

A Life in Public History

A Conversation with John Herbst

As director of three of this state's most influential historical organizations, John Herbst has been an unusually influential shaper of historical practice in early twenty-first century Indiana. Before assuming his current position as president and CEO of the Indiana Historical Society (IHS) in 2006, Herbst held the same title at the Indiana State Museum, Historic Sites and Foundation. He preceded that experience, in turn, at Conner Prairie in Noblesville, where his five-year term as president was marked by an administrative struggle that ultimately resulted in the historic site's independence from Earlham College, whose trustees had until that time controlled the Conner Prairie Endowment.

Herbst had arrived at Conner Prairie in 1997 with a busy and successful career in museums and public history already under his belt. His professional accomplishments began in the history classroom of a Paterson, New Jersey, high school in 1974; they expanded first at the Paterson Museum and then at the New Jersey Historical Society, where for four years he served as director of education. In 1983, Herbst returned to Paterson to establish and then direct the American Labor Museum.

Herbst went on to gain national recognition for his leadership of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania from 1986 to 1997, a period in which that institution enhanced its profile and moved to its current quarters in the Heinz History Center, a converted ice warehouse in downtown Pittsburgh. A short time after the center's opening, he made the move to Indiana, where he has since resided.



John Herbst in the “You Are There 1924: Tool Guys and Tin Lizzies” exhibit. The 1917 Ford Model T is part of a living recreation of a 1924 photograph of a Hartford City, Indiana, repair shop for the society’s *Indiana Experience*.

Courtesy Indiana Historical Society

We spoke with Herbst in his IHS office in late August 2010. During a conversation of about two hours’ duration, he reflected on changes in the history and museum professions, on the challenges of institutional leadership, and on the things that made Indiana unique. The transcript of our talk, which follows, has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

IMH Can you tell us about a bit about your career—in particular about your professional and personal ties to other places before you came here to Indiana?

JH I’ve been blessed in that the role of the institutions I’ve served has been to help define place—to identify a region’s characteristics and what makes it special. That part of my career has been extremely rewarding, and I’ve been lucky to be on the scene in places at critical moments. My

museum career started in Paterson, New Jersey, in the last gasp of the textile and the machine and locomotive industries that had been so important to it. I was fortunate to be in a position to go in and document the last vestiges of the silk industry. That was very exciting: my Dad's family were German immigrants who worked in the Paterson silk mills and got involved in the labor difficulties there, and who did all the things that immigrants do to survive and eventually to flourish.

Then I went to Pittsburgh, which shares an industrial and ethnic theme with Paterson. I was there at the very point that the steel industry was disappearing, and I participated in documenting the Homestead steelworks and in interpreting the steel industry and other emblematic businesses. During my time there, we took in corporate collections from the Mellon Bank, US Steel, and H.J. Heinz—the companies that, together, really influenced the Pittsburgh area. But we also worked hard to document the ethnic groups that worked in the industries, and we were there at a very good time for rescuing and undergirding the sense of ethnic identity that a lot of these groups had. I will always consider that to be another privileged experience.

IMH When you go back to New Jersey or western Pennsylvania now, what do you see in those places? What's changed since you were there, and how has history—or historical awareness—made a difference?

JH In Paterson, the people whose parents or grandparents worked in the textile industry are aging—I'm not sure how much the younger generation has a sense of why it's called Silk City. Almost forty years of urban challenges have not strengthened or advanced the institutions that care for Paterson's history very much, and that's kind of disappointing to see.

I like to think that Pittsburgh has a very strong institution now that is capable of taking care of history. When I started there, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania—while old—could not handle the collections it had, and could not be aggressive about new collecting. At the same time, people were afraid of losing their history, afraid it wasn't being taken care of, that it was being literally trashed and destroyed. Many groups did not feel that the historical society belonged to them. In the intervening years, establishing the Heinz History Center, we built up a cultural institution that became a major player in the city—and that had a sufficient level of staffing to be stable and to manage the components a historical museum needs to do its work in the community. I would hope that people now feel there is a home for Pittsburgh

history—one that they can trust and depend on, and one that depends on community ownership.

IMH How do you make the people of a community “own” their historical society, when they haven’t previously?

