

Snell, John Leslie, Jr. ^[1]

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by Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., 1994

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John Leslie Snell, Jr., historian, academic administrator, and defender of academic freedom, was born at [Plymouth](#) ^[2] in [Washington County](#) ^[3]. The son of John Leslie and Lessie Ann McLamb Snell, he grew up in [Columbia](#) ^[4], [Tyrrell County](#) ^[5], and was valedictorian in the Columbia High School class of 1940. Snell enrolled at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[6] in September 1940 but left to join the U.S. Army Air Corps in December 1942. A bomber pilot in the European theater of operations, he flew over thirty combat missions and won the Air Medal, Distinguished Flying Cross, and five battle stars. In December 1943 he married Maxine Pybas; they later had three children, Marcia Ruth, Leslie Ann, and John McCullough.

Snell returned to [Chapel Hill](#) ^[7] in 1945 and quickly completed three degrees: a B.A. in history (1946), an M.A. (1947), and a Ph.D. (1950). Working principally with Professor Carl H. Pegg, he wrote his dissertation on "[The German Socialists and Wilson's Peace Policy, 1914–1918](#)." ^[8] From this research a series of articles appeared in the early 1950s that quickly stamped him as a rising American historian of Germany and of international affairs.

Although Snell taught while a graduate student as a part-time instructor, his professional academic career began at the [University of Wichita](#) ^[9] in 1949. Two years there were followed by two research years made possible by grants from the American Council of Learned Societies. In 1953 he became an assistant professor at [Tulane University](#) ^[10], where his rise was meteoric. In three years he became an associate professor, in six a professor, and a decade after his arrival dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, a position he held until 1966. The years at Tulane saw a steady stream of published works, including [Wartime Origins of the East-West Dilemma over Germany](#) ^[11] (1959) and [Illusion and Necessity: The Diplomacy of Global War, 1939–1945](#) ^[12] (1963) (later translated into German), the editorship of two sets of text anthologies and of a scholarly work, and repeated professional appearances.

Two studies brought particular note to Snell. In [The Meaning of Yalta](#) ^[13] (1956), which he edited, Snell and his fellow contributors challenged right-wing allegations that President Franklin D. Roosevelt "sold out" to the Russians at the Yalta conference. The sober, meticulous use of recently published diplomatic documents not only removed many illusions about the conference, but also facilitated a clearer understanding of the origins of the Cold War. Indeed, Snell's contribution on the side of moderation renders this work and his other articles on the Cold War of continuing historiographical importance. But these views on Yalta and the Cold War frequently brought Snell into conflict with both right- and left-wing political groups; his moderation and willingness to speak frankly were symbolic both of his professional integrity and personal courage, especially in the emotion-laden South of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The second volume was [The Education of Historians in the United States](#) ^[14] with E. Dexter Perkins (1962). Serving as executive director for the American Historical Association's study of the graduate history departments in the United States, Snell came into contact with most of the leading academic historians in the two-year investigation of graduate education in history. From this study came a set of recommendations for the restructuring and acceleration of graduate education. In it he also stressed a part of his continuing professional concern: the improvement of the quality of preparation for teaching given graduate students. Work on this project was followed by nearly continuous activity in the [American Historical Association](#) ^[15], culminating with his election to the governing council in 1965. At the same time he helped to found the European history section of the [Southern Historical Association](#) ^[16] and served as its chairman in 1966.

Also in 1966 Snell moved, as professor of history, to the [University of Pennsylvania](#) ^[17]. In two years there he edited two further sets of readings and continued research on a major study of the origins of democracy in Germany. In 1968 he returned to Chapel Hill as University Distinguished Professor of History. During the next four years he attracted numerous graduate students for whom he was a demanding but concerned mentor. He also continued his work in the professional associations, including attendance at the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Moscow in 1970, and his research on German history.

Never hesitant to speak his mind on professional or public issues, Snell played an important, calming influence during the campus unrest at Chapel Hill. An opponent of the war in Vietnam, Snell—ever mindful of the politicization of the German universities before and during Hitler's regime—argued forcefully that academic freedom required that a university not take institutional positions on public issues. In May 1970, in a momentous faculty debate over a resolution to establish a political action committee, Snell argued that "To commit a university to a partisan political stand is to invite those who ultimately control our universities to re-make them in whatever political image they may desire." This incisive intervention helped to defeat the resolution. In doing so Snell fused the European and American traditions of faculty control and free speech; his standing as an internationally known scholar, teacher, and former administrator ensured that his remarks would be heeded. It was possibly his most significant contribution to his beloved alma mater while a faculty member.

In the spring of 1972 Snell was suddenly stricken, anew, with cancer. Yet until the end he continued to meet his classes, to grade papers, and to read—his devotion to students, duty, and scholarship undiminished. At his death at age forty-eight he left the first volume of his major study on German democracy nearly finished. It was completed by Hans Schmitt (a former colleague from Tulane) and published as *The Democratic Movement in Germany, 1789–1914*^[18] (1976). This posthumous work reflects Snell's encyclopedic knowledge of sources, his demand for perfection, and his brilliant ability to synthesize and generalize. It traces the halting and often tragic drive towards democracy in Germany, its frustrations, its limited successes, and yet its beaconlike appeal to many Germans before and after 1914. The study will stand as a major contribution to German history since 1789.

A member of the American Historical Association, the Southern Historical Association, and the Methodist church, Snell was a *Democrat*^[19]. At his death a memorial service was held in the University Methodist Church in Chapel Hill. Later the Southern Historical Association established the Snell prize for the best seminar paper in European history; and the Department of History at Chapel Hill, the annual Snell lecture on European history.

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