

## Book Reviews

*A History of the Indiana Historical Society, 1830-1980.* By Lana Ruegamer. (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1980. Pp. ix, 383. Illustrations, notes, appendixes, note on sources, index. \$15.00.)

American historical societies have been an important factor in the preservation and dissemination of the nation's history, but they have received little attention in studies of the historical profession. To many professional historians they no doubt represent little more than book, microfilm, and manuscript depositories staffed by library bookrunners. In fact, however, the nation's historical societies have played a greater role than this in the study of history. The Mississippi Valley Historical Association, to name just one example, was founded by a group of historical society administrators, not academic historians. Lana Ruegamer's history of the Indiana Historical Society provides a valuable reminder of the place of historical societies in the historical profession.

Throughout the 152 years of its history the Indiana Historical Society has been a private institution, though not always, as the author notes, by choice. From its founding in 1830 until 1886 it had only a small library and no quarters to speak of, and meetings of its members were often separated by periods of many years. Rather than simply a smaller version of the present society, it might better be envisioned as comparable to many modern local historical societies. To a large extent it existed only in the minds of the small group of men who founded and supported it. It had neither the independent momentum of substantial physical facilities nor the assurance of continuation offered by a permanent state appropriation. The Indiana Historical Society in these years might best be described as an intellectual concept.

This began to change after 1886, when three local historians—Daniel W. Howe, William H. English, and particularly Jacob P. Dunn, Jr.—took an interest in developing the society as a vehicle for publishing their own work in Indiana history. Under their leadership, the society was transformed into a gentleman's club of a very limited number of professional men from the Indianapolis area. The members' financial backing gave the society much more permanence than it had known up to that time, but its goals and its ability to fulfill them were still very limited. Periodic appeals for a state appropriation were almost always rejected. But perhaps more important than

this, as Ruegamer points out, the society still lacked a professional historical administrator dedicated to making the growth of the Indiana Historical Society his lifework.

It found such an administrator in Christopher B. Coleman. In 1924 Coleman was elected secretary of the society and appointed director of the Indiana Historical Commission, the state historical agency which had been created in 1915. This dual position was important because it provided for administrative coordination of the society's programs with those of a state agency backed by a regular appropriation. At about the same time the society received a substantial bequest from the estate of Delavan Smith, the publisher of the *Indianapolis News*; this was used to establish a historical library, which eventually was housed in the State Library and Historical Building when that structure was completed in 1934. By joining forces with the Historical Commission and continuing its longstanding association with the independently published *Indiana Magazine of History*, the society was able to expand its programs to reach a much broader segment of Indiana's population and thus became a truly statewide organization. One of these programs, to which Ruegamer devotes a full chapter in her book, was a major archaeological survey directed by Glenn Black and funded by Eli Lilly.

Lilly was, in fact, important to the society both as an officer and as a financial mainstay from the 1930s until his death in 1977. The bequest from his estate increased the society's endowment to more than \$22 million by 1979 and opened up a new era in the society's history, allowing it greatly to expand its earlier programs and to experiment with new ideas about the work of a historical society, opportunities its previous 150 years of financial stringency had never offered.

Ruegamer's book is a well-documented and very readable account of the history of a private historical society that experienced the full evolution from a gentleman's club devoted to the study of pioneer history to a professional institution serving both the scholarly community and the general public.

*Iowa State Historical Department,  
Division of the State Historical Society,  
Iowa City*

Alan M. Schroder