

## Debby Applegate

Reported by Steve Kwasnik

Debby Applegate spoke at the CLA Conference on Wednesday afternoon at 1:30pm. Her name may not be immediately recognizable but with her first book, Ms. Applegate won the 2007 Pulitzer for Biography for her fascinating work entitled The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher. This work, which she actually began in her undergraduate days at Amherst College, took 20 years to come to fruition. Researching for a display for her college library entitled "Notorious Alumni" turned up the name of Henry Ward Beecher and before long Beecher's name was turning up everywhere. He had opinions about everything it seems and was a bit of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century "Forrest Gump" according to Applegate.

Henry Ward Beecher was first and foremost a Connecticut man and a member of one of our most famous families. He was born in Litchfield, the son of the famous puritan minister, Lymon Beecher. He was the younger brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catherine Ward Beecher. Henry was the eighth of 12 children and in some ways the rebel of the family. While his brothers were preaching on Heaven and Hell, Henry took a different approach. Heaven actually sounded a bit boring, so Henry decided why not advocate having as much fun as you could while you had the chance.

Beecher fought Unitarianism in Boston and then headed to the Wild West, namely Indiana. His flamboyant preaching style captured the attention of many and he grew in popularity. He preached that Christ's love was "unconditional" and his "Gospel of Love" was for everyone. With his fame growing, the board of the Plymouth Church in Brooklyn called him back to the East in 1847.

In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Act was passed and the North became inflamed against slavery. Beecher's church grew as he preached abolition from his pulpit. Most unemotional Northerners suddenly became very emotional and Beecher's sister's book, Uncle Tom's Cabin added fuel to the fire. "Beecher Boats" brought hundreds to hear Henry and his self-confident ways did not disappoint them. President Lincoln, impressed with Beecher's speaking, even sent him to England to persuade them not to support the Confederacy.

Henry Ward Beecher even published a novel entitled Norwood. It appeared like there was no stopping him. Unfortunately in 1868 he was accused of seducing a friend's wife, Elizabeth Tilton and a huge scandal erupted. His career was ruined. But even to this day, according to Applegate, it is not certain whether "this" affair ever really took place. That is not to say other improprieties had not occurred.

Applegate's publishers were hoping with the talk of similar scandals in the White House that she would publish in 1998 but that was not to happen till 2006. She admits her book was not an easy sell until the Pulitzer. Ah what a prize will do!

When asked if she had her next book in the works, Applegate sighed. After 20 years with Beecher, is was like finally giving birth to a baby or saying goodbye to a long-term boyfriend. Although she is currently studying the 1920's she admits it is time for a rest.