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Chillicothe Makes a Name For Itself

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

REFERENCES in story, song and film Chillicothe has made a name for itself

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By [Josh Jarman](#)

The Chillicothe in Story and Song project has linked up Tom Thomas and Jennifer Thompson, director of the Chillicothe and Ross County Public Library, which is sponsoring the project. Books and movies with Chillicothe references are on display at the library.

Thomas, whose real first name is William, is cataloging obscure references to the city in a project called Chillicothe in Story and Song, which is being sponsored by the Chillicothe and Ross County Public Library.

The mission got its start in 1971 when Thomas came across a cartoon in Look magazine of a man talking to a sage on a misty mountaintop. The caption read, "I travel all the way from Chillicothe, Ohio, and your only advice is 'Keep your options open?'"

It wasn't a thunderbolt, he concedes, but an amused interest, a 'Hey, that's my town' sort of moment that led him to clip out the cartoon and slip it in an envelope.

Fast-forward 37 years, and Thomas, now an adjunct professor at Ohio University-Chillicothe, decided to open the envelope and see just how many times he could find the name used in books, movies or music. Aided by like-minded Chillicothians from across the country, he has tracked down 20-some fictional references to the state's first capital.

The effort has become a fixture at the library, where patrons can learn all about one-liners from Elvis movies and the city's role as a finish line in one episode of the Hanna-Barbera cartoon Wacky Races.

The city shares its name with others in Illinois, Iowa, Missouri and Texas, but none has the honor of being the hometown of Rex Stout's fictional detective Archie Goodwin.

Thomas has heard a lot of tips since the project kicked off, from the concrete to the frustratingly intangible.

"One person told me they saw a black-and-white movie once with a guy on a white horse who says, 'I'm from Chillicothe, Ohio,'" Thomas said. He dutifully files such pointers and waits for the day the dots connect.

Most tips turn out to be dead ends but lead him to plenty of books and movies he would not have read or seen otherwise. Still, the thrill of the hunt keeps him going, along with the great unanswered question: Why would so many writers choose Chillicothe to have their characters be from, pass through or mention?

"Rex Stout probably said it best when he said, 'Chillicothe is a funny word without being silly,'" Thomas said.

Library Director Jennifer Thompson said the collection is a fun way to get people interested in reading and learning more about the city.

"If we thought they were only using the name as a symbol of backwardness, we wouldn't have endorsed the project," Thompson said. "There are no derogatory overtones I can discern."

Thomas agrees. "It's not the sticks, not bucolic, but certainly not Manhattan. It's a good place to go home to."