



"Humor is a serious thing. I like to think of it as one of our greatest earliest natural resources, which must be preserved at all cost."

-James Thurber



## OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN HUMOR STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Sponsored by: Department of English, Saint Louis University      Graphic Design: Timmy Nelson      Editor: Laurie Britt-Smith

### Special Edition

The American Humor Studies Association has lost its remaining founding member. It is our honor to dedicate this edition of *To Wit* to his memory.

### In Memoriam

#### Dr. John O. (Jack) Rosenbalm

October 8, 1938 - September 22, 2015

Dr. John O. (Jack) Rosenbalm of San Marcos and Lockhart, Texas, beloved and cherished husband, father and grandfather passed away on Sept. 22, 2015, with his family by his side. He was born in Dallas, Texas, on Oct. 8, 1938, to John and Maryjane (Hazel) Rosenbalm.

Dr. Rosenbalm served his country in the United States Army and received an honorable discharge for his service. He was a distinguished English Professor Emeritus at Texas State University for 34 years, the editor of *Studies in American Humor* for 20 years, a founding member of the American Humor Studies Assoc., and before the age 35, he was a life master of the American Contract Bridge League. An avid golfer, he loved to recite poems and always said "there was a poem for every occasion." He will be lovingly be remembered by his family and greatly missed by all.

His parents, two sisters, Mary Margaret Rosenbalm and Oneta Church Tucker, his aunt who raised him, Beulah Belle Russell and his grandmother, Winifred Allie Rosenbalm preceded him in death.

He is survived by his devoted wife of 50 years, Carolyn (Walton) Rosenbalm; three daughters, Tracy Jo Patrick and husband, Arnold of Edinburg, Margaret Faye Guzaldo and husband, Gary of Houston, and Carolyn Jane Coburn and husband, Paul of San Marcos; and seven precious grandchildren .

A Celebration of Jack's life was held Saturday, Sept. 26, at the Pennington Memorial Chapel, with the Rev. Randy Frye officiating. In lieu of flowers, his family requests that donations be made to the American Humor Studies Assoc., in honor of the Jack Rosenbalm Prize.

Adapted from the *San Marcos Daily Record*, 9/24/2015

### Jack Rosenbalm's Legacy

It was my misfortune that I never got the chance to meet Jack Rosenbalm. By the time I came up through American Humor, Jack had already retired. What knowledge I have of him is from the stories that Dave Sloane and others who knew him tell of "the two Jacks" responsible for the creation and continuation of the American Humor Studies Association and its journal, *Studies in American Humor*. So although I cannot offer an active memory of Jack, what I can do is tell you what his legacy meant to me, and to other scholars whose interest is in American humor.

Prior to the American Humor Studies Association, scholars with an interest in humor had very few outlets for their work. The major journals considered humor a relatively minor area of study: not "serious" enough for "real" scholarship. Without this organization, I would have had nowhere to go to publish on the things that interested me most: how humor works to make changes in culture. For example. African American humorists have done more to change the landscape of race than all of the more "serious" writing, reading and thought put together. The same is true for gender, and other contentious issues in American society. What Jack did for us is give us a home from which to prove that humor is much more than telling jokes.

Jack's hard work kept the journal alive and flourishing after the untimely death of Jack Methenia, something that many of our newer members don't know. It would have been easier to let the journal languish and the Association pass into memory—something that happens with regularity to small groups without major support from the MLA, the American Literature Association, or other larger venues. Jack refused to let that happen, and recruited some of the most important humor scholars of the time to make the journal what it is today. Walter Blair, Jesse Bier, Mary Ann Wimsatt, James Caron, and David E.E. Sloane graced the pages of the journal doing groundbreaking research that made it possible for myself, and others like me, to see the ways in which our research was important, interesting, and (yes) fun.

So, my thanks to Jack for not giving up on AHSA when times got difficult. In honor of his hard work, we instituted the Jack Rosenbalm Prize for the best essay in American Humor two years

ago. I am happy that Jack at least got to see how much he was appreciated, and especially sorry that I did not get the chance to thank him in person.

