

## *Reports from the Field*

# Public Historians and Public Television: Collaborating on *Where in Time Is Carmen Sandiego?*

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WITH INCREASING FREQUENCY, historians are called upon to serve as consultants to films and television programs as these industries expand their offerings to attract larger audiences. Scholars sign on, motivated by a desire to contribute in a meaningful way to these projects, but not entirely sure what to expect or how to proceed. Casting themselves in the role of scholar or educator, they usually approach an assignment with the hope that they can, at the very least, make sure that a program's historical content is factually correct and reasonably balanced. Once they become involved,

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however, they may realize that they have far less influence than they had anticipated or become frustrated by the process and discouraged that their efforts have not had more of an impact.

The authors of this article agreed to serve as advisors for a children's television show—*Where in Time Is Carmen Sandiego?*<sup>2</sup>—that was produced by WGBH, Boston, and WQED, Pittsburgh, and was shown on PBS from 1996 until 1998. Although our experiences were probably quite different from those of historians working in the more common genres, historical documentaries and docudramas, our involvement with *Where in Time. . .?*<sup>2</sup> taught us a number of lessons that we believe might be useful to historians interested in collaborating with the media. Our goal is not only to share lessons that we learned but also to encourage others to accept promising invitations to serve as media consultants.

### *Overview of the Show*

In 1994, the two television stations responsible for the enormously popular *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?*<sup>2</sup> decided it was time to shift the focus of the program from geography to history and to replace “*Where in the World. . .?*” with “*Where in Time. . .?*” Both programs were based on Brøderbund computer games but were modified to meet the specific demands of television. The producers and writers hoped that the new history show would, like its predecessor, generate interest among a school-age audience and increase knowledge of the subject. Using their language, “the series [was] designed to entertain while motivating youngsters to learn more about history.”<sup>1</sup>

The program in its final form was fast-paced and varied. Each episode began with Carmen Sandiego and an accomplice plotting to steal a historical item. The item could be serious—such as the Declaration of Independence—or whimsical but still important—such as the world's first sewer system. The question raised was, “How might the course of history be changed without this significant item?” Three contestants chosen from grades six to eight and referred to as “Time Pilots” were assigned the job of tracking Carmen and her accomplice through history. Using logic, judgment, and prior knowledge of history, they pursued Carmen and her associate through time by answering a series of multiple-choice questions in the preliminary game. As part of the journey, the Time Pilots were given additional clues by “walk-ons,” characters from the past who appeared to tell the contestants about their contributions to history.

In the middle segment of the program, the two highest-scoring contestants were matched against one another in a quiz that required them to arrange events, some of which were drawn from questions used in the

1. *Where in Time Is Carmen Sandiego?*<sup>2</sup> Fact Sheet, 1997.



preliminary game, in reverse chronological order to restore the “loot”—the stolen item—to its proper place in history. The winner of that quiz went on to the “Trail of Time,” in which the contestant raced against the clock to answer questions relating to the main theme of the show. If he or she beat the clock, Carmen Sandiego was captured.

### *The Nature of the Collaboration*

Months before PBS started to line up advisors for the new program, producers and writers had examined various learning theories to determine which of those could best be adapted to television. They had, for example, identified the importance of teaching in context, the need to appeal to different learning styles, and the value of choosing subjects that were of genuine interest to the audience. They had also begun to collect copies of national and state standards in order to find out what history their contestants were likely to know and what critical thinking skills could be incorporated into the program. By the time they were ready to recruit scholars, the producers and writers had a good sense of what was going on in the social studies classroom and how their program could complement the formal academic experience.

The two of us were among the first historians asked to serve as consultants. We each worked with the television team in a variety of capacities and continued in our advisory roles until funding lapsed and production ceased.

The other scholars who served as advisors attended the annual planning meetings but were seldom given other assignments. Christine Compston joined the project in December 1994, when the writers were still working out the basic structure of the program—one of her first assignments was to review and comment on these early scripts. Kathleen Steeves came on board a year later, at the first planning session.<sup>2</sup>

Both of us had taught at the high school level, were actively involved in educating teachers, and, above all, were familiar with the reforms underway to improve history education in the schools. Compston was the director of the National History Education Network; Steeves was teaching at George Washington University's Graduate School of Education. For the most part, the fact that we were professional educators as well as trained historians was a real asset. The producers and writers clearly saw us as valuable resources, individuals to whom they could turn to make sure they were on the right track.

