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## THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY— A VIEW FROM THE '80s

*By James C. Olson*

The following address was given at the Nebraska State Historical Society's fall meeting in Lincoln, September 6, 1980, by James C. Olson, president of the University of Missouri system. Olson, an authority on Nebraska history, served as Society Director from 1945 to 1956.

This is indeed a homecoming for me. I am pleased and honored to be here.

I shall always be grateful to those hardy souls on the board of the State Historical Society who were willing to take a chance on offering the superintendency to an inexperienced and untried young man who could not even boast that he was a native of the state. They gave me an unusual opportunity to assume at an early age administrative responsibility for an important organization and a significant agency of state government. That early experience in dealing with diverse constituencies, with boards, with legislators, and with public officials, generally has stood me in good stead over the years. It has prevented me from making even more mistakes than I have. Above all, those early board leaders were great teachers, and they gave unstintingly of their time, energy, and thought, to the society and to the progress of their fledgling superintendent. Let me mention a few of these individuals:

•**Jim Lawrence**, editor of the *Lincoln Star* and president of the society during eight of my years as superintendent. A man of great vision, deep understanding and profound enthusiasms;

•**Nathan Gold**, who served as treasurer during those years. A business executive with great drive and ability;

•**Jim Sellers**, who was my mentor at the University of Nebraska and who gave unselfishly of his time and vigor as acting superintendent during the period between my appointment and my release from active duty with the Army Air Forces. A profound scholar and an inspiring teacher;

•**Ray Owens**, who succeeded Nate Gold as treasurer. A devoted son of Nebraska who gave his time freely and unobtrusively to the society;

•**Arthur Carmody**, who succeeded Jim Lawrence as president. An able and influential political leader whose presence on the board and in the legislature was a constant source of strength. Art, I note, is still on the board, and according to the way I calculate it, has 35 years of uninterrupted service to this society. A record, I am sure, that has never been equaled.

The years following the end of World War II were exciting ones for those involved in historical society work. The war had brought a renewed interest in our past and, in a very real sense, the cataclysmic experience of a worldwide conflict had deepened the appreciation on the part of many Americans for their own origins, their own communities. There were a number of us—mostly young veterans with Ph.D.'s in history—who felt that historical societies could both contribute to and take advantage of this renewed interest in our past. Moreover, we were concerned that research, publication, and popular education be added to the traditional missions of collection and preservation. We banded together in the American Association for State and Local History and sought through a variety of means to bring what we thought was a "new professionalism" to historical society work.

Those of us who had responsibility for public as distinguished from private historical societies were convinced that increased public support would flow from greater popular participation in our activities. For that reason, those of us involved in state historical society work were particularly concerned with developing new techniques for the popular dissemination of the histories of our various states. We used all of the techniques available. Some thought we overdid it—that we were simply historical hucksters. Walter Muir Whitehill, in his book *Independent Historical Societies*, entitled his chapter on the American Association for State and Local History, "The Organization Men."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps we did overplay the theme of popular education, but I think not. I think it is fair to say that the growth of interest in and support of historical societies in the country derived in part from the broad appeal which historical societies were achieving in the recognition of the fact that they were indeed important cultural and educational institutions. Testimony to this is the fact that the National Endowments for the Arts and the Humanities, as well as many private foundations devoted to the

furtherance of cultural institutions, look upon historical societies as legitimate recipients of financial support.

As I reflect on what has happened here since I left the directorship of the society, I am impressed with the fact that my years were indeed years of small beginnings. I note that annual appropriations from the state are now over a million dollars. My first biennial budget—which seemed large at the time—totalled \$67,226.31 including an unexpended balance of \$12,876.31 from the previous biennium, reappropriated. In reporting to the society on this budget, I said, “In preparing the budget, your superintendent and executive board were moved by the realization of the importance of keeping public expenditures at the lowest possible level during this period of inflation, and by the further realization that costs must of necessity increase during periods in which every article or service an institution buys has increased in price.”<sup>2</sup>

As I reflect on the problems of securing and administering the \$400 million annual budget of the University of Missouri, I am impressed with the fact that some things really don't change much.

But this society has changed. And it has changed for the better. It would be foolish of me to take your time to talk about the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1980. You know much more about it than I do. I do want to say two things, however.

First, I want to report a conversation with an historian at the University of Missouri who has been doing some work in the history of the West. He had this to say: “Of all the places I have worked, the historical society in Nebraska is one of the best—it has great resources, and its people are very helpful.”

Second, I want to state that much of what we have today in the Nebraska State Historical Society is a result of the leadership of Marvin Kivett. I take great pride in the fact that I had the good judgment to appoint Gus as director of the museum. When Bill Aeschbacher resigned as director, the board elevated Gus to that position. They couldn't have made a better choice. The society and the State of Nebraska owe Gus Kivett a great deal.

