Observing Local History in Indiana

Responses by Rebecca Conard, Jannelle Warren-Findley, and David Glassberg

LOCAL HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

By Rebecca Conard

Trying to get a handle on the wide-ranging thoughts and concerns expressed by Linda Rippy, Charlotte Sellers, and Joe Skvarenina in response to Keith Erekson's probing questions, I felt compelled to pick up the local newspaper. In this instance, it happened to be the weekly paper published in the small midwestern town where I grew up, and where my parents still reside. The front page carried a photo essay about an Arbor Day tree-planting in memory of one of my former classmates. It reminded me that my hometown, like thousands of communities across the country, has a long tradition of remembering the departed with memorial gardens, parks, groves, and forests. It also reminded me that civic groups, often established by women, typically spearhead such caretaking efforts, and have for generations. And it reminded me that, in the 1920s and 1930s, a group of local citizens in this community

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worked with the state board of conservation to turn an adjacent natural lake into a state park bordered by campgrounds, fish-rearing ponds, a reforested "natural" area, and a new city park. Other local citizens provided technical assistance or labor for this effort courtesy of New Deal work relief programs.

Today, residents and out-of-towners routinely use the state park for outdoor recreation and the city park for family gatherings and community celebrations. The recent tree-planting ceremony took place in the city park. Many older residents know bits and pieces of this history, but few understand the ways in which the development of our local park and outdoor recreation system is woven into the fabric of state and national history. The young teens who buzz along recreational trails on their motorbikes probably have not found the bronze plaque, reading "George Washington Memorial Forest," that was placed there by the Iowa Daughters of the American Revolution in 1932.

The local historical society has never developed an exhibit, published an interpretive brochure, or otherwise interpreted the history of the lake parks and recreation areas that give this community its distinctive identity, even though the historical museum sits across the street from a campground filled from May through September with visitors and even though hundreds of historical photographs reside in local newspaper files, private collections, and the historical society's own collections. Instead, the museum displays typical items donated by pioneer and prominent families and operates an ongoing rummage sale in the basement to augment its meager budget.

Rippy, Sellers, and Skvarenina identify a long list of what would seem to be endemic challenges and constraints in the practice of local history. Like many local museums, the one in my hometown employs no paid staff, has few actual members, does not interpret its collections, avoids programming, and relies on free publicity through the local newspaper. From the outside, it appears to be stagnant, yet the members currently have their hands full working on a newspaper preservation project in collaboration with the state historical society. Not only is this important work, but it is also the kind of effort that volunteers can fit into busy personal schedules, that requires more care than skill or training, and that provides a social outlet. The latter is both an asset and a liability, because the social aspect of local historical work all too often becomes insular and exclusionary. To paraphrase Sellers, there is so much work and so little help that loyal volunteers become vested in the enterprise to the point where it is difficult for newcomers to break in.

Moreover, assistance or "counsel" from outside professionals, however much needed, can be threatening: among other things, it reinforces the obvious—there are too few people to do so much work—but also because outsiders, however knowledgeable and well-meaning, do not always take the time to understand or appreciate the challenges and constraints under which local historical organizations operate.

The front page of my hometown newspaper also included a lengthy interview with the school superintendent on the pending school consolidation. This event bears important consequences not just for students but for residents of four towns as well as the farms and rural acreages that surround them. How will it affect property taxes? Will consolidation save money? Will any administrators or teachers lose their jobs? Will the curriculum improve? Will extracurricular activities expand? Where will athletic events take place? How will the school board be configured and when will elections take place? This is the third school consolidation my hometown has experienced since 1960, having been preceded by a succession of country school closings as farm owners opted to send their kids to town schools.

Because school consolidation has been a recurring fact of life in many rural areas for the last half-century, these episodes have not quite been consigned to history. More to the point, school consolidation continues to manifest the slow and disquieting process of rural depopulation and ultimately links to profound changes in the nation's agricultural economy over which local communities have little or no control. This part of the recent past intertwines with decades of individual farm sales and foreclosures, downtown business closings, friends moved away, and fewer jobs requiring a college degree. This local history remains off-limits not because it is controversial, but because its complexity is so extreme that any meaningful telling is hard to imagine in the formats typically used to interpret local history and because its poignancy is so great that any such telling would likely evoke many painful or at least bittersweet memories.

As astute museum directors know, making connections between people's lives and the past is key to a successful exhibit or public program, yet in this instance—and there are many such instances throughout small-town America—local residents by and large do not need or want to be reminded that the history of rural depopulation has contemporary relevance to their own lives and livelihoods. Still, this community applauded the moving of an extant country schoolhouse onto the museum grounds. By and large, it memorializes a past from which the

living are unchained. The chasm that exists between the past represented by that white clapboard, one-room schoolhouse and the past implicated by school consolidation number three is filled with an immense silence.

