

# The Presence of the Past

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*Jackson County Historical Society*

**D**URING the past few years I have had occasion to assist a typical American community to recover those stray scraps of its physical past that still were floating around among the drifting debris of the twentieth century. Such a job provides one with the chance to observe the average person's attitude toward the past. It also gives one the opportunity to experience that rather commonplace but "romantic" emotion often evoked by old places and venerable records. Even at this late date we are indebted to the influence of the Romanticists for some of our deplorable responses when confronted with the limitless possibilities of another age, and there are those who think that local historians are the most romantic of all nineteenth-century descendants. But the Romanticists also enabled succeeding generations to deepen their understanding of history and to recognize its presence by what is now called the historical imagination.

The Jackson County Historical Society was originally organized to encourage the community to deepen its historical imagination by conserving what relics remain of its early history. This is the everyday function of the society, as it is of most such societies throughout the country. We have developed a sizable membership of enthusiastic amateurs with vivid imagination; and although no one has yet come upon the specter of Frank James sitting with his ghostly cronies in our jail (as the Victorian lady schoolteachers 60 years ago chanced upon Marie Antoinette in the park at Versailles), we have managed in a small way to provide a larger audience with some insight into local history. Our manuscript accumulation totals 35 to 40 thousand items, dated from the 1820's to the present. A county that has been called home by Kit Carson and Jean Harlow—Jesse James and Casey Stengel—is bound to have all sorts of possibilities for the local historian.

I realize the limitations of any organization made up of enthu-

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siastic amateurs and I am aware that in times past some question concerning the permanent contribution of historical societies has been raised by professional historians. I myself have seen enough of misguided amateurs to appreciate this reaction. Too often the local society becomes the exclusive private property of the so-called first families and thus fails to make itself a part of the present-day community. Worse, it becomes the center for "local" cultural uplift. But I would suggest that the very scope and nature of the membership of a local historical society can enable it to perform real and lasting service in a number of ways for the professional historian and his partner, the professional archivist.

First, we can make a larger public aware of the potential historical research possibilities in little known accumulations. Our quarterly *Bulletin* always tries to dramatize the variety of material already preserved in our archives in order to indicate what we are looking for and particularly to emphasize the fact that fairly contemporary documents, such as a "heated" letter from our owner of the Athletics, may be of as much interest to students of local history 100 years from now as the seemingly endless supply of early Federal land deeds that are forever being presented with great ceremony to our society.

Second, if a large professional archive is close by, the local society has an opportunity to assist in furthering the work of that archive and at the same time to receive invaluable help itself. I believe that the relationship between the Jackson County Historical Society and the Harry S. Truman Library is unique. There is no question as to which institution has gained more from this liaison, for which we are very grateful. But, on the other hand, we have made a few minor contributions to the Library. After all, in 1920 or even in 1940 Mr. Truman didn't know that he was going to be President; so occasionally his neighbors' attics or basements turn up perhaps an old campaign button or pamphlet or, on rare occasions, a letter that should properly be in the Truman Library collection.

Third, the local historical society has a duty to inform the public about the state of conservation of the early public records in the community and to exert political influence, when necessary, to bring about better archival practices when things get out of hand. With the encouragement of Dr. Brooks, Director of the Truman Library, we paid a visit to our own local courthouse, though I must confess that our visit was somewhat shortened by the fact that we could hardly get beyond the attic door. Public officials with the enlightenment of Judge Truman have not al-

ways been in charge of our early county records. When Judge Truman was presiding officer of the county, he found the first book of the county court of 1826 in deplorable condition and he had personally to salvage that most interesting record, now on display in our county museum, appropriately turned to the page where the first sale of lots in the new county seat is recorded, along with the cost of the jug of whisky necessary to complete that transaction.

If anyone thinks that I am exposing too much of our dirty linen when I refer to the lack of any real program on a county level to preserve our old records, I have reason to believe that conditions are possibly not much better in one or two other States. Recently a local lady, of genealogical bent, returned from a trip to another State in hot pursuit of an elusive ancestor. She showed me with pride a document, complete with the ancestor's signature, given to her by the county clerk of the unnamed county. We can all appreciate this generous gesture on the part of the clerk, but one cannot help but wonder how long his supply of historic souvenirs will last!

The other day I read with interest of the formation of an archive at the University of Delaware devoted exclusively to the history of food production. In the coming years we shall undoubtedly see the proliferation of the specialized national collection. I suggest that local historical societies might serve as laboratories for pilot experiments in these specialized fields, testing the nature, extent, and usefulness of material in the proposed specialized field before a national program is launched.

The local society offers all kinds of opportunities to provide such service because of the diversity of its membership and its wide connections in the modern community.

We Americans really aren't too interested in our history—we disguise its teaching in some high schools by calling it "civics" or "social studies." We have reduced the great saga of the opening of the West to television fodder. We have made a three-ring circus out of our Civil War Centennial—and for this both enthusiastic amateurs and professionals must share the blame. They must also jointly accept the responsibility if there is to be any change in the public climate. The public attitude toward historic conservation is about the same, whether conservation of buildings or of records. Our politicians speak of the glories of the history of our States, yet refuse to care for the documents that record that story. With knowledgeable assistance from professionals such as yourselves, the local history society can help to restore some common-sense to our now posthistorical modern communities.

George Kennan, former U. S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union and dedicated student of history, has put his finger squarely on the real importance of localized history in a passage I like to quote because it is so good and to the point. It is a text that should be preached on any suitable occasion. In closing, I could leave you with no better thought than his:

It is clear that the spectacular mechanical and scientific creations of modern man tend to conceal from him the nature of his own humanity and to encourage him in all sorts of Promethean ambitions and illusions. It is precisely this person who, as he gets carried along on the dizzy pace of technological change, needs most to be reminded of the nature of the species he belongs to, of the limitations that rest on him, of the essential elements, both tragic and helpful, of his own condition. It is these reminders that history, and history alone, can give; for only history can expose the nature of man as revealed in simpler and more natural conditions, where that which was elemental was less concealed by artificialities. And to the supplying of these reminders which is the historian's task, it is not necessary that one should know or understand the whole unconscionable and spreading panorama of history. A little bit, looked at hard and honestly, will do.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> George F. Kennan, "The Experience of Writing History," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 36: 214 (Spring 1960).

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### *Community of Archivists*

... Nicht in den Ressortarchiven, sondern in den großen Archivverwaltungen ist schließlich die moderne Archivtechnik und Archivwissenschaft entwickelt worden; in ihnen werden sie weitergebildet. Nur in ihnen ist die Möglichkeit zur Heranbildung von modernen Facharchivaren gegeben. Allein in solcher größeren Gemeinschaft können die jahrzehntelangen Erfahrungen der Fachgenossen als Tradition des Berufes übernommen und ausgetauscht werden. Ein bloßer Lehrgang auf einer Archivschule genügt noch nicht, und er bliebe vollends wirkungslos, wenn der Archivar sich danach innerhalb eines Behördenarchivs wieder isolieren sollte.

[Not in ministerial archives but only in large archival establishments are modern archival techniques and archival theory ultimately developed; in these institutions they will be further perfected. Only in such larger establishments is it possible to develop professional archivists. Only in such a community of archivists can the decades-long experience of colleagues be acquired and handed on as professional tradition. A mere course at an archives school is inadequate and ineffectual if thereafter the archivist once more isolates himself within an agency archives.]

— Georg Winter, "Das Bundesarchiv; Fachprobleme eines Zentralarchivs im Aufbau," in *Der Archivar*, 9:6 (Feb. 1956). Staff translation.