Thomas Palaima
Classics

Even on paper this professor is cool. Thomas Palaima, deemed an expert on ancient writing systems, war, Bob Dylan and folk music, is a UT classics professor and director of the Program in Aegean Scripts and Prehistory, all while contributing regularly to the Austin American-Statesman as an op-ed columnist.

But he is even cooler in person, and his office might trump it all. Opening Palaima’s plain, dilapidated, wooden office door in Waggener Hall is like peeking in on a World War II bunker — a windowless room with sunken ceilings, old-school florescent lights and floor-to-ceiling shelves brimming with books. Appropriately, these shelves are home to all of Palaima’s books on war and violence. You have to burrow a little more to get to the ancient stuff, as well as Palaima’s prized possessions installed in his office like a $20 bill signed by Clifford Antone from the first time they shared lunch and a picture of a friend and former student that died in Iraq.

Palaima has spent 21 years teaching courses at UT, and his specialties within his cornucopia of knowledge include ancient Greek, Linear B — one of the earliest forms of writing — and the human experience of war and violence throughout history.

Palaima believes ancient history is studied to learn about the present, and he does not hesitate to provide examples in his lectures. He used a 1940s folk song inspired by a lifelong miner from Kentucky to illuminate the struggle of the Athenian slaves who worked in the silver mines. “Man will have lust for the lure of the mines,” Palaima says, quoting the song from memory.

Deep, past the bunker-esque room, stands another door, luring just like the mines. Suddenly, you are no longer in a bunker, but at the crossroads of all things Palaima. This room is a shoe box with one wall made of windows, the other three made of book shelves filled with his books on the Greek language.

But this is no closet with a name plaque slapped across it. Albeit small, the comfort and enchantment is undeniable. Sure the normal amenities constitute the bare bones of the office — a computer, phone, desk, chair and printer — but they are simply overlooked. The eyes are immediately drawn to the pictures, awards and posters Palaima uses to adorn the walls since he “doesn’t have a good visual memory,” he says.

A la his décor, Palaima can glance at a picture of famous blues singer, Albert Collins, namesake of Palaima’s son’s middle name, or a picture of his sister-in-law, the last Miss Harley Davidson.

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The center panels, which are the largest, supposedly depict Wilkinson and Hill rounding up cattle on Littlefield's land in Mescalero Spring, N.M., while the bottom panels show cattle grazing on his Four Lakes Ranch. When the doors were completed in 1911, Littlefield ordered that every animal whose right side, the place where he branded his cattle, was shown on the panels be engraved with his brand LFD to make it realistic. “They are the most magnificent piece of art depicting and celebrating the cattle industry,” says Dr. David Gracy, Governor Bill Daniel Professor in Archival Enterprise and a descendant of Littlefield himself. “There’s just nothing else like these doors.”

After serving as the American National Bank’s hallmark for 43 years, the doors were placed in storage when the bank moved to a new location at Sixth and Colorado Streets. In 1960, the doors were donated to UT and put on display at the Undergraduate Library, now known as the Peter T. Flawn Academic Center. Today, the doors are on permanent exhibit in the main lobby of Ashbel Smith Hall, only blocks from their original location. — HH

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Palaima also has documentation that he witnessed what is lauded as one of the two best goals in the history of soccer, made by Lionel Messi.

Palaima’s CD player is easily accessible so he can quickly listen to one of his favorite artists such as Collins, Willie Nelson, Bob Dylan or James Brown. Palaima even popped in a CD with Dylan’s version of a song called “Hard Times” during our interview, and sang right along with the folk singer: “Hard times, hard times come again no more.” Recently, Palaima has been taking piano lessons. Although music might be his strongest passion, it is not his strongest talent. “We often love what we can’t do,” he says.

Palaima enjoys his office, but obviously prefers spending time at home with his family, he says. Perhaps his office has the lure of the mines, with all of his interests in one compact space, it might be hard to stay away for too long. — PC