

SHOULD HISTORICAL AGENCIES HAVE TRAINING PROGRAMS?

*By Walter J. Heacock**

There are some two thousand "historical agencies" operating in the United States today. Their staffs compose a specialized labor force of many thousands. As the public interest in things historical increases and as standards of operation rise, many persons are concerned because the personnel capable of running these historical societies, museums, houses and sites is in short supply.

I have no broad acquaintance with historical agencies, nor am I an authority on training. And I am not certain that my appraisal of the problem of trained personnel would be agreed to by those more experienced in this field. For the past six years, however, I have been involved rather closely with what I suppose may be called a "historical agency;" for the same period we have conducted a small training program, which within its modest field of operations has met with some success. I propose to discuss the broad problem of trained personnel for historical agencies and then to tell you something of our experience.

I raise the question of what a historical agency is without attempting to give an answer. I do this principally to spotlight those commercial ventures that use or abuse history for private profit. There is nothing wrong, surely, in making an honest dollar by purveying the past in books, in magazines with hard covers, in art and in furniture reproductions, or in admitting the public to historic houses and sites. But when profit is the major — or only — consideration and authenticity of detail is ignored, I wonder if professional historians and organizations such as the Association should not in some way let the public know that these projects are not "historical agencies" and that their presentations of the past are spurious. I have not visited "Freedomland USA," and should probably not make any comment, but I do wonder if fact outweighs fiction in its attractions. I was interested in reading just last week of some problems at the Freedomland exhibit that re-

*Director of Research and Interpretation, Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation, Wilmington, Delaware. The following article is based on his Iowa City address.

enacts the Chicago fire. In front of the Chicago firehouse was placed this sign: "Due to operational difficulties, Chicago will not burn today." I wonder if there is a place in such projects for the trained personnel we are talking about this morning. Perhaps even a jazzy version of the past is better than none at all — perhaps. But this is not really our problem at this session.

More pertinent is the question of whether or not there is a distinct profession of historical agency administration. Is there a common core of knowledge and experience necessary for the successful historical society director, museum curator or registrar, historic house director, and restoration vice president? And is this cluster of occupational propensities sufficiently specialized to justify the label of a distinct profession? If so, it must be defined before we can formulate a training program for its prospective personnel. If not, we need some agreement on the varied knowledge and skills most useful to historical agency personnel, and then we must devise practical ways and means to teach them to interested persons.

In a recent issue of *The Curator*, Albert Parr raised this question for the museum profession. "Is there such a profession?" he asked. And after carefully examining the staff of the American Museum for the past twenty years, he reached a negative conclusion. He found that the members of his museum staff concerned with administration, exhibition, education, and research moved in circles of much wider occupations than those that could be specifically labeled museum. Professional mobility was greater between museum and non-museum jobs than it was within the museum field.

Parr made very clear that his conclusion was based on the experience of one institution, and he is willing to grant, somewhat reluctantly, that the combination of many different professional skills in a single individual might in itself constitute the creation of a new profession.

If a distinct profession has evolved or is evolving within those diverse institutions we labeled "historical agencies," I think it is to be found in Parr's words — "The combination of many different professional skills within a single individual." It should not be expected that every professionally trained staff member be an expert historian, archivist, librarian, curator, registrar, designer, preparator, public relations specialist, teacher, editor and administrator. But fortunate indeed is the historical agency which numbers among its staff one or more persons to whom none of these is entirely foreign, who has a special competence in one or more of these

fields, and whose training and experience has given him an intelligent basis for judgment in many of the fields outside his special interests.

Where are these paragons to be found? Ah — that's the problem we are supposedly facing in this session. If you will admit the need for such persons, and if you will agree that they are in very short supply, then perhaps you will be interested in one very small experiment in training — a cooperative venture sponsored by the Hagley Museum and the University of Delaware.

The program began in 1954 when the Hagley Museum was hardly more than an idea. At that time, the newly chartered Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation had an endowment, 165 acres of land along the Brandywine Creek, and a commitment to make appropriate use of both. The land had been of industrial importance in the eighteenth century and had been the birthplace of the Du Pont company in 1802. In time, a long-range plan involving an industrial museum, a limited restoration program, and a research library was developed.

At the very outset it was recognized that a close tie with the state university — located some 14 miles away — might be mutually advantageous. We took our cue quite obviously from the Winterthur-University of Delaware fellowship program, which was then in its third year.

Our motives were mixed. We felt that the presence on our staff of several intelligent, bright-eyed young people each year would be stimulating and profitable for us, and we also thought that we could give them a combination of academic instruction at the university and on-the-job experience at the museum which would be professionally valuable to them. Our foundation trustees agreed to underwrite two \$1800 graduate fellowships each year. These grants are renewable for a second year, and since it is a two-year program, we have a total of four fellows at a time.

It has not been our primary intent to produce museum directors, curators, or history professors, but to select from a fairly sizable group of applicants some promising students, principally history majors, and to give them an experience that will be of value to whichever profession they choose.

Basic to the entire program is a sound academic background in history. I think that this would hold true for any program designed to train historical agency personnel. Hagley fellows spend half of each of their four semesters in class at the University of Delaware. Courses, totaling 27 semester hours, investigate English and American life from the eve of colonization through

the nineteenth century, as well as the history of science and technology in Europe and America. Two courses are devoted to the history of American thought. A thesis, somewhat more demanding than the average master's thesis that I have encountered, is also required.

