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SEF Final Reflection: Mother Jones Statue Project

A little under a year ago, I had just begun my first year of university education. Fresh out of high school, always a strong academic, and brimming with ideas, it was back to the basics for me during my first few months at Northern Illinois University. Having come from southeast Iowa, graduating from a school with strong Advanced Placement and co-curricular programs in history and social sciences, my 12th grade history classes were roughly like the social science courses that I finished this past year. Because of my background, I consider myself quite fortunate — when taking introductory history classes, I didn't struggle with my coursework and I had a fair bit of time on my hands for extracurricular activities, my own personal self-development, and generally getting a feeling for adult life. While my peers were navigating the treacherous waters of seminar discussion and learning how to compose essays, I had the freedom to do further research, explore, and present my findings.

This freedom eventually led to my discovery of the SEF research program through introduction by a professor, which provided a venue for me to dive into an informal research assistantship. At the time, I was nervous to aid in this patchwork project and to possibly present to my mentor and colleagues, but I rolled with it. In August of last year, I was first acquainted with Rosemary Feurer — labor historian, history professor, and my mentor for my undergraduate research assistantship. I guess Professor Feurer noticed something in me that first day of class because a few months later, I was digging into the guts of a newspaper database which serves as the basis for Feurer's Mother Jones project. Having the incredible opportunity to work with Feurer over the past five months, I've been challenged frequently, and I've grown a significant amount as a future historian, researcher, and human being.

Diving into a project that is already mature is hard. Especially so, when it's subject to re-configuration, changing conditions (such as a global pandemic), technological constraints, a well-defined research-set, and a project outline that has been (mostly) chosen and written in stone well before you've arrived. When I started working on the Mother Jones Project back in January, I was mainly trying to organize data from donations for the project and other figures into spreadsheets and other organizational tools. The way this worked was pretty simple: due to excels design, I could easily create any number of charts and data sets that would then be sent along to Feurer. This remedial task is how I began my work with Feurer, however it was still an opportunity that allowed me to see how much of a financial burden creating a historical marker/display can be. Speeding through that early stage of the project, I then helped to retrieve and organize from the web's collect of databases and build up the number of newspaper files and other research material Feurer could use for her own historical discussion. This pulled me well out of my comfort zone and forced to me to adapt to changing searches and altering topics. Through this entire development process, I could make mistakes, learn, explore, build, and eventually get a large stack of historical materials on labor, unions, and important figures of American labor history, such as Mother Jones, Fannie Sellins, and Hannah Hennessy. This experience was seriously valuable, taught me a lot, and has helped to shape me as not only a student, but also a historian.

As part of SEF research assistant position, Feurer has encouraged me to really think critically, participate in historical discussion, and each round of research on historical themes/individuals has helped me get to be where I am now. Nearly at the end of my second full academic semester, I'm actively participating in research, analyzing meaningful text, and presenting my finding to the SEF department and my mentor. My work under Feurer has

contributed to two of her ongoing projects, the second being an adjunct of the first. As I aided her research into Mother Jones, she discovered alternative research topics that aligned on the path toward achieving a statue for Jones.

Now that my role in the development of the Mother Jones Project through the SEF program is pretty much done with, my sights have been set to the future. I never thought things would move so quickly, but now I find myself actively seeking to continue my participation with this project as I prepare to apply for a graduate program in Library and Information Studies, seeking to improve my research capabilities and my ability to communicate and aid others in their research. It's been a wild year and I really can't wait to see what's in store for the upcoming months. I'm constantly amazed with the great work that is being done at the University, and I'm eager to jump in again and contribute in whatever way I can.