**Jan McIntire-Strasburg**

Executive Director

American Humor Studies Association

**About an Old Friend**

Jack Rosenbalm was a Renaissance man. No, I mean he was really a Renaissance man because his specialty was renaissance and early eighteenth-century English literature. His route to becoming one of the central figures in the study of American humor was different, and we owe him special homage that except for Jack's two decades of dedication to the task of maintaining the American Humor Studies Association, and its accompanying journal *Studies in American Humor*, when both might just have easily vanished into some Dickensian world of "Scholarship Past." Instead, a robust and healthy organization continues to bear witness to his work.

In 1973, when Jack Maethenia issued his first call for an American Humor Studies Association, the reason given was simply that the study of American humor gained no scholarly respect among formal literary circles such as represented in the Modern Language Association. Well, look at it this way, would you want your scholarly child closeted out in the "backhouse" reading Captain Billy's Whiz-Bang? Hell, no! Other scholars, some still kicking, and some now beyond reproach, joined in the effort, but a powerful center of energy formed at Southwest Texas State University under the auspices of the two Jacks, Jack Maethenia and Jack Rosenbalm. Jack Maethenia set about the organizational tasks and the editing of the journal, whose first number 1:1 was dated April 1974 (April Fool's Day and Halloween being deemed the appropriate publication dates for such a venture) and Jack Rosenbalm took up the organizational work which was largely out of sight as Managing Editor, organizing the membership list, collecting dues, dealing with the printers, and so on. Having run a couple of scholarly magazines, I can say simply that the task is not as simple as it seems.

And, after grading final exams late into one December night, Jack Maethenia fell asleep at the wheel and ran off the road into a bridge abutment. That was in December 1981, and from then on it was Jack's baby. The story, and all the stories that account for StAH being four years and 14 issues behind as it was when the baton was passed on to Jack Rosenbalm's hands, told in Jack's unique Texas raconteur style, are in his own article on the history of his life in the American Humor Studies Association, in the new series 3, no. 13 issue dated 2005-2006, pps. 37-44. Surrealism and Texan irony were his specialty, even in one-liner jokes such as one I remember from his treasured collection of "aggie" jokes (the Southwestern Texan equivalent of Polish jokes) about the aggie cayote who had gnawed off three legs and was still caught in the trap. His account is well worth looking up for the fun of it.

The long and short, without more elaboration, was that until 1993, Jack Rosenbalm became the American Humor Studies Association. At that point, we created the position of "Executive Director," recruited a Secretary-Treasurer, Joe Alvarez—as staunch an AHSA pillar as Jack—and others to take over all the various posts that Jack Rosenbalm had been carrying on more-or-less single-handedly. It took several of us.

I will go so far as to quote the last two paragraphs:

"I knew Jack for only nine and a half years, but he was the best of friends. We laughed, cried, and drank together. A day rarely goes by that I do not think of him, his laughter, his friendship, and his genuine concern for all who befriended him. I sometimes wish "for the touch of a vanished hand,/ And the sound of a voice that is

still!" Once more the feel of his arm around my shoulder, and sotto voce, "Stick with me, Rosenbalm..." Jack, I tried.

Over a quarter of a century has passed since Jack first published *Studies in American Humor* and proposed the founding of the American Humor Studies Association. His vision gave them birth; his tenacity gave them life, and his humor sustained them. In their maturity, they remain forever in his debt."

That arm around the shoulder, "Stick with me," was the gambit by which Jack recruited Jack in 1973. It was where the wonderful history Jack spun out for the record all began. Few know in these days of J-STOR and the like, where Jack's article can be found by anyone who would like to see the real insides of academe in the late 1900s, that after 1993 Jack did not quit but instead turned to putting all the original issues of *Studies in American Humor* online as a permanent resource. They are there now as a free resource on [www.compedit.com/toc.htm](http://www.compedit.com/toc.htm) for those who want to see the free table of contents. The introduction is characteristically Jack:

"I have scanned these articles using my own scanner and computer. This is, of course, the hell that must have been reserved for editors. I had to re-edit and see all the errors I made in the first place. I am embarrassed. To make matters worse, if they can get worse, I am sure that other errors have crept, slithered, or stampeded in between original copy and posting..."

