The Nebraska Viewpoint

Civil Rights and Civil Liberties: Understanding the Past, Looking to the Future

The Miranda Rights is a litany easily recited by any school child (you have the right to remain silent, you have the right to an attorney . . .), yet many adults could not tell you where those rights come from. For the next year those rights and all the others found in that grand document, the United States Constitution, will be at the heart of public presentations, community conversations, a major exhibit, and publications and broadcasts.

The Nebraska State Historical Society will explore Nebraska’s role in figuring out who “We” are. This exploration—including public presentations, an exhibition, a publication, and broadcasts—will investigate the circumstances in which constitutional rights have been granted, taken away, restored and abused over the course of our national history, and in particular how that saga played out in Nebraska.

Nebraskans will be asked to engage questions about our past as it affects our present and our future. Does the “We,” a collective pronoun that once did not include African Americans, American can Indians, and women, still exclude classes of people? Does the “We” include new immigrants, Hispanics, gays, Muslims, and others? How important is a free press?

An exhibition opening in January will, of course, offer exhibits about provocative stories and the lessons from Nebraska’s past, but it will also feature a recording booth where individuals can tell their own stories and add them to the history books. And along with a series of public lectures we will host two Community Conversations where we will ask the public to voice perspectives on the important issues of civil rights and civil liberties. (See p. 10 for a schedule of events.)

This exhibit and public programming are possible thanks to important support from the Nebraska Humanities Council and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment, together with the Cooper Foundation and the Woods Charitable Fund, Inc. The Nebraska State Historical Society Foundation has served an important role in bringing this support together.
Change!

Change! The battle cry of the last two national elections; a challenge set forth by management consultants; every woman’s hope for her over-inhibiting man; the basis of history. Yes, change is all of these and more.

My focus here is on change as the basic component of history. Recently, I looked into the reason for the closing of the Keene Canning Company in Freeport, Illinois, in 1953, seven years after my grandfather, John Smith, retired as its general manager. The owners noted that they could no longer contract with farmers to grow the corn and peas that the company processed, because everyone had turned to dairying. Today, in 2010, almost all that dairying is gone as farmers have returned to row crops. The agriculture of Stephenson County, Illinois—traditionally a pursuit regarded as slow to change—moved first one way and then back again in a half century. Change! Yes, change is constant. At this time of year, we are reminded that pundits offer hard and fast conclusions about situations that some see as certain and long-term. Yet it is the practitioners of history on every level who understand that the natural condition of life is change. Historians look for change in the record of the past, seeking out its indicators, its causes and its effects. It is in change that we see what has motivated and driven our worlds, define those as we may.

The proverbial “good old days” were in fact a time of change. In understanding the past, seeking out its indicators, its causes and its effects. It is in change that we see what has motivated and driven our worlds, define those as we may.

One of the NSHS William Jennings Bryan images that appeared in God in America. NSHS RG3/108-4715

NSHS Welcomes New Trustees

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Cloyd Clark, McCook. Clark is a retired county judge who is a member of the High Plains Historical Society and a trustee of the NSHS Foundation. He helped found the Buffalo Commons Storytelling Festival and serves as its co-chair. He is also a founder and vice president of The Norris Institute, serves on the vestry of St. Alban’s Episcopal Church, and belongs to the American Legion and the McCook Rotary Club, where he has served as president and district governor.

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NSHS Rededicates Headquarters Building

Our Nebraska history is part of our living heritage as Americans,” said NSHS Superintendent James Olson during the dedication of the Society’s new headquarters building on September 27, 1953. Olson’s daughter, Sarah, read the words during the renovated building’s rededication ceremony on September 18, 2010. Governor Dave Heineman was on hand, officially declaring it Nebraska State Historical Society Day. Former Congressman Doug Bereuter delivered the keynote address.

The NSHS building under construction in 1953. NSHS RG14-8-1

Former Congressman Doug Bereuter delivers the keynote address. Bereuter’s congressional papers are housed in the NSHS Archives.

NSHS, Bryan in PBS’s God in America

The NSHS provided images of William Jennings Bryan for God in America, broadcast on PBS last fall. The six-episode documentary was a co-production of American Experience and Frontline. Like The National Parks by Ken Burns, God in America is an example of how the NSHS and its collections are a resource for broadcasts and publications that reach nationwide audiences.