For the other half of their two-year program, the Hagley fellows are at the museum and are considered part of our staff. Although some of their instruction is in the form of lectures by full-time staff members, we try to involve them as much as possible in the actual operations of the museums. The problems they are given to solve are real problems, and there is a minimum of made-work.

During their first semester the fellows take a museum seminar course, for which they receive university credit. It divides roughly into two sections. One is devoted to local orientation, the history of the Brandywine Valley, local industries, and the source materials available for their study. The lectures covering this material are attended by our first-year fellows and the new class of museum guides. Several of the lectures are given by the second-year fellows.

The second division of the museum seminar begins with discussions of museums — their history and purpose, of historic sites and restoration, of the various organizations which we refer to as historical agencies. Then our regular staff members introduce, by precept and example, their special areas of responsibilities.

The research staff discusses the techniques of historical research and its special application to museum exhibits, historical restoration, and the like. The mechanics of note taking, writing reports, documentation and bibliographical citation are stressed. And each fellow is assigned a major research project, which will occupy part of his time for the remainder of the year. Some of our research is done with pick and shovel uncovering some of the mill sites on the museum property. We don't do very much with this, but our fellows do learn something of the use of archeology in interpreting historic sites and in restoration projects.

The mysteries of library operations are introduced by our staff librarian. The acquisition and care of books and manuscripts are discussed and the fellows assist the librarian in cataloging and filing. Our library contains the Du Pont company archives for the first hundred years of its history and smaller collections of the papers of other local industries. Under staff supervision, these collections have been processed, inventoried, cataloged

and filed. Hagley fellows do not become trained librarians or archivists, but they do receive a combination of instruction and experience which would be valuable in many historical agency jobs. Our library is small and largely, though not entirely, for staff use. But next year the collections of a much larger library are to be combined with ours in what we hope will become a center for regional industrial history.

Since we are a museum without a collection and without a curator, we are not able to give our fellows as much practical experience in curatorial duties as would be desirable. A museum without a collection is certainly an anomaly, and we are not quite in that position, but most of our exhibits consist of working models and dioramas. We do have a growing collection of industrial artifacts and other objects, some of which will be on display as other buildings are opened on our property. These have to be accessioned, identified and cataloged. Hagley fellows participate in this.

We design and construct our own exhibits, and again we think it is instructive to have our fellows observe an exhibit as it develops from idea to installation. Our staff designer discusses with them floor plans and layouts, lighting and lettering, special exhibit devices and — I suspect — the perils of amateur designing. Our exhibits preparator was not at all enthusiastic about having the fellows work in his laboratory for a few weeks, and protested that we expected him to teach in weeks what he had spent years acquiring. He was converted, however, when he finally understood that we were not trying to produce preparators and diorama builders, but future museum staff members who would be able to appreciate the skills and the problems of the experts who do build exhibits.

These are the chief areas of operation explored by the Hagley fellows their first semester, and in which they participate to some extent during the remainder of their two-year program. In addition, there are field trips to nearby historical societies, museums, historic homes, and the state archives.

During the second semester, courses at the University continue. Fellows work on their individual research assignments and there are sessions on historiography with a member of our research staff. They also gain some experience serving as museum guides.

Two days a week for five weeks during the spring, the fellows report to the Historical Society of Delaware. It is agreed that during this period they are to perform some useful service for the society and receive a broad but brief indoctrination in its operations.

During the summer we customarily employ the first-year fellows for various museum jobs. They are paid a full salary, but we allow some time for work on their thesis, which most of them have selected by this time.

During the third semester, the museum seminar course consists of readings and discussions in business and industrial history. The fellows also continue their thesis research and writing. They spend some additional time as guides and serve briefly as assistant museum manager during the winter.

The last semester is devoted chiefly to completing the thesis. Museum chores are reduced to a minimum, and there are informal sessions on job possibilities or plans for continuing the doctorate. Our fellows leave the university with a well-earned master's degree in history and they leave the museum with special qualifications for historical jobs.

The program is far from perfect. It is now, and I trust always will be, undergoing changes. There are a number of areas pertinent to historical agency work which we do not explore or to which we now give inadequate attention. We might well devote some time to the financial structure of the various agencies, fund raising, and the legal aspects of gifts to tax-free institutions. Historical editing and the publication of books and pamphlets should be included in the program. Public relations problems get some attention, but not enough. We have an oral history program, and have found it an excellent way to collect certain kinds of local history, but we have not yet had our fellows participate in this. Our museum is not greatly concerned with the decorative arts, but some of our fellows have gone into jobs where a greater knowledge of furniture and tools and household furnishings would be very helpful. We hope to meet this need in the future through some arrangement with the Winterthur Museum, only a few miles away.

I do not wish to suggest that the Hagley Museum program is the best possible solution to the growing and much-discussed need for historical agency personnel. But I do think the formula of joint university and museum participation is a good one. This does not mean simply providing part-time museum jobs for the interested university history major. Both the university and museum work must be carefully planned and geared to the realities of historical agency operation. Such a program is not necessarily expensive, and I think that there is a decided advantage in keeping the enrollment small — not necessarily as small as ours, however. Better I think to have twenty small training programs at twenty universities and museums scattered from coast to coast than to have only a few very large programs.