Well, we can't fax or e-mail the corrections as requested, but at least we can acknowledge the heroism of the true scholar and gentleman who made a lifelong labor in carrying out a friendship. I have known Jack Rosenbalm since 1975, well over the quarter of a century he mentions, and I have admired him for all of those years with good cause. Jack, you didn't just try, you did it. God bless and God speed, old friend.

**David E.E. Sloane**

Humor scholar

Longtime AHSA member

If you have memories of Jack Rosenbalm to share, or would like to write a note of appreciation, please send them to Jan McIntire-Strasburg: [mcintire@slu.edu](mailto:mcintire@slu.edu). These will be gathered and sent to his family, as well as posted on our webpage.

**President's Column**

I never had the privilege of meeting Jack Rosenbalm. When Laurie Britt-Smith and I put together the prize named in his honor a few years back, I wrote Jack to let him know we had named the prize for him. He said that he was touched by the "undeserved kindness" and then praised the scholars who he had worked with in the AHSA, especially David Sloane, who had taken over the journal from Jack. It was, in fact, David's idea to name the prize for Jack, specifically because he had done so much to mentor younger scholars and bring them into the association.

That type of encouragement and mentoring has been my own experience in my relatively short time in the AHSA. I have been lucky to have experienced much of that undeserved kindness from many scholars in the field, including the current and past executive committee of the AHSA—Jan McIntire-Strasburg, Judith Yaross Lee, Bruce Michelson, Jim Caron, Jennifer Hughes, Ed Piacentino, Joe Alvarez, Laurie Britt-Smith, and David Sloane.

The AHSA, like the field of humor studies more broadly, has been a warm and welcoming scholarly home. I hope that you have similarly found that the AHSA has been a rewarding experience—through the excellent journal, through our online presence, and through our conference. If you ever have questions about what we are doing or comments about how the AHSA can improve, please feel free to contact me at: [wustert@gmail.com](mailto:wustert@gmail.com).

The past year has been a busy time for the AHSA. Our quadrennial conference—held jointly with the Mark Twain Circle of America—was held in New Orleans in December 2014. Many excellent papers were presented in between beignets and jambalaya and other delicious foods. Jan McIntire-Strasburg and Ann Ryan ran a fun conference, and Jennifer Hughes made sure everything went off smoothly. Our next quadrennial conference will be held in 2018, possibly in Las Vegas.

*Studies in American Humor* has moved from being published by the association to being published by Penn State University Press. Additionally, all of the journal's back issues have been digitized and made available via Jstor. Both developments will help place the journal and the AHSA on a firmer financial footing. As book review editor of the journal, it might be immodest for me to boast of the excellence of that publication, but I will give all the credit to Judith Yaross Lee for her work as editor and leave it at that. We are always excited to have new reviewers from our membership, so contact me and I will forward your information to David Gillota, who is taking over as book review editor over the next year.

At the meeting in New Orleans, we voted for a modest increase in the cost of memberships—a cost that hasn't increased in many years. The increase will help recoup the expense of the journal before its move to PSUP, help rebuild our reserve, and allow for us to increase our outreach through conferences and other activities.

The goal of promoting and expanding the study of American Humor that we strive for through the AHSA has inspired the creation of "**The Humor in America Project**" at the **University of Texas at Austin**, sponsored by the English Department. As co-director of the project, I will plan a variety of activities to promote humor studies both at UT and for scholars of American humor around the world. **Our first event will be a half-day workshop in Austin on Friday, January 8th.** We will have a presentation on Mark Twain's humor in India, a discussion of the state of humor studies, and a visit to the Harry Ransom Center, all followed by the AHSA-sponsored roundtable at the MLA conference. Please contact me if interested. I will also be bringing in speakers and plan to hold a conference in fall 2016 or spring 2017. Keep an eye out on the AHSA website for announcements.

Again, our goal at the AHSA is to help you, as people who value humor studies, to find a community of like-minded scholars who will support and appreciate the work of studying American humor in all its forms.

