

UW Offers 'New' Black History

By JOHN NEWHOUSE
(Of The State Journal Staff)

The "new" approach to Negro history is being used at the University of Wisconsin.

It takes strong issue with the "traditionalist" approach which was in vogue up to the 1950s, an approach which holds that the Negro is "a Sambo — shiftless, docile, happy-go-lucky, intellectually incompetent, and almost sub-human."

IT QUARRELS with the "revisionist" approach which came into being in the 1930s, in which some liberals sought to glorify a segment of black history which was to their own liking.

And it argues that the presence of the Negro in America, and the influence of many Negro individuals has been a central theme of high importance in the manner in which this country has developed.

"If we are to understand history, and apply its lessons to contemporary problems, we must know the full story, from the impact of race on the writing of the Constitution to the strengths and weaknesses of Malcolm X," said Prof. Robert Starobin.

AND HIS COURSE, "American Negro History," which came into being last fall, is an attempt to do just this.

Starobin, of the "new" school, sought to set up his course in January, 1968. A few months later, the Rev. Martin Luther King was assassinated. There was pressure for a Negro history course, and Starobin's, already being considered, was accepted.

Any first course verges on the experimental. Starobin's was no exception.

HE DECIDED upon a class with equal numbers of whites and blacks, for "a maximum confrontation." He interviewed some 30 whites and a dozen or so blacks to choose a class of eight blacks and eight whites.

The white students were better prepared for college on the basis of reading skills, he felt. On the other hand, the Negro students, some from big city ghettos, were "very articulate and abreast of the situation."

There seemed to be an air of condescension on the part of some of the whites, of which they probably were not aware, he said.

And, on the other hand, the blacks tended to feel white historians all were racist.

"I DID NOT share that feeling," Starobin said.

Not all of the students agreed with the way he started teaching his course.

There was little disagreement with his strong quarrel with the traditional school, which held that the Negro had no history worthy of the name.

"In Africa, the Negro had his own states and empires," said Starobin. "His culture was sophisticated. He made advances in the arts: sculpture, music, and dance."

"UP TO THE TIME that Europe got fire arms, the white and black civilizations were much on a par," he said. "After that, the whites forged ahead from a technological standpoint."

"Yet is it fair to make technology the main comparison? Is it more important to land a man on the Moon than to learn how to live together peaceably?"

Some of his students cited the works of the Communist and Marxist writers, he said.

And he felt that there were

weaknesses in this school.

"**HERBERT APTHEKER**, writing on W.E.B. DuBois, the famous Negro editor, was an example of this weakness, he said.

"Few doubt Aptheker's contribution," Starobin said, "but Aptheker's extreme hero worship interferes with his understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the man."

In short, he said, the Communist historians and many other revisionists worship Negro heroes blindly and write almost exclusively of the Negro successes, without accounting for the problems of the majority of blacks in America."

IN HIS TEACHING, Starobin insisted upon his own choice of books which were the "classics."

They related slavery to the writing of the Constitution, and the parties which formed, and the added power which the South got as a result of the "three-fifths" clause which added part of the Negro population to the South for purpose of taxation and representation.

The new history brought a new image to the abolitionists, changing them from fanatics, neurotics, and impractical reformers to sincere humanitarians.

THE NEW HISTORY destroyed the impression that segregation and disenfranchisement began in the 1890s, and set them a century earlier in the American scene.

There were a few vocal students on either side when the class began. There was an air of hostility in the class as well. But, after several months, the class began to come together, he says. The quiet ones began to enter the discussions.

There were four themes in the course. One was to trace the impact of black people on American political development. A second was trace the history of

black protest movements.

A THIRD DREW the relationship between Negro culture and Negro protest, and the fourth looked into white racism.

The course, Starobin said, is obviously no panacea — no solution to a whole race problem.

"But there is a decided value in looking unemotionally at the true place of the Negro in the history of this country so that we deal fairly with the subject and so that proper conclusions can be drawn from the past to aid us in today's crises," he said.

AND HE IS finding that interest in the course runs deep. Enrollment, which started with 16, has risen to more than 600 with

the second presentation of "American Negro History" this semester.