At the annual meeting of this society in 1946, Hyde Sweet, longtime editor and publisher of the *Nebraska City News-Press*, gave the principal address. He talked on the history of old Fort Kearny. I don't know whether the fact that this was the first an-

nual meeting for which I had responsibility had anything to do with it, but that speech has always remained with me. The talk was centered on old Fort Kearny, but the speaker ranged over much of the pioneer experience in eastern Nebraska, talking about the people who came, stayed briefly and then departed. But more importantly, he talked about those who came and stayed. At the end, he said this: "Of course, every land is cruel to those who do not become affiliated with it. It is as true now as it was when Kearny and his men came laboriously up the river to establish our old fort. Success in pioneering, I take it, and regardless of the soil into which one sticks a spade, is dependent on the ancient verities. It takes good will, courage, industry, intelligence, thrift, and honor."<sup>3</sup>

During the last several years, all of our institutions have been subjected to critical examination and severe questioning. The traumatic events of the late '60s and early '70s—the sit-ins, the riots, the burnings, the drugs, the breakdown of family life—have had a profound effect upon our society and upon the way in which institutions relate to that society. The effect is more extensive than we who have lived through it can appreciate. In some respects, the experience which America has gone through in the last two decades is similar to that of the American society which moved out onto the Great Plains a century and more ago. As Walter Prescott Webb put it:

The Great Plains offered such a contrast to the region east of the 98th meridian, the region with which American civilization had been familiar until 1840, as to bring about a marked change in the ways of pioneering and living. For two centuries American pioneers had been working out a technique for the utilization of the humid regions east of the Mississippi River. They had found solutions for their problems and were conquering the frontier at a steadily accelerating rate. Then in the early 19th century they crossed the Mississippi and came out on the Great Plains, an environment with which they had had no experience. The result was a complete though temporary breakdown of the machinery and ways of pioneering. . .

When people first crossed this line, they did not immediately realize the imperceptible change that had taken place in their environment, nor, more is the tragedy, did they foresee the full consequences which that change was to bring in their own characters and in their modes of life.<sup>4</sup>

So it is with us of the 1980's. Despite our vast communications resources and our penchant for self-analysis, we have neither fully realized nor have we come to grips with the change that has taken place in our environment.

One might ask what are the implications of the new environment for institutions such as the historical society. What is the

future for historical studies in a generation that lives only in the present, that has little interest or ability in reading, that has little intellectual curiosity? These conditions do exist and those of us on the firing line of public education are painfully aware of their existence. Hopefully, these are mitigated by the fact that there is a large and growing reservoir of interest in the past. The conditions of contemporary life may be such that the historical society will play a more significant role in the future than it has in the past.

Conditions today conspire against the development of a sense of community. Societies, communities are in danger of being replaced by collections of individuals with little in the way of common purpose or experience to hold them together. We no longer go to events. We sit at home in our living rooms and watch them on television. We have just gone through a presidential nominating process which has seen the substitution of a series of disconnected individual decisions for the collective action of responsible political parties. Some futurists predict that through the use of expanded computer and communications technology, it will be possible for many workers to do their work at home and not have to go to the office or factory at all. Should this be the case, these people would lose one of the most important socializing influences of all—going to work.

John Gardner sounded a solemn warning in a recent speech before the Cosmos Club in Washington. He said:

Our pluralistic philosophy invites each organization, institution, or special group to develop and enhance its own potentialities. But the price of that treasured autonomy and self-preoccupation is that each institution concern itself also with the common good. That is not idealism; it is self-preservation. The argument is not moralistic. If the larger system fails, the sub-systems fail. That should not be such a difficult concept for the contending groups to understand.

A society in which pluralism is not undergirded by *some* shared values and held together by *some* measure of mutual trust simply cannot survive. Pluralism that reflects no commitments whatever to the common good is pluralism gone berserk. One can understand that occasionally single-minded pursuit of its own purposes may render a group psychologically incapable of lending itself to any worthy common purpose. But when virtually all groups feel that way all the time, something has to give.<sup>5</sup>

Despite all these tendencies, the human animal remains a social being. And those institutions which do provide a sense of community, which offer an opportunity for people to come together on the basis of shared values, may have more important roles in the future than they do today. The historical society with its emphasis on the preservation of our heritage of shared values is such an institution.

The enduring themes of Nebraska's history give expression to values which are shared as part of a developing sense of community. These themes find repeated expression in the State Historical Society's publications and in its museum exhibits. I'm thinking of such themes as the westward movement, the pioneer experience, and the triumph over adversity. They are part of our common heritage. An understanding of them is an important part of the glue which holds our civilization together.

### NOTES

1. Walter Muir Whitehill, *Independent Historical Societies*, The Boston Athenaeum, 1962, pp. 499-520.
2. James C. Olson, "Nebraska State Historical Society in 1947," *Nebraska History*, XXVIII (October-December, 1947), pp. 261-262.
3. J. H. Sweet, "Old Fort Kearny," *Nebraska History*, XXVII (October-December, 1946), p. 243.
4. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains*, Ginn & Company, 1931, New York, pp. 8-9.
5. John W. Gardner, "The War of the Parts Against the Whole," Cosmos Club, Washington, D.C., April 3, 1980.