

America 1890-1814: History May Not Repeat itself but It Can Rhyme

In the brief description in the brochure, I highlighted how the issues of the Progressive Era parallel many of the issues of our own time. The parallels, however, go beyond politics and reach into the areas of culture, technology, and mass entertainment. For example, before the Civil War the railroads were generally seen as a positive good, unless perhaps you had invested in state canal bonds. By the 1890s, however, their indispensability and resulting power were also proving enormously problematical from the standpoint of the public good. How different is this from our own experience with the internet is something we might well consider.

I believe that biography is a very helpful tool for helping us understand an era, and so, by course's end, you will probably know more than you expected from individuals ranging from Billy Sunday to John Dewey, Bob LaFollette to Sam Goldwyn, and many others. I expect that the course will be roughly 75% lecture and 25% class discussion. The discussion portion will focus on some short readings from materials I will prepare. For example, we will compare and discuss the Populist platform of 1892 with the Bull Moose platform of 1912.

The progressive era has been seen very differently by different generations of historians, each projecting to some extent their own concerns onto the past. I will certainly be discussing these differing perspectives as well, which I hope will lead to a fruitful discussion on the nature of and reliability of history itself.

For those who might want to do advance reading, in no sense necessary, a good overview would be *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* by Michael McGerr.

Leader: Walter Frank is former chief of commercial litigation for the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey. In retirement he has written law review articles and two books, one on the Constitution, the other on the history of gay rights.

Wednesdays: 10:00 a.m. to 12 noon, 6 weeks: February 27 through April 3

Location: The Presbyterian Church of Lawrenceville