



## The Historical Society and Its Function Today

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## THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY AND ITS FUNCTION TODAY

BY K. ROSS TOOLE

The subject of my address to you, "The Historical Society and Its Function Today" is an invitation to be banal, trite, and, perhaps pompous. There is a tendency among us, we who are involved in historical society work, to be rather grimly academic. But we are schizophrenic, too. We are always having meetings at which in substance, we quiz ourselves. Is local history worthwhile? Are we spreading the American Heritage? Are we reaching the public? We contrive panel discussions that are peculiarly introspective. We are almost universally tactful. We are rarely blunt. We are less publicly zealous than we ought to be.

The American Association for State and Local History strives to set up standards for historical society personnel; you might say for the "accrediting" of historical societies. And in many cases it's like chiropractors requesting, by

*Dr. K. Ross Toole is director of the Historical Society of Montana. This paper was presented at the annual spring meeting of the Nebraska State Historical Society at Fremont, Nebraska, 19 May 1957.*

fiat, the prestige of M.D.'s. There will be no fiat. Only individual performance will count.

The fact is that historical societies in this country vary vastly in what they are doing and how they are doing it. Some are miserable and some are excellent. Some are supervised by crackpots, some by trained people. But there is the constant danger that *any* historical society will slip into narrow antiquarianism, into the limbo of a social or hobby club or that it will simply vegetate.

The good historical society will implacably resist the bombardment of antiquarians, hobbyists, collectors of vinegar cruets and general crackpots. It will be beset by those whose principal interest is social prestige or genealogical priority. It must thwart their control tactfully if possible, bluntly if not. If it is a state institution, tax supported, there is the ever present "taxpayer" who will demand that the organization render services it is neither equipped to provide nor authorized to perform.

If it is a local institution there are those who will seek to make tea and bridge into history, family trees into privilege and gravestones into heroic monuments. Always there will be some professional historians who regard local history with contempt, who refuse to grant that the historical society is operating with any fundamental legitimacy.

Those societies that publish books will be presented with abominable manuscripts. Those societies that publish magazines will be presented with awful vanity books to review. To refuse to do so is to make another vocal enemy. Those societies that operate museums will forever be presented with material that has no significance and the would-be donors will usually be angry when such material is turned down.

Historical societies are rarely heavily endowed and usually not very well supported on a tax basis as educational institutions.

All of which is to say that a good historical society, state or local, is neither easily made nor easily kept. But it

is vastly easier today than it was a generation ago. This is especially true in the vast region west of the Mississippi where consciousness of the past is enjoying a new, and probably permanent enlivenment. To a decided extent, also, the nation as a whole is more interested in the history of the West than it has ever been before. All of this is grist for the historical society's mill, if it is prepared to take advantage of that interest.

There are several basic realms in which a good historical society must operate. Emphasis may differ greatly from society to society, but the balanced and effective society *must* do certain basic things. Before we examine these things, however, we must first examine what underlies them.

It is always slightly amazing to me to hear a panel of historical society people asking themselves if "local" history is worthwhile. Yet that question, in one form or another, seems to preoccupy them. They are defensive about it. They seem to feel it necessary to keep re-examining the very justification for their existence. If the people who run historical societies are in doubt on that fundamental proposition, it isn't likely that they can develop useful institutions or programs.

*Of course* local history is worthwhile. It is worthwhile if *any* history is worthwhile. The various facets of history are not mutually exclusive. Some historians occupy themselves with great trends, the influence of ideas, the power of world economics, the trends of great religions. Others mark off specific eras for study. Others, still, bite off a specific and sensible chunk of geography.

Local history isn't the process of setting the lens minutely and arbitrarily; it is a matter of emphasis. No adequately written state history, for instance, stops the rivers at the state boundary. All of us recognize that state boundaries were politically drawn and often make no sense in terms of economics. Any historian producing a history of the Montana town of Fort Benton, for instance



(which was at the headwaters of navigation on the Missouri River), would know that he had to involve himself with the city of St. Louis, with the Canadian termini of trails spoking out from Fort Benton, with the Hudson's Bay Company and Northwest Mounted Police, and many other things. But there is great legitimacy in approaching all this from Fort Benton's point of view.

Actually the critics of what we call "local history" set up a straw man. Certainly, there are people and organizations studying and writing about narrow and rather meaningless subjects. They narrow the lens arbitrarily. But they are not producing local history. They are chroniclers—and if they have any fun at it, let them be. If they think they are writing history, let them think so. But do not let them control our historical societies.

These people and the organizations with which they associate themselves should not obscure the great validity of effectively done "local" history (and I am speaking essentially in a geographic sense). Semantics shouldn't confuse the issue. The value of a "local" approach to history is simply that it is the ultimate buttress of more generalized history. Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier hypothesis, for instance, had ultimately either to stand or fall on the basis of a whole series of what amounted to local examinations. The generalizers, who are often so critical of local history, seem to forget what they owe it. There is nothing wrong and nothing unprofitable about the process of examining the individual stones that constitute the matrix. Indeed, it can be wonderfully revealing; sometimes it is wonderfully corrective.

