

Finding humor in history

Professor Peter Bales finds laughter in the past

By LIZ FINNEGAN

ISLIP — For the last meeting of this year, Susan Hantz-West, the president of the Historical Society of Islip Hamlet (HSIH), presented her members with a program that offered a little bit of a twist on history—humor.

Guest speaker Peter Bales, a history professor, author and stand-up comedian, faced his audience at the Islip Public Library on Nov. 12, offering them a new approach to learning about the subject.

It is an approach he uses in his book, *How Come They Always Had the Battles in National Parks?* (Maple Hill Press). However, he noted, regarding his mature listeners there, “I know I’m preaching to the choir.”

That’s because Bales is used to addressing, well, let’s just say a crowd less versed on the subject, whether performing at various comedy clubs such as Dangerfield’s in Manhattan or standing before a class filled with freshman and sophomore students where he teaches at Queensborough Community College.

He admitted that some of his students’ responses to history mirrored his own opinion of it when he was in the seventh grade. “Oh my God,” Bales recounted, “this stuff is boring.”

Somewhere along the line that attitude changed and he eventually earned a Ph.D. in the subject. “I started to love history,” he said, “and I love to tell stories about it.”

His audiences are treated to stories from the past that are filled with anecdotes and lots of humor. Bales’ method has helped many others take a second look at the subject. “You have to have a sense of humor about history, especially when teaching youngsters.”

The East Northport resident and father of teenagers said he used that method on his own kids, appeasing them with a trip to water parks before visiting historic sites.

During one of these trips, while touring the Gettysburg National Military Park, he was confronted by the fact that many Americans have little knowledge of their own history.

When the park ranger who was giving a group tour inquired if there were any questions, one woman in Bales’ group raised her hand to ask one that eventually became the title of his book.

Upon seeing the baffled look on the park ranger’s face, Bales said he stepped

up to announce tongue-in-cheek, “It was an amazing coincidence.’ Everyone [in the group] nodded and seemed satisfied,” he added, chagrined.

In his book, Bales takes the reader from prehistoric times through the discovery of the New World, the American Revolution and right through to the Civil War.

The funny tales, comments and caricatures do not mask the veritable intent. “History is important. It’s about people, life, passion and understanding why we live here today,” he said.

Still, as he worked the room in Islip, he drew quite a few laughs with his delivery of tidbits of information. He said John Hancock had psychological problems. Bales began to explain how the great patriot, whose prominent signature appears on the Declaration of Independence, would often blow of steam by smashing china.

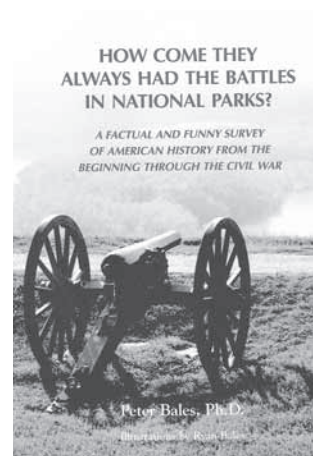
And poor George Washington, the father of our country, died after a strep infection. But the infection didn’t kill him. He was inadvertently harmed by his physicians who used an acceptable method of treatment in his day. “Washington was bled to death by his doctors. Today we’re bled by insurance companies,” Bales remarked in jest.

When an adversary accused President Abraham Lincoln of being “two faced,” Bales said the president responded sarcastically, “If I had another face, would I use this one?”

The information garnered laughs and a plethora of questions, which Bales answered fittingly as though lecturing in his class. Hantz-West was very pleased with the response. “Everyone really enjoyed it,” she said. “I would have loved to be a student in [Bales] class. He really makes history come alive.”

And that’s just the reaction the historian hoped to receive. “Try not to take history so seriously,” Bales said. “Have fun with it. But,” he added in earnest, “never forget your past.”

How Come They Always Had the Battles in National Parks? is available through Amazon.com, at Barnes and Noble Booksellers and on the author’s Web site, www.peterbales.com, where his upcoming personal appearances are also listed. ■



Comedic historian Peter Bales (inset) paid a visit to the Islip Historical Society last Thursday. His latest book is *How Come They Always Had the Battles in National Parks?* IB/Finnegan