**Combs: A Renaissance Man**

*A Friends' Personality*

*By Gordon Eriksen*

We usually use the phrase, "Renaissance man" to describe an individual who is "a person of broad intellectual and cultural interests encompassing the full spectrum of available knowledge" *(The Random House Dictionary of the English Language 1968, p. 1117).* We know such a man, and our definition is more personal and descriptive. Our Renaissance man is intelligent, well-educated, well-read, and profoundly curious. His curiosity has lead him into wide-ranging investigations that cross many areas or disciplines. Moreover, he is alert to ethical, social, and political issues and responsibilities. Finally, he is urbane, witty, and likes to take risks or challenge the status quo. The one of whom we speak is William W. Combs, Professor Emeritus of English, Western Michigan University.

Bill Combs was born in Houston, the county seat of Chickasaw County, a rural area found in northeast Mississippi. His father, as Bill wryly observed, was an "itinerant school superintendent," who moved from school to school several times during Bill's own years of schooling. Not surprisingly, Bill went on to college, "Ole Miss," the University of Mississippi, in Oxford, where he began his lifelong pursuit of the discipline of English.

Although much too young for World War II, Bill came of draft age during the Korean conflict and served with the U.S. Army from 1953-55. His "education" in that organization came from the Army Transportation School where he learned to dispatch trains, how to make them arrive on schedule, and how to avoid head-on collisions. He observes, of that experience, that "the army is a slow-moving monolith that was still handling transport the way it had been handled before World War II." Regardless, Bill was an adept learner and soon found himself teaching the same concepts and procedures to other GI's during the duration of his service career. And, there was a bonus since he also had the opportunity to meet and marry Marie. (Marie is a nationally known printmaker and designer of quilts that have been selected for display in major institutions across the country; one can also be seen in the Faculty Lounge of the Bernhard Center at WMU.) The Combs have two daughters—Mary Carol, a University of Michigan graduate and Sarah, a Cincinnati Conservatory graduate.

After discharge from his military service, Bill headed to Harvard for graduate study in the field of English. His dissertation was on Henry Fielding, the eighteenth century English novelist, dramatist, and essayist. With Ph.D. in hand, Dr. Combs began a long and distin-

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He who gives to me teaches me to give.

— Danish Proverb —