In some respects, my hometown historical society is less active than many I have encountered during a public history career that now spans four decades, but overall it falls within the range of normal. Carol Kammen writes that "local history has too many community implications to be regarded simply as something to do on a rainy Tuesday night."[1] Her statement gets to the heart of the matter. The stuff of local history is endlessly fascinating, yet so hard to interpret because it is impossible to separate social and cultural aspects from political and economic ones. Meaningful local history is hard to parse. Moreover, local history always rubs against personal memory. Sellers points to the need, in her county, to be sensitive to long-standing cultural rivalries among descendants of early families. Skvarenina and Rippy observe that age of audience is an important factor in determining what topics are likely to be controversial. Both note that the Ku Klux Klan is still living memory, not history, for elders who may have witnessed or even participated in Klan activities, or knew others who did.

Making connections is what local history is all about. One frequent approach to interpreting local history attempts the connection by fitting a local story into a broad historical theme or topic. Curriculum standards for history and social studies, outreach initiatives of state humanities councils, and the Smithsonian's Museums on Main Street program encourage, even aid, this approach as a way to make local history more meaningful, i.e., connected to state and national history. Another approach, the one addressed in response to Erekson's question about off-limits history, is to find topics that are interesting and lively but either avoid controversy altogether or can be manipulated to avoid offending certain segments of the community. Both approaches have legitimacy and value, but the former can take on a formulaic quality and the latter often means avoiding topics that resonate with contemporary issues. Making meaningful connections is not easy, especially considering that the audiences for local history are both small and surprisingly

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[1]Carol Kammen, "Local History—In Search of Common Threads" in Kammen, ed., *The Pursuit of Local History: Readings on Theory and Practice* (Walnut Creek, Calif., 1996), 12.

diverse. Sellers admits that defining her audience "has been hard" because "many factors influence motivation for local history interest." Some people like to "do" historical research on family history or topics of idiosyncratic interest. Others prefer to "consume" local historical flavor, and a few come seeking to learn more about the history of their community.

I turned to the local paper not merely out of idle curiosity, but to see just what events and topics were considered newsworthy in one locale and, moreover, to see if I could make historical connections pertinent to these present-day concerns. In other words, I turned the relevancy question around. The connections came to mind rather quickly, but, of course, it would be quite another thing to make these connections interesting or meaningful to a local history audience. It might be relatively easy to develop interpretive materials explaining the evolution of the state and city park system, which creates a distinctive sense of place for the local community. This is upbeat history with a rich photographic record, and residents of all ages could easily be persuaded to share personal stories that capture the human element. However, the history of local schools and school consolidation would be a mighty challenge, and might ultimately be off-limits because, in essence, it carries too much meaning.

The collective quality and quantity of personal meaning vested in the past are, I think, the "community implications of local history" to which Kammen calls our attention. For this reason, local history is inherently difficult history. Thus, the tendency is to step away from making local history too meaningful. Sellers admits that "seldom in [her] experience has local history moved beyond the superficial to explore how the community . . . relates to similar (or dissimilar) nearby or national events. Perhaps the best for which we can hope," she offers, "is that some of the artifacts, structures, records, and stories . . . will endure to be pursued and appreciated on an individual basis." Rippy expresses a similar point of view about the value of local history for placing individuals in the stream of time. She also cites local history's propensity for uniting "friend and neighbor, past and present," as does Skvarenina when he states that "the value of local history lies in its ability to establish a set of roots" for community members. Perhaps this is enough. But I continue to wonder about the power of local history to connect the past with the present in ways that move us beyond thoughtful, individual reflection to stimulate civic discourse and even, maybe, more civic engagement in community affairs.

ROOTS AND ROOTLESSNESSS

By Jannelle Warren-Findley

My grandparents arrived in Arizona before statehood (1912) and I grew up here, as did my father. Yet people continually tell me that there are no "roots" here. They speak of themselves—I have roots here.

So for me, local history is very place-based. I drive past intersections whose streets are as familiar to me as my own name, but I recognize nothing else there because everything I knew has been torn down and replaced. I often feel that if you could peel back this version, there would be a full-scale model of that intersection that I would recognize instantly hidden just below. But then, of course, there would be another and another, until you peeled down to the Hohokam in 1100 AD, and perhaps layers below that.

I wish that we could figure out a way to interest the thousands of newcomers to Arizona in the history that took place here. Newcomers *are* interested in past times, but their allegiance to cowboys and the Old West and vanishing natives is extremely hard to shake. The more ordinary stories, however heroic or shocking they may be (the Klan beating up a Mormon, for example), are often complex or open-ended or end badly. They're not like a John Ford film or a Wild West presentation. The urge for history to be something other than what it is gets so bizarre here that we just saw a local Native American tribe buy a failing Wild West show and move it to the reservation, where it has proven extremely popular with tourists. Nobody wanted to touch the question of who shoots whom in these new circumstances, however.

