

Combs: A Renaissance Man

A Friends' Personality
By Gordon Eriksen

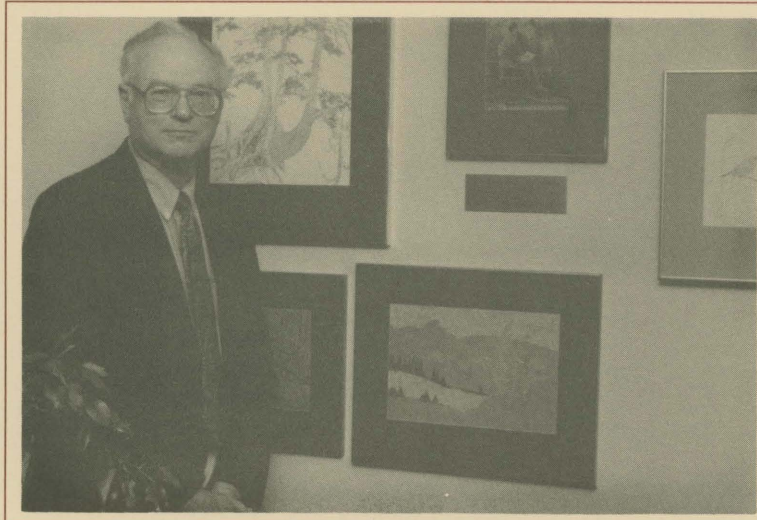
We usually use the phrase, "Renaissance man" to describe an individual who is "a person of broad intellectual and cultural interests encompassing the full spectrum of available knowledge" (*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* 1968, p. 1117). We know such a man, and our definition is 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-



Bill Combs: Man of Many Facets

guished academic career. He first taught at Duke University from 1958-62, and then was recruited to WMU where he remained until his retirement in 1995. But, as noted earlier, Renaissance men seek out new vistas and attempt innovative projects. Bill was no exception. Building on his youth and childhood background, he gravitated to specialized courses on Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and other Southern writers. His interest in different cultures saw him serve as Fulbright Professor at the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. In time, he also took a turn at departmental administration and became chair of the English Department for a three-year period. A perusal of his thirty-three year WMU academic vitae uncovers numerous publications, professional activities, and scholarly research.

But, that, alone, would not make Bill Combs a Renaissance man. His other interests fill out the profile and explain the title. Among the first is his love of and devotion to music. Bill has served as Artistic Director, and for two years, as President of the Kalamazoo Chamber Music Society. He has sung in Matt Steele's Collegium Musicum, one of WMU's internal musical organizations. His recorder playing is such that he is a part of Windworks, a group of exceptional recorder players whose reputation now brings invitations to perform in the local venue.

In still another turn of the mind, Bill Combs is not only interested but heavily involved in library support groups. He works with the Friends of the Kalamazoo

Public Library, one of the most effective Friends organizations in Michigan. Not only do they have a program of activities for members, but their collection and resale of used books has raised record amounts of money for KPL. They campaigned for and received space in the totally remodeled main library where they will be even more of a key asset and source of "extra" funding for library projects. Not surprisingly, Bill is a charter member of the Friends of the University Libraries as well. Here again, his willingness to work on major activities such as the semi-annual book sales has made his contributions invaluable.

Another key interest is his involvement in the political arena especially as it relates to social needs. Bill has been an ardent campaigner and organizer for former Representatives Mary Brown and Howard Wolpe. He continues to believe that political responsibility and service should be part of every man's role. During his years of teaching at WMU, he became active in the AAUP Faculty Union and, quite logically, edited and wrote the union newsletter for a number of years.

Finally, and, most important, there is William W. Combs' sense of moral commitment. One area where he makes a major contribution is that of Amnesty International. That ambitious group has a strong letter writing campaign that crosses all national and political boundaries. Bill is one of the several authors of letters that are sent, monthly, to heads of state and ministers of justice—always articulating the rights of the individual and protesting human rights violations. He challenges repressive government policies and, when necessary, reaches directly and specifically to defend a particular person. Needless to say, rewards for this are seldom noted, but, on occasion, his letter has brought a positive outcome; justice has prevailed.

And so it goes: an academic, a scholar, a musician and lover of the arts, member of service organizations, political activist, and moral man—the resident Renaissance man.

*He who gives to me
teaches me to give.*

— Danish Proverb —