



A Decalogue for State and Local Historical Societies

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Article Summary: Corey suggests ten central activities of historical societies. He acknowledges that making the societies and their work better known requires constant effort.

A DECALOGUE FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

BY ALBERT B. COREY

IT is a wonderful opportunity to be here today and to share your anniversary celebration of distinguished leadership in state and local history. You can well imagine how delighted I have been to visit your splendid and appropriate new headquarters and to study at first hand the substantial accomplishments of your society here in Lincoln. I would like to add a purely personal note of greeting to my good friend, Jim Olson, with whom I have worked closely in expanding historical interest throughout the United States. I understand you appreciate him, too.

May I congratulate you on the character of your seventy-fifth anniversary program. It brings very properly to mind nostalgic memories which fill each one here with justifiable pride in what has been wrought in the past. It provides a convenient stopping place when one can take stock of past achievements of the society and look forward to the future. It provides a platform from which to view the best contemporary thinking and practice in state and local history and to prepare a blueprint of work to be done and the means by which to do it. This anniversary, in short, provides an exceedingly important period for taking in-

Dr. Albert B. Corey is state historian of New York and president of the American Association for State and Local History. This paper was presented at the luncheon session of the 75th anniversary meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, 26 September 1953.

ventory and determining policy which, I anticipate, will yield a rich harvest.

Before doing this it seems appropriate to determine what we mean by history, for this is the subject of our discussion. A seventeen-year-old college freshman student of mine blurted out to me once, "I know two thousand dates. How many do you know?" Of course, we cannot understand historical processes without knowing dates, but to know two thousand unrelated dates is not to know history. The same lad handed to me at another time a long sheet of paper and said, "You can have this. It is a list of all the Popes and their dates. I know them all." When I asked him why he had memorized them, he said that when he did any writing he did not want to take the information out of a book for fear of being accused of plagiarism. Chronology of this kind is necessary information, but it is not history. Knowledge of all the firsts in a community should be available, but it is not history. The historian must be concerned with securing genealogical information, but he recognizes that history is not confined to the oldest families or to the most prominent ones. It is not confined to nostalgic memory of the past. All of these are approaches to history, but they are fractional approaches at best.

History is somewhat more than the sum of all these parts. It is something more than the statement that "it is the story of everything that man has ever done or thought or felt or hoped." History is the story of the dramatic evolution of ideas in motion, of people in action, of society in flux. It is less important that an incident happened a hundred years ago than that it can be interpreted as being significant in the human story. Not antiquity, but importance is the criterion we should use. "The province of history," said Mayor John Boyd Thatcher of Albany, New York, in a remarkable speech on the occasion of the city's bicentennial in 1886, "is to show the relation between events, the conditions under which they happen, the source from which they have their spring . . ." History is the story of change, constant change in human affairs.

I am not one of those, if such there be today, who refuse to use history to teach a lesson useful to the present. We may guess at the future. To be useful and intelligently acting citizens we must know the present and how it came to be. A distinguished lawyer once told me that his study of English law and jurisprudence from the eleventh century onward gave him an understanding of present day American law which few of his contemporaries have and that this knowledge has many a time given him a real advantage in court over others who know little but current practice. He recognizes that although law is based largely on precedents it is, like history, the record of a continuing process.

This continuing process has been happening and is now happening to us—in our homes, in our streets, in our villages, in our cities, in our counties, and in our states. It has been happening to people—the baker who no longer touches the flour, the dough, or the loaf with his hands; the housewife, surrounded by mechanical gadgets, who, for lack of help, still finds her day too short and her work too long; the farmer who is no longer merely an artisan but a business man; the doctor whose concern with neuroses is as great as his concern with physical ills; the policeman who has to contend with crime in an automotive age; the village clerk who finds his duties multiplied but his salary static.

Who can conserve this human record more appropriately than our historical societies who are organized for that very purpose? How then shall they do it?