As history educators, we brought with us the perspective that program viewers were students—not just kids watching television after school. As a result, we tended to think of the program, first and foremost, as an extension of the classroom experience. In contrast, the producers and writers had quite a different vision—one that included curriculum-related goals but placed greater emphasis on winning and holding an audience in order to maintain the level of funding needed to keep the show on the air.

As seems often to be the case when scholars serve as advisors to television and film projects,<sup>3</sup> the objectives differed for the two groups. Teaching the discipline of history was our primary goal, and we saw *Where in Time . . .?* as a way to achieve that outcome. Specifically, we envisioned a program that would provide students with accurate historical information, teach them discipline-related skills, and, where appropriate, establish links to the newly drafted standards.

Building on the success they had achieved with *Where in The World . . .?*, the producers and writers changed the format of the show when making the shift from geography to history. Yet they relied on many of the same elements—a catchy theme song, simple but clever sets, and creative costumes—to convey a sense of fun. At the same time, they took very seriously the commitment to present history in a way that was accurate as well as engaging.

This fact became apparent at the planning meetings for the first season and set the tone for the discussions. The two writers for the program,

2. A number of historians served as consultants over a period of three years. Representatives from the National History Education Network's member organizations met with WGBH support staff in March 1995. Nearly a dozen scholars attended the planning meetings held in 1995 and 1996. This article, however, is based exclusively on the experiences and insights of the two authors.

3. See Nina Gilden Seavey, "Film and Media Producers: Taking History off the Page and Putting It on the Screen," in *History: Essays from the Field*, eds. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar, Fla.: Kreiger Publishing Company, 1999); Robert Brent Toplin, "The Filmmaker as Historian," *American Historical Review* 93 (December 1988): 1210–27; and Richard White, "History, the Rugrats, and World Championship Wrestling," *Perspectives*, April 1999, 11–13.

Charles Nordlander and Jamie Greenberg, created an environment in which people listened to one another, responded to suggestions, refined ideas, offered alternatives, and reinforced promising proposals. Their approach made the best use of the intellectual resources that had been marshaled for the job and, in the process, conveyed a level of respect that left us feeling positive about our involvement.

Because the meeting followed essentially a give-and-take format, we learned what was possible and what was not. On the one hand, it was simply not realistic to expect twelve-year-old contestants appearing for the first time on national television to respond to questions without being given multiple answers from which to choose. On the other hand, it was possible to use the program to teach critical thinking skills associated with the discipline of history. The “walk-on,” for example, which was used in every show, turned out to be the perfect opportunity to teach basic lessons in historiography.

Historians who attended the planning meetings played a major role in shaping the program.<sup>4</sup> Working closely with the producers and writers, we identified the themes that would be featured during the season; these included arts and culture, community, diet, economics, exploration, fashion, immigration and migration, leisure, political movements, science and technology, transportation, and work. Then we selected topics for each of the sixty shows, figured out the “loot,” chose the historical events around which each of the shows would be constructed, and suggested related items that could be incorporated into the questions.

To illustrate, a show on trains was built around the theft of the “John Bull.” Subsequent historical events featured in the show included the introduction of the Bullet Train in Japan and the construction of the Chunnel connecting England and France. Granville T. Woods was the walk-on. The appearance of this African-American, who had been denied recognition during his own lifetime for his many inventions that made railroad travel safer, made clear that an earlier generation of historians who were influenced by the racism of their times had not told the whole truth.

The writers, in turn, found imaginative and effective ways to deal with cause-and-effect, change over time, sequence of events, links between time and place, use of evidence, and the importance of perspective. However, their definition of history was not always the same as ours. Relying on popular reference works such as *The People's Chronology*,<sup>5</sup> they

4. Compston and Steeves attended both of the annual planning meetings. Lawrence Beaber, Laird Bergad, Matthew Downey, Laura Edwards, and Robin Kelly participated in the planning sessions for the first season of shows. Laird Bergad, Carol Berkin, Richard Bullit, Catherine Clinton, Robin Kelly, and Lyn Reese served as advisors for the second season.

5. We were aware that the use of these popular reference works was a conscious decision, designed to keep the questions at the appropriate level for the contestants and the audience, as well as the result of having limited time and money for research. Occasionally, Senior Research Assistant Robin Espinola called on us to provide more detailed information than she had available. She was always appreciative when we faxed a relevant chapter or several pages of background information on a topic. She also welcomed the offer to supply her with a list of standard reference works to supplement what she already had on hand.

occasionally drafted questions that came close to trivia. "Where," for example, "was the doughnut hole invented?" (Answer: The State of Maine.) Or they focused too much on professional sports, creating a big advantage for contestants who had memorized baseball statistics from trading cards.

