

PANEL: 'Who Owns History' spirited and contentious

By Thomas D. Clagett

Some said the "Nonfiction Focus: Who Owns History?" panel was spirited. Others called it contentious.



Jane Little Botkin and Linda Wommack.



Terry Del Bene

One thing was certain: It was an engaging hour, ranging from stories of finding the truth, personal threats and following the money.

Moderator Stuart Rosebrook, editor of *True West* magazine, opened the panel by saying, "The idea that someone owns history is as ridiculous as it sounds. If I ask your permission to write your story, you can refuse. If you are a public figure and you refuse, we may interpret your refusal. In this world of news blended with opinion, we have a hard time trying to distinguish the difference. I believe we must try to remain truthful, fair, honest, diligent, independent and accountable."

He stressed the importance of doing research and sharing sources. "We're only as good as our sources. Your bibliography reveals your work. You must want to do your best to have your publisher include your bibliography." He added that, unfortunately, some publishers see bibliographies as "extra-neous."

Colorado historian and award-winning author Linda Wommack said that she often tries to find a subject no one has written about, like her biography of Colorado cattle queen Ann Bassett, and said she has been challenged many times on her sources. But she is adamant about her bibliographies. "I won't go with a publisher who won't share my bibliography notes. I have gone to other authors who are writing about a subject and they refuse to share [their sources] and I understand that, too."

"I'm a purist on research," said Jane Little Botkin, whose nonfiction books include the Spur Award-winning *Frank Little and the IWW*. "I want to find these original primary sources."

But in spite of Botkin's exhaustive research on *Frank Little*, she encountered problems. Botkin said she had been threatened because there were those who were adamant that Frank Little was a communist. "I said, 'No, he was a socialist,'" Botkin said. "These communists thought they owned Little. I had to call the FBI."

Freelance writer Terry Del Bene, who described himself as an archeologist by trade, said, "Getting threats is upsetting and nonsense. The KKK put a hit out on me once." He went on, "If a story has meaning to you, write it. We are looking for meaning, things that make a story feel more solid." As an example, he cited the famous line from Stanley Kubrick's film, *Spartacus*. "I am Spartacus' never happened. It's crap, but it's great crap because it sticks. It's meaningful. We're looking for different blocks of meaning. We all carry our own histories."

Rosebrook said that there are people who want



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to challenge the status quo of Western history, but a lot of people don't want to challenge it because there's money in maintaining it.

"Yes, there is money in the status quo," Wommack said. "Doc Holliday is buried, but is it in Greenwood Springs, Colorado? Greenwood Springs makes money off Holliday being buried there." (Some contend that Holliday is buried in his hometown of Griffin, Georgia.)

Wommack also said that her relative, Robert Miller "Bob" Wommack, found the first gold in Cripple Creek, Colorado, and is said to have sold his claim for \$500 and a pig, that he died penniless and was a drunk. "Now we don't know all that for sure, but Cripple Creek likes to say it is true."

"We should not be afraid if the [history] changes," Rosebrook said. "But there's still room for interpretation. Don't discount anything."

Chat session with Reavis Z. Wortham, Sequoyah Branham and Sean Lynch.