When you reduce great ideas and great trends to the effect they have in a given community, a town or a river valley, for instance, they often assume not only a more understandable aspect, but a new aspect.

This, then, is the kind of "local" history with which our historical societies must concern themselves. They must *begin* with the premise that the study is important—because

it is. And I, for one, insist further that it is pragmatic. If we, as a people, locally, as residents of states, as Americans, are to proceed in this crashingly confusing time with any kind of rudder, with any degree of intelligence or certitude from this point into the future, we have got to know everything we can about how we got where we are. The process of learning how we got where we are is best begun early, in grade schools, and best begun locally—because it is the nature of the human animal to scrutinize his immediate environment first, and then look outward. What surrounds him closely catches his interest first. It is the ember of this interest that we who are involved in historical society work should blow upon steadily and with a program of conflagration.

Historical societies are not schools. We have no captive audiences. We give no degrees. So whatever else we do, we must seek to interest. We have in the past far too frequently failed to reach out. We have sat mustily among our manuscripts and books and waited for students to come our way. We published stodgy and colorless trade journals with low circulation. We put artifacts in cases, lined them against the wall and called the results a museum. And we waited.

We thought of ourselves as educational institutions. Whether it was beneath our dignity or beyond our capacity, we did no proselytizing, we did no reaching out, we did no promotion. We justified our existence on the basis of the passionate few who used our facilities and whom we didn't *have* to interest. We ourselves were hardly passionate.

Anyone who has made it a point to visit historical societies of recent years, however, can tell you that something is happening. The ferment is obvious. Ask the members of the Council of the American Association for State and Local History. They have had occasion to witness it broadly. There is a great lay interest in history throughout the land and *most* historical societies are aware of it. They are beginning to reach out and to realize that their

first responsibility is to plan a series of programs that will interest laymen and students. Historical societies cannot instruct unless they first interest. They may have wonderful raw materials in their collections. But the ultimate justification for collection and preservation is utilization. That may be heresy to the pure scholar, but it is an economic fact of life for the historical society which must have an ever widening base of public support. It can only get such a base and keep it by producing. Producing what?

In the first place, it must produce good monographs, books and articles involving solid scholarship but which are aimed at the intelligent lay reader, not exclusively at a small coterie of professional historians. These latter have their own journals, their own organizations, and their own institutions. The historical society should maintain the closest possible liaison with academic historians, *but it should not let them determine institutional policy*, nor should their strictly academic philosophy become the basis of historical society operation. Again, the historical society is not a college. It cannot operate as one.

In the second place the balanced historical society must have an elementary and secondary school program. Such a program may involve a monthly magazine or newspaper, traveling exhibits, slide series or motion pictures. The point is that the historical society must catch them young, present its material colorfully and dramatically and operate on a long range basis with respect to students. They are the stuff of future membership.

In the third place, the historical society must continue to build its library collections, to get new material constantly, to process it so that it can be used and to preserve it with utmost care. The collection aspect of the society's function must never be static, and particular care must be taken to keep abreast of the times. Today quickly becomes history. The records of today, be they political, business, social, religious, etc., should be collected with all possible dispatch. The tendency to regard what is nearly contemporaneous as of little historical value is bad policy.



In the fourth place, the good historical society will create (and keep organic) a good, modern museum. This must be no amateur job. The museum should be created and maintained by professional museum people. The museum is the come on, the invitation. Also, it is the part of the organization that shows. It may be like the one fifth of the iceberg that shows but it isn't by virtue of that fact superficial. It is the most versatile of teaching aids *providing* it is cohesively done by professionals. It has the greatest lay appeal. It is the best kind of society and/or state and local advertizing. And the same can be said of historic restorations and sites.

In the fifth place, everything possible should be done to attract competent students, researchers and scholars to work with the institution's materials. This may well necessitate a scholarship or grant-in-aid program of substance. If so, such a program should be launched and carried on.

Lastly, the institution should have a public relations program. It should work closely with the area's newspapers, radio stations and television stations. People should constantly be reminded that the institution exists and that it performs many and varied services.

All of this is really to say that the historical society today, while its operation is based on solid scholarship, must have a sense of the dramatic and it must be aggressive. It does not have the advantages of the ordinary educational institution and it cannot be run like one. Its program must be imaginative and colorful. Because its place in the overall educational scheme of things is precarious, because it is not buttressed by tradition and widespread acceptance by the public as a *necessary* institution, it must be all the more productive. The great and spontaneous interest in history which is today abroad in the land, is the testing ground of the historical society. If it does not respond to that interest with imagination and originality, then a superb opportunity to contribute to American life and stability will have been lost.