I guess, in sum, that the people who move to where I live are the people who might be more interested in the history of their towns in Indiana than in the history of Arizona. But that doesn't do any good for the historians in Indiana because those people are here, not there. The hooks that might be used with them—family history or place history or community history—don't exist when they move someplace like this. So they say there are no "roots" here. Do you suppose that's what they like about it? As if they were expatriates, avoiding local history in order to free themselves to new experiences or new places or from family ties? I wish we had a way to ask those questions, because we might then have a

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clearer notion of how to approach those audiences that would respond to and appreciate the reinforcement of local histories and their own roots—and we might stop the frustration of attempting to reach those who really don't want to pay attention to history.

SUSTAINING LOCAL HISTORY
By David Glassberg

The practice of local history in Indiana is thriving, but with enormous effort. Linda Lou Rippy, Joe Skvarenina, and Charlotte Sellers serve their respective communities in multiple roles. They write church histories, family histories, and genealogies; they produce lecture series and commemorative events; they organize campaigns to preserve historic buildings; they lead tours and prepare PowerPoint presentations on various topics for schoolchildren and other groups; and they collect historical documents and artifacts related to their areas of interest. Balancing this work with their day jobs (only one is a paid employee of a historical society) they are astoundingly productive and resourceful. Rippy, Skvarenina, Sellers, and other local historians keep history alive in their communities even as their nearly all-volunteer organizations face aging membership rolls, dwindling audiences for public programs, and minimal local and state financial support.

Given these challenges, I wonder how long their stamina will last. Will others follow in their footsteps? What changes might be necessary to ensure the sustainability of the local historical enterprise?

These Indiana historians make a great case for "hands-on," community-based history, demonstrating that in the age of the Internet and virtual worlds, the appeal of the tangible and the local remains strong. Genealogy can be pursued online, but there is still a need for the local genealogy room, where materials can be handled and experienced in person. Although everyday life in Indiana is shaped more and more by global economic and cultural forces, there remains a need, too, for the kind of local context that makes the national and global comprehensible and responsive to personal perspectives. Rippy, Skvarenina, and Sellers

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clearly understand and celebrate this civic function, even while they confess to being driven largely by personal curiosity about one or another particular aspect of the past.

Every day, local historians must strike a balance between seeking new audiences for history and not alienating their old ones. This is a serious challenge. In New England, part of the appeal of joining a local historical society is its social role, like a private club. Many longstanding members are reluctant to socialize with anyone new. Genuine efforts to diversify membership, such as reaching out to new ethnic groups in the community, can disrupt that cozy atmosphere.

The Indiana historians must also consider local comfort levels. They confess to their reluctance to explore memories of Ku Klux Klan activity or other local controversies that might disturb the older members of their communities. But they observe that younger generations are curious about these topics. Nurturing that curiosity involves some risk, but it is crucial to bringing new vitality to local historical organizations and encouraging new members who will find relevance in local history activities.

Another key to sustaining local involvement—made clear in these historians' comments—is the willingness to work with diverse community groups. Recent immigrants eager to establish roots sometimes take more interest in local history than do long-time residents who take their locale for granted. Preservation concerns lead naturally to alliances with local environmental organizations, through a common interest in maintaining continuity with the past while ensuring a viable future.

The practice of local history differs in New England and Indiana. Indiana residents identify more strongly with their counties, and this seems to lead to greater regional cooperation and connection among them. In Massachusetts, nearly everything historical happens at the town (rather than county) level, making cooperation across local borders challenging. The Bay State Historical League, a 101-year-old statewide organization of local historical societies, closed in 2003. While the state humanities council and the University of Massachusetts have assumed some of the roles formerly played by the League—such as hosting an annual conference on Massachusetts history—Massachusetts seems to have been less successful in supporting local history than Indiana, where the state university land grant tradition of cooperative extension at the county level has strengthened local efforts.

Nevertheless, the essential tasks of local history remain constant across the nation. Local history asserts claims to local distinctiveness,

promoting attachment to place and curiosity about one's immediate surroundings and neighbors, as well as about one's personal and family identity. In an age of global electronic communication and standardized, instant architecture, at a time when Americans spend more time connecting with like-minded outsiders than they do with their neighbors, and when towns increasingly have the same look and feel, considerations of the particular and the face-to-face grow more important. For the local historical enterprise to remain vital so that future local historians will continue the work of Rippy, Skvarenina, and Sellers, the present generation must embrace new constituencies, alliances, and topics. States must continue to assist local historians with fundraising, preservation, and conservation, as well as offering intellectual support through their university systems and public humanities programs. By sustaining local history, we help to sustain our local communities.