The first and foremost duty of a historical society, whether a state society or a local society, is to establish its major objectives. These can be stated in terms of geographical area; the collection and preservation of historical source materials relating to the area; publication, acquisition and development of historic places and properties; development of historical museums; and dissemination of historical information; in fact, the establishment of a historical center. These are broad objectives, but it must always be remembered that they can and should be accomplished within

the definite geographic area described in the society's charter or its constitution.

There are so many facets of human achievement, successes, failures, frailties, whimsicalities and all the other aspects of human drama which can be found in a community that the study of them need never come to an end. It is not important that the history of a neighboring county or town begins a century earlier or fifty years later. The chances are that it is just as full of human interest and that it has been important in many ways which provide a challenging contrast with its neighbors. This is why a historical society should limit its work to studying and understanding its own area.

I am not here advocating an isolationist historical outlook. The fact is that each of us lives in an area which has contributed something to the stream of history. What are these contributions? What, by contrast, have been the influences from beyond our borders which have shaped our history? These, too, we must be willing to study and to learn.

The second duty of a society, but nonetheless a primary one, is to collect and preserve the historical records of the area which it serves. The most immediate problem which arises at once is, of course, where to keep the records. If the society has a headquarters building or rooms of its own the problem is partially solved. If it does not have a headquarters of its own, the records can be placed in a local library, a school, a public building or other available quarters, or even in someone's home. In any event, it is necessary to take the greatest possible safeguards for their safekeeping against damage, especially by fire or dampness. Insurance coverage is of little help if irreplaceable records are destroyed. Protection of the most valuable records can be assured by duplicating them by microfilm and storing the microfilm in a separate place. The cost is relatively low, and the returns in safety are very high. Microfilming newspaper files yields large returns in reduction of space and providing additional copies for use. Publishers are often willing to share the cost.

Every society should catalogue its holdings. Persons familiar with library procedures are available in most communities, who will do the work or assist others to do it. Only by cataloguing can a society make its holdings available to potential users under conditions which it sets up, such as direct use, inter-society, inter-library loans, and the like.

Most societies have a tendency to collect too much. If a society has or acquires records which relate exclusively to areas outside of the scope of its stated objective, the records should be sent as gifts or as exchanges where they properly belong. The reasons for doing so hardly need elaboration.

One of the great American games played every year by almost every householder is spring housecleaning. There are rarely any spectators except those who watch incinerators burn up the trash or the paper man who occasionally makes a haul. There is, of course, no way of knowing how many valuable records have been wantonly destroyed in this way, but the total must be very large. I heard once of one ignorant city historian who, upon taking office, and having decided that the space occupied by some records stored in barrels (I don't understand why in barrels), could be used more advantageously for her desk, threw out the entire accumulation of historical records which her predecessors had carefully brought together.

Every historical society has an obligation to take steps to prevent the wanton destruction of historically valuable records.

The third duty of a society is to publish materials relating to the area which it serves. Members appreciate receiving a periodical or a bulletin regularly. Such a publication increases their interest in the society and makes them feel they are getting their money's worth as dues-paying members. Publications of local historical societies should be largely popular in character, but this does not diminish in the slightest a society's responsibility for publishing articles which are historically accurate. The most whimsically written article may rest upon the most meticulous research. Good writing makes history attractive.

Thomas Moore, the Irish poet, won the hearts of men everywhere with "The Minstrel Boy." His ponderous and dull five volume history of Ireland had little influence, even in scholarly circles. Smaller societies which publish leaflets, broadsides, historical maps, short histories of communities, industries, institutions, and the like are to be commended. Nothing ever quite takes the place of the written word, whether it appears in a newspaper or a monumental tome.

The fourth duty of a historical society is to encourage people from all walks of life and every segment of the population to become members. Snob appeal should be strictly ruled out. Historical societies should never be exclusive organizations to which only the "best" or "approved" persons are admitted to membership. The single criterion for membership should be a person's interest in the historical process.