“The contest between evolution and Christianity is a duel to the death,” William Jennings Bryan proclaimed at the 1925 Scopes trial. For Bryan, according to a biographical sketch at www.pbs.org/godinamerica, “the greatest threat to America’s spiritual and material future, he believed, was Darwinism and its offshoot, Social Darwinism. In Germany, he believed, the ‘might is right’ theories of Darwin coupled with the philosophy of Nietzsche to create a malignant offspring, German barbarism. In America, Social Darwinism allowed rich and powerful capitalists to justify trampling on the poor and the weak. . . . His duty to the downtrodden and his innate sense of justice propelled Bryan on his crusade to save public schools from teaching Darwinian theory.”

As for our own publications, evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould explored in greater detail the relationship between Bryan’s religious beliefs and his sense of social justice in “William Jennings Bryan’s Last Campaign,” an essay that was reprinted in the Fall/Winter 1996 issue of Nebraska History. This double issue devoted to Bryan is still available through the NSHS Landmark Stores.

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From the State Fair

To inaugurate the Nebraska State Fair’s new location in Grand Island, the NSHS created an agricultural history exhibit for the 4-H building. Using words and photos, the exhibit sketched in the major themes of farming and ranching in Nebraska. The eye-catching Patriot truck and its oversized cargo helped draw fairgoers to the exhibit, which is now displayed at the Nebraska History Museum in Lincoln.

During the fair, the NSHS awarded a Certificate of Achievement and one-year membership to Whitney Koehn of Elmwood, for her scrapbook *Heritage in the Kitchen: Making Kolaches from Louise Svecik Borzicky’s Recipe*. The scrapbook illustrated and documented Whitney’s Czech culinary heritage from her family in the Farwell/St. Paul communities. She prepared her scrapbook for the “Explore Your Heritage” 4-H project. NSHS Library Curator Cindy S. Drake has been a judge for the project for more than fifteen years.

NSHS Board of Trustees Seeks Candidates

Do you want to help shape the future of the Nebraska State Historical Society? Assist in setting policies? Help guide strategic planning and offer overall support to the director, staff, members, and volunteers? These are the principal duties of the NSHS Board of Trustees.

The board consists of fifteen members, and meets quarterly at a variety of locations across the state. NSHS members elect four members from each of the state’s three congressional districts to staggered three-year terms. The governor appoints another three members. Terms expiring in 2010 include seats in all three districts.

The board-appointed nominating committee will put forward a slate of nominations, but anyone may become a candidate by petition with the signatures of twenty-five current members, or seek a governor appointment.

Application materials and contact information will be posted at nebraskahistory.org/admin/board starting January 17. In order to be considered for the nominating committee’s slate of candidates, please submit your application by June 1. Petition candidates may submit applications up to 5 p.m., August 15, 2010.

Virtual Exhibits are Just a Click Away!

Visitors at the Nebraska History Museum are surrounded with events, photos, objects, and stories from the past. But what happens to old exhibits after they’re replaced by new ones? You can find more than two dozen of them at nebraskahistory.org/exhibits, where they live on as virtual exhibits, from crazy quilts to the Orphan Train, providing photos and stories from the very beginning of Nebraska.

Our newest online exhibit is *The Boy Scouts of America, 1910-2010*.

One of the more popular exhibits is titled *Weird Nebraska*, featuring strange stories (such as tales of ghosts and UFOs) and real-life oddities such as Lincoln’s grave-robbing scandal of the 1860s or a collection of early twentieth century electrical healing machines in a section titled “Shocking Medical Breakthroughs.”

Viewers can even help solve a mystery. A collection of more than 2,000 glass plate negatives were donated to the NSHS from the Palisade, Nebraska, area. Several boxes of the photos were identified as being taken by the Bostock Studio—but no record of this studio has been found, and the NSHS is relying on southwestern Nebraskans to help identify people and places in the photos.

Other exhibits include, *Chimney Rock: Landmark on the Overland Trail*, a large collection of early images of the famous formation; *Nebraska Toy Stories*, a display of toys from the 1860s to the 1960s; and *One Hundred Years of 4-H in Nebraska*.

So whether you’re in need of a dose of familiar Nebraska history, or want to learn about something new, virtual exhibits allow you to enjoy some of our museum collections without leaving home.

