

Governor Robert Ray had not been willing to take a political risk and use one of his appointments to the then new State Historical Board for this son of South Dakota, a "Roosevelt Democrat" who was anxious to serve the cause of the people's story. I owe him much and gladly acknowledge him and others who gave me gifts of great and lasting value.

Indulge me in a few remarks as I begin to draw one phase of my professional life to a close. It would be fun to rehearse the past but I want to share a few observations about the future based on the past.

I see my career as a historian and public servant divided into decades—the first being dedicated to studying and writing the history of politics. Then the next ten years were invested in the politics of history as I became engaged in all the details of managing, collecting, and preserving Iowa history. How we understand our past has political overtones, most evident in frequent debates about what to teach our children about the making of our national story. Interpretations in textbooks, editorials, and news reports assume some perspective about our past. The issue of perspective will be forever a subject of public discourse. My reflections here are not about historical perspective but rather about the agencies that support the serious study of history and are the structures for gathering and preserving historical material.

My last two decades working at the national, state, and local level on behalf of history have taught me much. I quickly learned that all my graduate degrees did not mean much when dealing with elected officials. They meant more in the classroom but not much in the legislative halls. Public support for funding for all forms of history must contend with critical social and economic needs such as sewers, social welfare, security, police, education, et cetera. All these needs have constituencies that involve strong economic interests that profit from legislative appropriations. Iowa history lacks a broad support base or aggressive lobby that is willing to engage in serious politics. This is true of the arts as well.

When reflecting on my past experience, I come to several observations about the future. First, any serious and quality historical agency requires bright, well-trained professionals who know both the discipline of history and how to effectively manage a historical enterprise. Volunteers are indispensable to almost every historical agency, but they cannot accomplish the professional tasks essential for the care and preservation of historical resources.

Second, to secure adequate public support and appropriations, we must engage more than a few genuinely sympathetic legislators. We need a bipartisan "history caucus" composed of supporting legislators and representatives from historical organizations to set goals for each legislative session and design strategies to accomplish those priorities.

Third, without making history a commodity or cheapening its intrinsic value, we should point out the economic benefits of adequate historical programs. Businesses are finding that having their own historical archives is an excellent management tool. We must be more effective in "making the case" for history. Simply saying history "enriches our quality of life" is not enough! The current success of historical or heritage tourism is one immediate ally in this effort. However, we must be careful that what passes as historical tourism not become very little history and a lot of tourism. Creating romantic notions of our past with touches of Walt Disney may be good tourism, but it is very bad and misleading history.

Point four follows from the previous observations. Historical groups need to build partnerships with the economic sector to take quality history to new constituencies in effective ways, and possibly in new places. I wonder if the days of the large central museum are coming to an end. Large museums tend to wait for the people to come to them, and across the nation admission statistics show dramatic decline even in institutions of great prominence. We must be more proactive and find new, imaginative ways to take history to the people.

And last, the preservation of historic structures needs economic incentives. Tax incentives are necessary to stimulate investments and keep important landmarks on the tax rolls. We need tax incentives at all levels of government to make preservation "good business." Governor Culver's signature on the historic preservation tax incentive bill is truly an act to be celebrated. It means that the State of Iowa is willing to encourage the preservation of our built environment. The evidence is clear from many years of experience that such public policy is good for everyone and is an effective way to preserve important elements of our past.

We are all makers of history. The big question is, Will we become careful, passionate caretakers of our rich past? I pass the torch of leadership to you! ❖