**Tracy Wuster**  
President, AHSA

#### Announcing:

#### **THE 2<sup>nd</sup> JACK ROSENBALM PRIZE FOR SCHOLARSHIP IN AMERICAN HUMOR**

Awarded to the best article on American humor by a pre-tenure scholar, graduate student, adjunct professor, or independent scholar published in (or accepted for publication in) a peer-reviewed academic journal or book. Articles published in 2014 and 2015 are eligible for the next award. Please submit by 1/3/2016. Applicants do not need to be members of the AHSA to submit. For details about the prize and entry information, please visit [americanhumor.org](http://americanhumor.org)

**PLEASE NOTE:** This will be the last issue of "To Wit" to be published in paper form. Please make sure your email address is up to date with our Secretary-Treasurer:  
**jahuges@averett.edu**

You can find current and back issues of "To Wit" on our website.

The following was written by Jack, for Jack - a eulogy to a dear friend that appeared in an early edition of *Studies in American Humor*. We thought it was fitting to end with the sound of his voice, addressing his partner in crime - and give us the opportunity to pause and reflect on the gift they have left us all.

#### FOR JACK

*The troubles of our proud and angry dust  
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.  
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.  
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.*

A. E. Housman

The most fitting tribute to Jack Meathenia should emphasize the special qualities that made him a valued friend and colleague. Were he alive today, he would object to tearful farewells and condemn any maudlin sentimentality. Jack was not only a student of humor; he was also a genuinely humorous man, possessing a keen sense of irony and seeing the absurdities of daily life. Added to Jack's wit and humor, however, was another quality which truly distinguished him. He was a graceful man. Jack was one of the least pretentious men that I have ever known, and he toiled in a profession often saturated with pretense.

Jack spent the last eight years of his professional life creating and then struggling to sustain this journal. The fight was arduous, and Jack pursued it ardently, sometimes despairing of winning, but never surrendering. In eight years he tried kissing a lot of frogs and toads, hoping to effect some magical transformation from indifference to support. Happily, before he died, he knew that *Studies in American Humor* was likely to receive official sanction and support, justifying the many lost battles of the first years of the journal. His humor, his wit, and his honesty finally gave his dream reality. Knowing his perception of irony, I am sure that he would appreciate the fact that final approval for the funding came only after his death.

Jack spent literally thousands of dollars of his own money in an effort to keep the journal vital. Many people advised him throughout this period to lessen the quality of the journal by printing it more cheaply: by stapling the pages together, by using mimeograph rather than offset, by using less expensive paper. Quite rightly, he rejected all such advice, often saying, "I may be too poor to paint, but I'm too proud to whitewash." Jack firmly believed that a journal devoted to scholarship ought not to belie the work and care of those who contributed to its pages, for Jack knew that *Studies in American Humor* belonged not only to him but also to those who shared his love for the discipline.

Jack was always unselfish with regard to the journal. The special issues for Walter Blair and the late Arlin Turner illustrated Jack's high regard for these two remarkable men. At Jack's request, other scholars served as guest editors: Louis J. Budd of Duke University; Hamlin Hill of the University of New Mexico; and Mary Ann Wimsatt of Southwest Texas State University. Jack always tried to do what was best for the journal and for scholarship. The triumphs of *Studies in American Humor* he willingly shared; its failures he suffered alone.

My awkward bow should have ended with the paragraph above, but, to change the circumstances of Keats's letter to Charles Brown rather dramatically, I can scarcely bid Jack good-bye, even in a letter, without a personal note. Jack was my friend, my colleague, and my associate. I loved him, and I shall miss him.

**Jack Rosenbalm**



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## American Humor Studies Association New and Renewal Membership Application

Membership in the American Humor Studies Association includes the semi-annual newsletter, *To Wit*, and the annual journal, *Studies in American Humor*, on an as-issued basis.

To join:

<b>1 yr.</b>	\$35 (\$40 International, \$20 Student)	<b>2 yrs.</b>	\$65 (\$75)
<b>3 yrs.</b>	\$95 (\$110)	<b>4 yrs.</b>	\$125 (\$140)
<b>Life</b>	\$300 (\$400)	<b>5 yrs.</b>	\$155 (\$180)

Send a check to:

Dr. Jennifer Hughes  
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420 W. Main  
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Or

Join electronically via [Americanhumor.org](http://Americanhumor.org)

Enroll /  Renew me as a member in the American Humor Studies Association, please.

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