Research Grants for 2011

Every year, the NSHS Foundation awards one or more $1,000 grants to researchers working in areas of Nebraska history. The idea is to encourage the use of our library and archives, and to generate material that may be suitable for publication in *Nebraska History* magazine. Send your proposal to David Bristow, Editor, at the return address on this newsletter (or by email to david.bristow@nebraska.gov) by April 1, 2011. We’ll announce the winner(s) in May. Grant recipients will then have until April 1, 2012, to complete their manuscripts. See nebraskahistory.org/publish/grants for details.

Brown Bag Lectures Available on YouTube

Our Brown Bag History Forum series has proved popular with Lincoln audiences, who attended the noontime lectures at the Nebraska History Museum, or watch them on Lincoln-area cable channel 5, but until recently the rest of the state has missed out. Thanks to YouTube, program videos are as close as your nearest Internet connection.

Since we first announced the YouTube videos a year ago, we’ve considerably expanded our offerings: “Memory Quilts” by Shirley Chaffin and Shelia Green; “A History of Nebraska’s Creature Feature Hosts” by Dale Bacon, NSHS Assistant Curator, Digital Imaging; “What Remains” by Nolan Johnson; “Take Care of Your Family’s Heirloom Photographs” by Karen Keehr, NSHS Curator of Audio and Visual Collections; “Conservation of Grant Wood’s Corn Room” by Kenneth Bé, NSHS Ford Conservation Center; “Make-Work Projects of the New Deal in Nebraska” by Jill Dolberg, NSHS Historic Preservation Office; “Forts of Nebraska” by Jeff Barnes; “From the Colonel to Carson: The People Who Put Norfolk on the Map” by Sheryl Schmeckpeper; “The Quilts of Grace McCance Snyder” by Janet Price.

To find our videos on YouTube.com, go to channel “Nebraska Historical Society” (no “State” in the title), or just follow the link from nebraskahistory.org.
Omaha’s Modern (But Historic!) Twin Towers

When does the modern become historic? For Omaha’s Twin Towers at Thirty and Farnam, the answer is less than fifty years. Built between 1960 and 1967, the complex was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2010. After World War II, many urban residents began viewing their downtown areas as places to work, but not live. Young families wanted single family dwellings with yards and garages. People began to drive to places for entertainment and shopping rather than living in a neighborhood that provided all their needs. Standing just west of downtown, the Twin Towers—with commercial space on lower floors and residential space on upper floors—embraced the idea of working downtown and residing in a modern mixed-use environment with a park-like setting and ample parking.

Architect James W. Nicas began by stripping a 1919 commercial building to its structural bones and renovating it with a design that was entirely new to Omaha. Today this is known as the South Tower. Like its twin, which was completed in 1919 commercial building to its structural bones and renovating it with a design that was entirely new to Omaha. Today this is known as the South Tower. Like its twin, which was completed in 1919, the building’s Modern style is reflected in its transite curtain walls, panels, and its use of glass and geometric planes. Simple sleek lines, emphasis on vertical and horizontal features, adopting expressed structure, functionalist planning, and rejection of historic precedent are all features of the Modern style. The Twin Towers represent Omaha’s only example of this style as applied to a building constructed for both commercial and residential purposes.

The complex retains a high degree of historic integrity. The South Tower is fully occupied; the North Tower is currently vacant but plans are being made for its re-use. Recently, the South Tower condo association has been doing paint removal work that represents “an amazing transformation,” according to Grant Landreth of the NSHS’s Historic Preservation Division.

“This is work that our office never dreamed they would do because of the amount of painted surfaces and the costs involved, and because mid-century resources—especially those with firm’s renovation of the Twin Towers, along with their National Register listing, indicates that appreciation of Modern architecture is growing.

“The Civil War in the American West,” The Eighth Fort Robinson History Conference

The beginning of the Civil War Sesquicentennial in 2011 provides a perfect opportunity to explore some of the ways the war affected the history of Nebraska and the American West. That’s why “The Civil War in the American West” has been chosen as the theme for the Eighth Fort Robinson History Conference to be held April 28-30, 2011, at Fort Robinson State Park. The event is co-sponsored by the NSHS and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Despite the trans-Missouri region’s distance from the great national drama playing out on battlefields in the East and South and in the arena of American politics, it experienced major consequences from the four years of war. Settlement and economic development stagnated. A handful of U.S. Army volunteers clashed with Indians while struggling to keep open vital transportation and communication corridors extending across the Plains to the West Coast. Wartime decisions made by President Abraham Lincoln and the U.S. Congress, such as the Homestead and Pacific Railroad acts, would guide the region’s economic and political development for decades to come. The war delayed statehood for Nebraska and other western territories until well after the fighting had ended. Union victory brought the end of slavery, political rights for the freedmen, and new relationships between the states and federal government.

