

March 2017

# The Ultimate Reality TV: JMU alumni help win Peabody for C-SPAN

Pam Brock  
*James Madison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/monty>

---

## Recommended Citation

Brock, Pam, "The Ultimate Reality TV: JMU alumni help win Peabody for C-SPAN" (2017). *Monty*. 43.  
<http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/monty/43>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Monty by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).



## The Ultimate Reality TV

### *JMU alumni help win Peabody for C-SPAN*

While *Survivors!* were busy voting each other off the island in a primetime experiment in self-government, C-SPAN's staff might have wondered what all the hullabaloo was about. To these discoverers-come-lately, after all, C-SPAN can point to more than 20 years of around-the-clock coverage of the original American experiment.

JMU alumni are among the players who deliver this Reality TV, which, in C-SPAN parlance, means commercial- and pundit-free public affairs programming.

As camera operators, studio and field technicians, crew supervisors, directors and producers in the nation's capitol, C-SPAN JMU alumni televise congressional hearings, votes and caucus meetings, National Press Club gatherings, and interviews with reporters and literati.

JMU graduates also hit the American roads to air the thoughts, issues and concerns of the citizenry at schools and universities, grassroots town hall meetings, campaign rallies, book festivals, lectures and panel discussions.

All of these efforts aim C-SPAN's cameras at the everyday drama and tedium of the checks, balances and branches of government, the press and the American people.

And although JMU alumni don't expect to win the Nielsen sweeps for its mirror of Americana in action, win they do. In 2000, the cable network won the prestigious Peabody Award for Journalism and Historical Programming for its "American Presidents: Life Portraits", a documentary series celebrating C-SPAN's 20th anniversary.

Paul Brown ('83) was one of several producers who helped deliver 41 three-hour, in-depth portraits of the U.S. presidents, their lives, families and administrations, from George Washington (airing March 1999) through Bill Clinton (airing December 1999).

"We went on location for each president," says Brown, setting up shop in presidential libraries and homes around the country. Part of the program on James Madison, for instance, was aired from Montpelier.

"We wanted to illuminate the presidents' lives - to go beyond policy - their character and personality, their wives and children," Brown explains. "We wanted to try and humanize them."

This they did by interviewing experts, scholars, historical society and foundation curators and archivists, family, and friends. The series painted a hometown portrait of Calvin Coolidge, for example, partly through the reminiscences of people who as children encountered him as he walked the streets of Northampton, Mass., and through the recollections of his son, the nonagenarian John Coolidge.

The almost yearlong documentary series has reaped critical and popular praise for the cable network, for CEO Brian Lamb and for the rest of the C-SPAN staff, which included Jennifer Beemer, Meg Galperin

('97), Anne-Hope Johnson and Jeneen Robinson. It has also spurred another series, now winding up production, on American writers from the nation's founding through the 20th century.

Brett Betsill ('82) directed half of the president's series productions, working closely with Brown and other producers as well as field crew chiefs and technicians to coordinate all the technical elements of the programs.

Crew chief Steve Carpenter kicked off the series by directing the program about George Washington at Mount Vernon. Throughout the series he was a production manager, coordinating the crew, technical requirements and logistics, and a director, traveling to remote sites for the initial surveys, taped interviews and again for the live programs on James Monroe, William Henry Harrison and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Joe Teeples traveled to almost half of the series' live sites, including Jefferson's Monticello, the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center in Fremont, Ohio, and the James A. Garfield National Historic Site in Mentor, Ohio, to set up C-SPAN's remote production facility, known as the C-SPAN School Bus.

Before she became a logistics editor at C-SPAN headquarters, Debbie Richerson Bates ('93) operated the camera for many of the live shows, including programs at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston and Andrew Jackson's Hermitage in Tennessee. Carol Hellwig ('92), meanwhile, compiled and wrote C-SPAN's series companion, *Who's Buried in Grant's Tomb*, a guidebook to the birthplaces and burial sites of America's presidents.

Working in teams, C-SPAN started about four weeks in advance of each program's debut.

"Our research window was relatively short, given the schedule we were on," says Brown, who produced about a third of the programs. "We had to come up with the concept of each show, research the president and travel to find the best location for the interviews. I spent weeks on the road and got to know the National Archives real well, looking for old Universal Reels and videos."

The research "was fun, interesting and very enlightening, especially [concerning] the presidents people hadn't paid a lot of attention to. It was those I really enjoyed. William Henry Harrison, for instance," Brown says, "his was the shortest presidency. He was president for just 30 days, and all most people remember him for was Tippecanoe," a battle that occurred while Madison was president. "But through the research I found that Harrison led a fascinating life."

Putting together the programs on the early presidents was relatively easy, Brown says, "because the relatives and libraries were happy for the attention." But things grew more complicated with more recent presidents, as Brown found out when working on the Nixon and Reagan programs.

The Nixon family "felt they had to guard the Nixon legacy," Brown says. "There is still debate over the interpretation of Watergate and of Nixon's presidency."

Some presidential families "wanted to preserve a certain legacy," Brown adds. "They were subjective, and we were trying to be objective. That was a struggle sometimes."

"But we did have some shining moments," Brown says. "I was producing the Reagan segment, and we got an interview with Nancy Reagan. She took us on a walking tour through the various stages of Reagan's life. She commented on her husband's Alzheimer's. And that's when [Edmund] Morris' book [the non-fiction/fiction *Dutch*] came out. It was the first time anyone was able to ask her about the book. She confirmed [the rumors that] she was not happy with it. That was truly a masterpiece. I really enjoyed that. It was a coup. It was awesome."

Another personal coup for Brown was the venue for the Reagan program. "We had a three-hour program set at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, but I visited the [former Reagan] ranch and was so fascinated with the change of pace it offered that we did it from the ranch. It spoke to the type of man he was," Brown says. "The ranch was the Reagans' sanctuary. They never let reporters and writers inside because they were at peace with one another there. A national audience got to see the ranch for the first time."

"And," Brown adds, "we lucked out because a former Secret Service agent took us on a tour of the ranch grounds. And a retired state trooper stopped by, a friend of Reagan, who continues to fish and ride on the ranch, and gave us a five- to 10-minute interview that we aired during a break in the live program."

"It was moments like those that really made the series shine," Brown says.

The series continues to shine in encore airings on C-SPAN and in classrooms around the country, as a tool for history and government teachers and professors.

Assisting in the production of the James Madison program from Montpelier was one of the special moments Brown won't forget because, as the former communication major says, "I had an interest in Madison because of my college connection."

Perhaps Madison - most of all among the U.S. presidents - might have appreciated C-SPAN's mission to reflect his American republic back on itself. He might even have tuned in.

*Story by Pam Brock*