I say this advisedly because I have been asked many times how one joins a historical society. One man, after having visited the substantial headquarters of a county society for the first time remarked, "I never knew before that common folk like myself were allowed in there." It is the common folk who have, in large measure, given form and substance to our communities and made them what they are. They have come from every clime and every culture. They should be encouraged to join in bringing the historic past to life.

Keeping members and securing their active support is as important as getting them to join. A good principle to follow is to make use of every member's talents and interests, and in so doing to establish the slogan, "Everyone a hobbyist." One may be a folklorist, another a collector of autographs, another an enthusiast about maps, another a specialist in military history, and still another a student of a local industry or institution. Every society should enrich itself by skillfully husbanding and using the creative skills and special interests of its members.

The fifth duty of a society is to bring the young people in and make a permanent place for them in its program. It is not surprising that people's interest in local history

lags between fourteen and forty or fifteen and fifty. The child becomes a man. His horizons expand beyond the confines of his home community, and his interests change. In later years his experience tells him that national history or state history is simply local history writ large. Then it is that he awakes to a realization that local history is living history and that he comes to the support of the local historical society.

What of the early and intervening years before fifteen and after fifteen? All over the nation more and more attention is being paid to local and community history in the elementary and secondary schools. As a consequence, the junior historian movement has begun to spread widely and is now effectively operating in at least a half dozen states. Every society should make a definite effort to keep in touch with the work in the schools and should encourage the youngsters to join with the oldsters in developing interesting and useful historical projects. The children can be organized into junior chapters of historical societies with programs of their own, but these programs can contribute markedly to the liveliness of the work of the society.

So can the young people who live and work in our communities. They have lots of energy and lots of time. Make them chairmen of committees, let them take charge of meetings, make them curators of collections, let them organize tours, let them appear on the public platform, give them responsibility. When a style show is held, remember that the gowns were originally worn for the most part by young people at a time when the proportion of young to old was far greater than it is today.

The sixth duty of the society is to use all of the newer methods for presenting local history. Historians regularly use the printed page and the public platform, but they are still a long way from recognizing that in this highly competitive world of ours today that the newer devices of radio and television, movies and slides, should be made use of regularly. A word of caution is necessary, however. Radio and television programs and movies must

be prepared with great care. They must give the appearance of having been prepared by professionals even though they have been prepared by amateurs. The public soon detects the inexperienced hand and is not very generous in giving it support.

I would urge that every society associate itself with an educational radio or TV program in its area and, where practicable, that it provide programs for commercial stations whose search for interesting and stimulating ideas is never ending.

Another new device which is coming more and more to be recognized as important for the collection and preservation of history is the oral recording machine. By using it there can be preserved for posterity the recorded experiences of living persons, songs, folk tales, and descriptions of incidents which otherwise might be lost.

The seventh duty of a society is to organize its museum collections properly and to portray them graphically. Too many societies have collections which lack selectivity and which, for want of a more appropriate name, are called museums. I recall the museum of a county historical society where an Egyptian mummified hand was the first object the visitor saw. When I asked the curator why it was there, he explained that it was a "come on." Having seen it first, visitors would be curious to examine the other exhibits. Apparently the curator believed in "come ons" because the first display in the next room was a complete mummy. The tragic thing about the whole exhibit was that in this "museum" were displayed, indiscriminately with articles of great instructional value for the history of the area, the most curious assortment of junk which people had given to the society because they cherished the idea that it ought to be preserved by someone but were no longer willing to give it attic room themselves.

A museum has immense possibilities for teaching history graphically. In its own sphere, the systematic and attractive display of objects, it has the same function as a book, that is, of orderly presentation of a subject for educational and recreational purposes. Every society which

owns objects of historical value is well advised to follow modern museum practices with respect to accepting objects, accessioning them, and displaying them. "Be selective" is a good slogan to follow.

