

TOM MORAIN recently received the highest award of the State Historical Society of Iowa, the 2008 Petersen/Harlan Award for his long-term and continuing contributions in Iowa history.

"Tom Morain has done it all when it comes to supporting and advancing Iowa history," says historian Dorothy Schwieder, who first met Morain when they both taught Iowa history at Iowa State University. "It didn't take long to recognize that Tom is a highly imaginative person. He taught with enthusiasm and humor, a wonderful combination in the classroom."

After five years at ISU, he served as director of history at Living History Farms for 13 years, and then as administrator of the State Historical Society of Iowa (1995–2001). He is now director of government relations at Graceland University in Lamoni.

Marvin Bergman, editor of the *Annals of Iowa*, remarks that "in all of his positions, and in his books and lectures, and behind the scenes, Tom Morain has long been the (always smiling) public face of Iowa history. *Prairie Grass Roots*, his history of Jefferson, Iowa, in the first three decades of the 20th century, is a model of local history. *Iowa, Past to Present*, the elementary school textbook he co-authored with Dorothy Schwieder and Lynn Nielsen, remains the best book of its kind. In the midst of sound scholarship, Tom can always be counted on to find the human element in history, often with a humorous twist. His leadership in the public history community has done much to make Iowa history more accessible—and more fun."

Here, Tom shares with us a few of his thoughts on history. —The editor



Tom Morain

Of Canning Jars and God: Reflections

by Tom Morain

REBECCA: *I never told you about that letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: Jane Crofut, The Crofut Farm, Grover's Corners; Sutton County, New Hampshire; United States of America.*

GEORGE: *What's funny about that?*

REBECCA: *But listen, it's not finished: the United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God—that's what it said on the envelope.*

GEORGE: *What do you know!*

REBECCA: *And the postman brought it just the same.*

End of Act I, *Our Town*, by Thornton Wilder

Museum consultant Fred Schroeder introduced that passage from *Our Town* when he spoke to young museum professionals at an exhibit design seminar over three decades ago. For every article, lecture, or display we create, he told us, we choose where to root it on the "Spectrum of Abstraction." I never forgot his insight and often reflected on it at Living History Farms, the State Historical Society of Iowa, and now at Graceland University.

Imagine designing an exhibit on canning jars. You could focus on the jars themselves, how they are made

and used. Or you could broaden it beyond canning to include drying, smoking, or pickling. How about "Food Preservation around the World"? Food as a factor in human history? All living things require nutrition? Life? . . . The Mind of God?

Don't jump to the wrong conclusion. It is absolutely not true that the best exhibits are always those on the "Mind of God" end of the spectrum. Yea, verily, starving philosophy students should learn how to can green beans and tomatoes. But it is also true that there are many fact-laden history textbooks whose content com-

pletely effervesces shortly after the final exam, leaving only a bad aftertaste for history. Facts without context are sterile indeed.

In my own pantheon of history mentors, there is a special place for Arvilla Long. I interviewed her when I was researching my book on Iowa small towns in the early 20th century. In her '80s when I asked her for a session, she resisted at first; she thought she knew nothing about history and would appear foolish. Nevertheless, once she began talking about her own experiences learning to drive a car in the 1920s in rural Carroll County, she became very excited recalling the first time she backed the Model-T out of the barn. Why was this still a big deal 50 years later, I wondered. What was such a big deal about backing up a car?

Three weeks later, the "big deal" hit me like a ton of bricks as I was commuting home from Jefferson to Ames: When she could back the car out of the barn, she could go to town when SHE wanted! She did not have to wait for her husband to take her. The morning she backed out on her own was her Independence Day, her Bastille Day, her "Get Out of Jail Free" card. It was a freedom her mother and grandmother and great-grandmother and generations of rural women before them had never known.

I have thought about that interview many times because there are so many possible locations for it on the spectrum of abstractions between "learning to drive" and "the human condition." What opportunities does technology provide me that my parents did not have? What are the trade-offs in using new technologies—global warming, global competition, loss of community? What psychological barriers to freedom are imposed by my culture? What do I really need in order to be happy? Like a set of Russian nesting dolls—dolls inside dolls—questions of all dimensions lie embedded in simple acts.

The chair of the Iowa State University history department once advised me to stick with history because, whatever else, "it's inside and clean." Wrong. The following year I became director of history at Living History Farms, recreating Iowa farming operations from the past 300 years. Up until then, I had known history only through class notes, books, and microfilm. But the Farms changed that. To stay in business the Farms had to engage visitors; it could not just talk at them. We had to relate the historical site to the visitors' experience. What is there in the story of the development of agriculture that is important for anyone to know? Why are we doing this?

Early in my role as the Farms' history director, I had an idea for a way to evaluate what visitors were learning, an outstandingly stupid idea. I thought about giving a short quiz to departing visitors on facts they "should have learned" on their tour. It would have been a colossal mistake (does No Child Left Behind come to mind?) because it would have encouraged every historical interpreter to teach to the quiz regardless of individual visitors' interests.

I grew into an advocate of what I call the "But" Approach to Historical Interpretation. The sure sign of a good interpretation program is when visitors leave saying, "You know, I had never thought about it, but . . ."

But what? We would never know what visitors were talking about as they headed down the interstate, but we were pretty sure they were talking about history. They were incorporating a little slice of the past into their own frame of reference. They were understanding the present differently because they had just experienced the past.

After nearly three decades as an Iowa historian, I still find the questions intriguing. The best history books and articles raise more questions than they answer. The better the article, the better the questions that it raises. How many different ways can I understand that incident? In what context do I place that fact? How does being an Iowan shape my perspective? Are any values universal or is everything relative to a particular culture?

It is not the facts that I have learned to value in my study of Iowa history. It is the questions that they raise. Just because a question has no definitive answers does not mean it is not worth asking.

In Robert Frost's "Choose Something Like a Star," the poet shakes his fist at the universe and demands certainties that he will never get. But in the end, he accepts the mystery ("the star") and finds affirmation in the quest itself.

*And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.*

The first 30 years have been great. I'm looking forward to the next 30. ❖