The conference will feature papers by scholars of the military and political history of the Civil War in the American West. New books by several of the presenters will be available for purchase and signing. A bus tour will take conference-goers to two notable Nebraska Civil War venues: the site of Fort Mitchell, an adobe fortification erected west of Scotts Bluff in 1864, and Mud Springs Station, where elements of the Eleventh Ohio Volunteer Cavalry engaged in battle with Sioux and Cheyenne warriors on February 4-6, 1865.


For more information, contact Lana Hatcher at lana.hatcher@nebraska.gov or 402-471-3272.
Robert Taylor, Nebraska’s Movie Idol

Robert Taylor (1911-1969), who was born in Filley and grew up in Beatrice, was one of a number of Hollywood film personalities from this state. The blue-eyed, black-haired Nebraskan, once called “the man with the perfect face,” was cast by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer as a romantic hero in the 1930s. He appeared in eighty motion pictures and television films from 1934 to 1969, and starred in one weekly television series and hosted another.

A major constant in Taylor’s life was his loyal love for his Nebraska roots. He made at least nineteen return trips to his former state during his Hollywood years, and was most fond of Beatrice, which he considered his hometown. Taylor’s life and career were discussed in E. A. Kral’s “Robert Taylor of Beatrice, The Nebraska Roots of a Hollywood Star,” published in the Winter 1994 issue of Nebraska History magazine. Readers can find it by going to nebraskahistory.org/magazine and clicking “Selected full-text articles.”

“I Just a Punk Kid From Nebraska”: A Robert Taylor Centenary Tribute Film Series

In what was purported to be Taylor’s favorite film, he and Vivien Leigh play star-crossed lovers.

**January 30 - Camille (1936)**

Perhaps as beautiful as his costar, Greta Garbo, Taylor was lauded for his performance as the youthful swain, Armand.

**February 6 - Waterloo Bridge (1940)**

“A gangster melodrama in which Taylor plays an egotistical hood.

**February 13 - Johnny Eager (1941)**

A gangster melodrama in which Taylor plays an egotistical hood.

**February 20 - Ivanhoe (1953)**

The Taylors, Robert and Elizabeth (no relation), star in the Sir Walter Scott classic tale of knights and their ladies.

**February 27 - Party Girl (1958)**

Playing against type, Taylor is a handicapped mouthpiece for the mob.
A Bird’s-eye View of Nebraska City, 1868

The NSHS recently acquired this Nebraska City lithograph created by Albert Ruger (1829-1899), one of the leading panoramic map artists of the post-Civil War era. Born in Prussia, Ruger immigrated to the United States and began sketching army campsites while serving with the Ohio Volunteers during the Civil War. In the late 1860s, he helped found Merchants Lithographing Company.

Ruger’s specialty was the city bird’s-eye view, made by sketching buildings while walking the streets of a city, and then returning to the studio to create an imaginary view of the city as seen from a great height. Maps such as these were usually sponsored by chambers of commerce or other civic organizations, which used them to advertise a city’s commercial and industrial prowess. Ruger, who worked with assistants, is credited with 254 such city views.

The Library of Congress online exhibit Panoramic Maps: 1847-1929 includes bird’s-eye maps of Kearney, Lincoln, Nebraska City, Norfolk, and Omaha. See memory.loc.gov/ammem/pmhtml.
From the Collection... Nebraska surprised the nation in 1986 when, for the first time in U.S. history, both major-party nominees in a gubernatorial election were women. Democrat Helen Boosalis, former two-term mayor of Lincoln, faced off against State Treasurer Kay Orr, a Republican. In the general election Orr received 53 percent of the vote to Boosalis’s 47 percent, becoming Nebraska’s first female governor, and the nation’s first female Republican governor. The election came sixty-six years after the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution guaranteed the right of women to vote.