

Gary Kornblith, "[How Roy Changed My Life, Part 3](#)": A great photo of Roy with Simon Kornblith, computer-prodigy son of Gary Kornblith and Carol Lasser who spent time with Roy and Deborah each summer starting when he was 13, and did skilled work for CHNM. Gary says, "Roy was a great mentor, and Simon is a better person for having Roy as a role model."

Warren Leon, "[Four Thoughts About Roy](#)": Elaborates on four themes: "was a lifetime friend," "knew how to have fun," "tried to squeeze the most out of a day," and "was part of a strong partnership."

Mike O'Malley, "[Don't let Rosenzweig near that hammer!](#)": A charming anecdote of Roy's clumsy but good-hearted effort to help the author build a deck. "But that's Roy – there he was in the hot sun, on his knees, whacking away happily at something he had neither the aptitude nor the time for."

Elena Razlogova, "[Working with Roy](#)": Speech at the January 5, 2008 AHA session on Roy by a former student and longtime CHNM staff member, giving a good sense of Roy's work style. "I think he was such a perfect mentor precisely because one didn't have to be his favorite student or colleague to count on his help and unwavering support. His commitment to social equality was not just academic, it encompassed everything he did – researching working-class culture, helping students, going to antiwar rallies, and lobbying for open source scholarship."

Tom Scheinfeldt, "[A Matter of Trust](#)": A short piece, the gist of which is given here: "Roy showed us that the way to gain trust is to give trust, which is the same thing as saying that the

way to be loved is to love. It's the best work lesson and the best life lesson I have ever learned, and Roy was the best teacher."

Kelly Schrum, "[Roy and CHNM](#)": Fondly recalls Roy's work style as director of the Center for History and New Media.

Zachary Schrag, "[Three Things Roy Never Said](#)": The three unspoken phrases, each one explained by the author and illustrated with examples, were "I'd like to help, but I'm too busy"; "You're wrong"; and "That sounds important, but it's not something that interests me."

Other Sources

Many tributes to Roy have been published in addition to those that appear in Thanks, Roy. The following are among the most informative.

Elizabeth Blackmar, "[Obituary](#)": Perceptive four-page tribute in *Planning History News* (Winter 2007/2008, pp. 5-9) by a noted urban historian and co-author with Roy of *The Park and the People*.

Stephen Brier, "[Roy Rosenzweig](#)," *AHA Perspectives*, March 2008: An excellent summary.

Bonnie Goodman, "In Memory of Roy Rosenzweig (1950-2007)," History News Network, [October 15, 2007](#): A compendium of early tributes (later incorporated into the "Thanks, Roy" site), quotes from Roy, photos, and commentary on his books.

Michael Kazin, "[For Roy](#)": Talk given at the January 2008 AHA convention, in a special memorial session. (The other three talks, by [Gary Gerstle](#), [Elena Razlogova](#), and [David Thelen](#), are in the Thanks, Roy site.)

Mike O'Malley, Steve Brier, and Josh Brown, with Tom Scheinfeldt (host), "[Roy Rosenzweig, In Memoriam](#)," November 15, 2007, History Conversations web site: An audio file with a very insightful 32-minute conversation among three of Roy's closest collaborators.

William G. Thomas, III, "Roy Rosenzweig and the Field of Digital History: A Tribute," Digital History web site, [October 15, 2007](#): A summary of his contributions to digital history, with links to many of his writings in this field.

Notes

¹ [*Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920*](#) (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). This book, based on extensive document research and oral histories in Worcester, Massachusetts, is often spoken of as a breakthrough in US labor history, enriching the field with social and cultural history. But it was also the only book he wrote alone, by deliberate choice. His other books were joint projects.

² Roy worked with the filmmaker Richard Broadman on this project, as he did on the subsequent film *Water and the Dream of Engineers* (1983), for which he was co-writer and researcher.

³ Stephen Botein, Warren Leon, Michael Novak, Roy Rosenzweig, and G. B. Warden, eds., *Experiments in History Teaching* (Cambridge: Harvard-Danforth Center for Teaching and Learning, 1977).

⁴ Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., [*Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*](#) (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1986).

⁵ Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., [*History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment*](#) (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

⁶ Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, [*The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*](#) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

⁷ A sampling was published in the Winter 2001 issue of the *RHR* and is posted [here](#) by permission of Duke University Press.

⁸ *Who Built America?* has had three editions. Roy was a supervising editor of the first edition, published by Pantheon Books in 1990 and 1992, and a co-author of the second and third editions (2000 and 2007, respectively). According to Steve Brier and Josh Brown, Roy's role was especially important in changing *Who Built America?* from a trade book to a textbook for the second edition.

⁹ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, [*The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*](#) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). See also a [supplementary web site](#) that contains additional statistical tables as well as the separate "Afterthoughts" by the two co-authors.

¹⁰ Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 1310.

¹¹ Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, [*Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web*](#) (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

¹² See National Humanities Center news release, "[Award Recognizes 'Digital Democratizer' of History](#)," May 13, 2003.