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Ken Burns Talks About *The War*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Documentary filmmaker Ken Burns never thought he would be associated with history. The Academy Award-winning producer and director, known for his beloved series on baseball, the Civil War and jazz, simply wanted to create films.

“If you would have asked me in high school if people would think of me as preserving history, I never would have believed them,” Burns said to a packed audience at the Hansen Student Center at Illinois Wesleyan University Thursday afternoon.

It is the people that interest Burns, and discovering their place in history. “You have to remember that at the base of the word history is the word story,” said Burns, whose appearance, on the heels of his latest series on World War II titled *The War*, came as part of the Adlai E. Stevenson Lecture Series, a joint effort by IWU and Illinois State University.

Making films since 1974, Burns rose to national attention with his multiple-part documentary *The Civil War* in 1990, watched by 40 million people on PBS, which introduced many to his famed panning of still photographs that has become known as “Burns effect.” “It’s always fun to have an effect named after you,” Burns said with a light laugh. Burns’ true calling card, however, is his combination of extensive research and emphasis on telling the story of people from all levels of society.

“We try to understand events from the bottom up. Instead of looking at just the generals, we look at everyone. You go on the belief that there are no ordinary people, and you will find you are right,” said Burns.

His newest documentary, *The War* was not supposed to happen. “After finishing *the Civil War*, I swore I would not do another film about war,” confided Burns, who said he was stunned when he learned the statistic that 1,000 World War II veterans die each day in America. “About the same time, I heard of a study that showed American high schoolers thought the U.S. fought along side Germany against Russia in World War II,” he said. “We are losing a phenomenal resource in those veterans, and a story we need to know.”

Instead of telling the story of the war from maps and dates, Burns and his team chose four towns across America. “At first we were going to tell the whole story through one town, Waterbury, Conn., but we quickly realized we did not have enough surviving veterans with a big enough range of stories,” said Burns, who added Laverne, Minn., Mobile, Ala. and Sacramento, Calif., to the list. Along with gathering stories from veterans and civilians in the towns, the team poured thousands of photographs, video footage and items in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and gathered materials from around Europe and Asia. “We went to hundreds of archives from Moscow to London to Tokyo. We spent five years in the bowels of the National Archives. We found footage not seen since it was originally screened in the 1940s,” said Burns, who noted that only a fraction of the massive amount of material researched actually found a place in the film.

Of the footage discovered, some of the most moving he found was by military personnel, said Burns. “We think how profound it is to see that footage of the soldier falling on Omaha Beach,” he said. “He’s not out there for money or conquest or for empire, but for an idea of freedom, and he is willing to give up his life for it. But then you have to think, who took that footage? There is a person ahead of that soldier filming, and that is a whole other amazing story.”

When gathering footage, the team found they needed to add one crucial element. “Every bit of footage taken during the Second World War was silent,” said Burns. “Producers added the tinny shots of explosions. We did the same, but at a much greater level.” They researched tens of thousands of sounds from war. “We know what a German Panzer tank sounds like on snow and mud and pavement. We know what it sounds like when a German gun fires from a mile away or right next to you and lands on metal or pavement.”

The documentary became something more personal to Burns when his father, a World War II veteran, died shortly before production began. “I’ve been told my films are always about bringing the dead back to life,” said Burns, whose mother died when he was 11. “They are also about helping to remember.”

Burns said he is proud the documentary is helping inspire other veterans to record their memories on film through efforts such as the Veterans History Project. “War is less about politics than it is about a universal human experience, whether it is veterans from a world war, Vietnam or Iraq,” said Burns. “If you import someone through time from the Peloponnesian War, I bet they would say the same thing: ‘I was hot. I was bored. I saw bad things. I did bad

things. I lost friends.”

The film is also helping veterans talk about the war. “War is never glorious. Though we may want to coat it in bloodless myth. We always have to permit people not to talk to about it. But it is also our obligation to ask and to remember,” he said.

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