The eighth duty is to commemorate the past. People are always interested in the dramatic. All one has to do is to watch a parade or attend a dramatic festival or a special celebration to realize what a lift these things give to people. As historians, we should not neglect to interest people in the story of their own communities through celebrations of centennials, of institutions, or political subdivisions and the like. Celebrations can take many different forms. In one instance a village historical society commemorated the centennial of the village by publishing a series of articles for an entire year in the weekly newspaper. Some societies put out commemorative booklets; others provide dramatic festivals. Many here have undoubtedly seen unshaven faces and out-croppings of beards in communities where celebrations are being held. Pageants, when well done and when produced imaginatively but with restraint, are inspiring and educational.

Historic markers and monuments represent a worthwhile means of calling continuous attention to the heroic and outstanding aspects of local history. They create an emotional impact which draws people closer to their own communities. They remind thousands of visitors of the historic drama which has made our history what it is. In some areas the state authorities are responsible for the erection of markers. Where there is no state program, local societies would do well to fill the gap. Where there is a state program, local societies can provide auxiliary services such as recommending inscriptions, taking part in dedicatory exercises, and reporting damage to markers.

The ninth duty of a historical society is to make history palatable. It is not sufficient to hold together a handful of persons interested in some aspect of the community's past. They will come together anyway. It is important that people not only understand what the historical society is attempting to do but that they shall

increase their understanding of the significance of the historic past. I cannot help referring once again to the competitive world in which we live. Societies should experiment with a variety of programs for their meetings. One society I know relies exclusively upon what it calls "live" programs. It has never had a paper read yet. The program of one meeting, for example, was confined to the development of fire protection in the village. You can well imagine how many different facets of village life were brought to light that evening. Out of a total population of around seven hundred there were more than four hundred at the meeting. I do not suggest that meetings be devoted exclusively to "live" programs, but I do suggest that the programs be varied with exhibits, illustrated lectures, working bees, dramatic productions, particularly by young people, and the like. After all, the life of a community is extraordinarily varied and a re-creation of it must be equally varied. This applies to every type of medium used, including publication.

The tenth duty of a society, and one that is almost all-inclusive, is to make local history an integral part of the community's life. To do this requires an effective publicity program and good public relations. The work of a historical society must be so intrinsically good that it will be regarded as important. Only then will the society receive the financial and other support it needs from local sources.

I recall going into a drug store in a village one day and asking the location of the public library. The owner of the drug store said he did not think there was a public library. Just then a seventeen-year-old stepped up and said, "Yes, it is just back of the gas station over on the other corner." On another occasion I attended one of the sessions of a weeklong ceremony commemorating the three hundredth anniversary of a community in which is situated a famous historic house. I stopped along the main street of the small city and asked seven different people in as many different stores where the house was situated. A shoemaker, a grocer, a clothing salesman and others had never heard of it, and the house was just two blocks away.

Moreover, the mayor of New York City was to speak there that day.

Now it may be admitted that people did not read or did not listen to the publicity attending this weeklong celebration, but the house was being dedicated as a national shrine to religious freedom by the local historical society. Great efforts were made, as I have reason to know, to acquaint the people with the house, its history, and its significance as a shrine dedicated to a great principle embedded in our constitution.

I am reminded at this point of Martin Van Buren's approach to the problem of gaining support for any venture. "Those who have wrought great changes in the world," he wrote, "never succeeded by gaining over chiefs; but always by exciting the multitude. The first is the resource of intrigue and produces only secondary results, the second is the resort of genius and transforms the face of the universe."

How to make the historical society and its work better known, that is the question. The obligation remains, and the problem continues. Historians and historical societies have a peculiar responsibility. They must ever be in the vanguard of those who lead our people to a better understanding of the present that they may be better citizens, better able to protect those deep and abiding values which have made our country what it is today. They must do no less.