One of the jobs we, Compston and Steeves, were assigned during the first season was to review scripts before they were used on the air. At the most obvious level, this meant making sure that the questions were clear, age-appropriate, and historically accurate. However, we both took the assignment a bit further, commenting on the depth of the history presented as well as problems of bias or misunderstanding. Our comments were welcomed, considered, and often integrated into the scripts.

Steeves was able to accept the invitation to watch the taping of the show in New York. For one day, she was treated as a member of the production team and, as resident historian, was asked about historical issues and encouraged to comment on the phrasing of the script. Observing the television crews responsible for various aspects of the show, she recognized the essential role that the television team had assigned to the historians in the overall scheme of things and also came away with tremendous respect for the professionalism of everyone involved.

During the second year, the nature of the collaboration changed. One of the principal sponsors, Delta Airlines, had withdrawn its funding and, as a result, money was scarce. The annual planning meeting came off on schedule, but the pace of the meeting precluded the thoughtful exchanges that had characterized the first year's meetings.

The opening discussion raised a number of issues that we believed required research. One basic question was whether shows that dealt with narrow, clearly defined topics were more effective than those that dealt with big, loosely defined subjects spanning several centuries. This seemed like an important issue to explore before we began sketching out the shows for the next year, but the schedule did not afford time for an extended conversation. Nor did the schedule allow time for more than a cursory review of the themes we had used the previous year to decide which should be kept, which should be replaced, and what new themes should be adopted.

To save time, consultants had been asked to outline their ideas for shows before attending the meetings, and these proposals were circulated at the first session. Discussion was rushed and, in some cases, cut off. On-going tallies made us aware of the need to keep up the pace in order to complete the work in the four days that had been allocated.

Reduced funding affected other aspects of the program as well. Historians who attended the second round of planning meetings suggested using more visuals, including historical photographs and artifacts.<sup>6</sup> The producers

6. This suggestion was made at the initial meeting in March 1995, but it did not come up again, so far as we can recall, until the planning meetings for the second season, when the advisors were given a few minutes to share their impressions of the first round of shows.

and writers were sympathetic but explained that the budget would not cover the expenses associated with the additional research.<sup>7</sup> They chose instead to rely on their technical staff to come up with entertaining interludes designed to vary the pace and texture of the show. They also eliminated the script reviews due, we were told, to the budget cuts.<sup>8</sup>

Both of us were given new assignments in the second year. Compston developed the qualifying test for the show's contestants, and Steeves wrote a proposal and received funding to research the impact of *Where in Time . . .?*<sup>9</sup> on history learning in the classroom. Neither of us had a hand in developing the educational materials for the show.

On the whole, the collaboration provided historians—particularly the two of us—with opportunities to contribute in significant ways to the development of *Where in Time Is Carmen Sandiego?* Although we were clearly not calling the plays, we were given major responsibilities in shaping the program and guiding the project throughout its two years of production. We felt more a part of the team during the first year because of the way in which the planning meetings were conducted and because we worked closely with researchers during the writing process. The fact that we were invited to New York to watch the shows being produced reinforced the feeling that we were on the field, not just warming the benches.

The budget constraints during the second year of production had a big impact on the collaboration. They changed the tone as well as the level of exchange and, perhaps more important, came at a point when we had begun to realize both what we had already learned and, given time, what more we could learn about history education from this experience.

### *What We Learned*

Our involvement with *Where in Time Is Carmen Sandiego?* provided lessons of two sorts. From this experience, we acquired basic insights into how public television operates, including firsthand knowledge of what the priorities are and how those priorities shape the character and content of the final product. We also came to recognize and appreciate the ways in which television can complement and, in many cases, enhance traditional teaching strategies.

Those engaged in producing television programs and historical films have already recognized the need to build bridges. In the case of *Where in Time . . .?*, the efforts on the part of the producers and writers to learn about history education served to span the gulf between the television

7. Steeves offered to have graduate assistants help with research in order to make use of suitable materials from the Smithsonian's collection, but the producers explained that would not be possible.

8. Both of us volunteered to continue the fact checks without being paid, but the writers and researchers seldom took us up on this offer.

studio and the university campus. What we came to realize, as have others who have advised media projects, is that historians also need to be bridge builders. They need to find out about television and film production before they become involved in joint projects so that they can adjust their expectations, revise their goals, and understand the constraints—time and money—that determine how, why, and when things happen.

What truly set us apart from the television team was our level of involvement. We participated in the annual planning meetings, reviewed scripts, and took on various other assignments, but our work for *Where in Time. . .?* was in addition to our full-time jobs and comprised a very small percentage of our professional responsibilities. In contrast, the producers, writers, and researchers focused all their time and energy on the program. They worked against tight deadlines created by the need to coordinate a whole range of production-related activities that went well beyond historical research. These included preparing the set, designing costumes, developing graphic displays, composing music, choreographing dance numbers, lining up actors and actresses, and filming sixty shows in a period of just three weeks.

The more we knew of the entire process, the greater our respect for those who were responsible for the final product. We soon came to appreciate the extraordinary skills required of the principal players. While sharing our desire to make sure that the history presented on the program was correct, the producers and writers had to work within the constraints of a half-hour quiz show. As a result, the subject of each show had to be developed using a handful of key points, each presented in just a couple of minutes. Each question had to be concise and clear. Each clue had to be selected on the basis of cost and availability. And all the pieces had to fit together in a way that made sense to a young audience but was a far cry from the traditional historical narrative.

From our perspective, the most important lesson was the practical realization—not just an intellectual acknowledgment—that a program has to establish and maintain a large audience in order to stay on the air. Regardless of how great a program may be when measured by educational theories or scholarly criteria, if it does not attract a big enough audience to satisfy the sponsors, it will not survive. With that in mind, the goal set by the producers and writers—to capture the attention of young viewers—was right on target.

The goal of entertaining a young audience, we realized, did not conflict with the educational objectives that either of us had set for the program. Quite the contrary. Steeves' school-based research, conducted in the late spring of 1997, confirmed what the television stations had stated in their initial design of *Where in Time. . .?* Those aspects of the program that appealed most to the audience—clues delivered by actors in period costume



or presented as part of a larger story—were the most effective in conveying the information to the audience.<sup>9</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Over the past couple of years, we have reflected, both individually and collectively, on this collaboration. Although we were sometimes frustrated and occasionally disappointed by the experience, we both came away convinced that it was tremendously valuable. As evidenced by this article, we learned a great deal. An observation made by Robert A. Rosenstone in a recent discussion of historians and film is one that we believe applies broadly to historians and the public media. He wrote, “Our task as historians . . . is to learn to judge films by their own rules of engagement with the past and not by rules we have long used for written history.”<sup>10</sup>

We came to see that the rules followed by television producers and writers deserve the attention of historians not only to facilitate future collaborations but also because their rules can help us better reach a general audience. The visual media present powerful ways to increase public interest in and knowledge of history. We should take advantage of the opportunities to involve ourselves and improve the relevance and accuracy of the history presented to the public.

Our experience as historians working with public television energized us. In retrospect, however, we realize that a better understanding of how public television operates could have greatly enhanced this collaboration. We have noticed an increasing number of sessions at professional conferences that deal with media-related collaborations as well as articles that offer insights about how these collaborations work and how scholars can most effectively

9. The study was done over a four-month period with 1,049 students in grades 5–8 in rural, suburban, and urban schools in Colorado, Michigan, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. Students completed a series of questionnaires, one before and two at intervals after viewing three episodes of *Where in Time Is Carmen Sandiego*? The research asked: (1) Do students gain knowledge about history by watching *Where in Time . . .*? (2) Does student interest in history increase after watching *Where in Time . . .*? (3) How do teachers view *Where in Time . . .*? and its application to the classroom?

Results indicated that students across the grades and regions gained knowledge of the history topics presented, often at a significant level. When historical material was presented in context, either by a walk-on or introduced by a walk-on and mentioned again by the Chief, well over 60% of students could recall the information. Material presented only verbally was the least well remembered, by less than 25% of students. Also noteworthy is the fact that students retained some knowledge, even when asked about the topics several weeks after viewing *Where in Time . . .*? All teachers reported that students were engaged in the history content and questions of the shows. Kathleen A. Steeves, “Analysis of Student History Learning with ‘Where in Time Is Carmen Sandiego?’: Report of Research Study for WGBH,” 1997 (unpublished).

10. Robert A. Rosenstone, “Reel History with Missing Reels,” *Perspectives*, November 1999, 21.

contribute to the programs produced. We would like to see more. As historians become familiar with the process of working with the media, our experiences will become more satisfying in every respect.