JH We formed advisory committees of different ethnic groups, and we began to collect their materials. Then, before the History Center opened, we introduced a number of groundbreaking social history exhibits that allowed us to address the history of those groups for the first time. One, *Pittsburgh Rhythms: The Music of a Changing City*, allowed us to deal with all kinds of groups and their music up to the advent of radio. We did another one, called *Homestead: Story of a Steel Town*, which also reflected the history of a lot of different types of people and the emblematic steel industry. Eventually, through these efforts, when we opened the History Center we not only had touched on many different groups of people that lived there, but we also had specific exhibits: one on the Jewish community and their philanthropic efforts, and another, *From Paese to Pittsburgh*, on Italians in western Pennsylvania. In our permanent exhibit we touched almost every community. I had a Slovak Lutheran woman go through during the first week. She said, “As small as our community is, I got to see a membership card for the Slovak Lutheran Benevolent Society!” She was so excited, because her parents had been members of that benevolent society and she got to see a little piece of herself. People felt it legitimized their presence in what was a very class- and ethnically stratified city.

IMH So, when people say they want to “see themselves” in museums, do they still identify themselves in ethnic or religious terms?

JH There is a point early in the immigration and naturalization process at which people are too busy to seek out that kind of thing. In my own family, the newcomers were busy establishing a new life for themselves. But after people have been here for a while—say, the children or the grandchildren of the newcomers—they become very interested in the historical context and the stories that one might tell, based on kinship ties that go all the way back. Many years ago, “genealogy” was a dirty word for historians, but it’s really come into its own. People have gone beyond just looking for the next set of dates of marriages, births, and deaths. So you really see a resurgence of people’s interest in ethnicity and

family history, and in the history of immigration, settlement, and so forth. We just had our Midwestern Roots conference, and I was struck by who was in the audience and the kinds of questions that they asked. Immigration occurred 100 to 150 years ago, yet many of the boomer generation feel a strong personal connection to their ancestors.

IMH Is there still something about the melting pot story that makes us want to embrace both the Americans we become and these other people who we once were?

JH I think so. There is a quest to find yourself, wherever that leads you. It's not done anymore—as it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—to search for noble ancestors and connections so that you'd gain social status. People are just as interested in the murder story, or the story of why somebody left the old country, or all the other dramatic stories that are not associated with class or prestige. They just want to know who they are. So the idea of “seeing themselves” in our museums and in our collections is still an enduring one. We've gotten much, much better at it, and much more inclusive, but I think it's still a challenge—both programmatically and in terms of collections.

IMH How do you get people to identify with particular collections, especially given the standardization and the globalization that characterize our lives today?

JH Well, it's true that many of the things that people use are the same things that they use everywhere. Mass production has had a unifying effect on how people live, and what you find in various households is not unique to one or another ethnicity. But still, I think there are differences. It's not that a bowl from Kmart, itself, really speaks to ethnic groups: it's what they're doing with it that we need to document. And while we're very open to collecting things that document events that have already occurred, we're not as good at going out there and documenting things as they happen. That's a matter of resources, more than anything. So much of collecting has been exhibits-driven: you decide you're going to do a program on this, hence you go out and collect within a community whose materials have not been collected, and that's the reason you begin to collect. Hopefully, you form some lasting ties with people so that a stream of documentation continues in. But tying collection to exhibitions is a very expensive endeavor: you have to have the

money to do something worthwhile. To say, “We have a gap in our collection regarding the Mexican community,” on the other hand, requires a less extensive commitment of resources than an exhibition, but even mounting a collection effort can still be a problem.

IMH We’ve been talking about standardization, but of course there’s also a lot of variety that remains in our culture today—from one region to another, for example. As you said, your own roots are in New Jersey. You found your first work close to home and then you went to Pittsburgh, which shares some characteristics, in terms of its people and its industries. So what did Indiana represent for you before you came here?

JH It took me a while to get over the topography, and to understand how it might actually work to create more of a defined identity for people. The contrast was Pittsburgh, where a very complex topography retained and helped to protect ethnic communities and historic neighborhoods, and tended to discourage people from moving out of the place where their families had settled. I felt that this was the reason why it is hard to identify ethnic neighborhoods in Indianapolis. There were ethnic neighborhoods, but retaining them has been kind of impossible for Indianapolis, because of the topography. Also, homogeneity is a much stronger force in the Midwest than it is in the East. You see that in ethnic identity; you see it in food. Take bread for instance—bread is so different on the East Coast, where it reflects ethnic groups and backgrounds. On the positive side, Indianapolis is a very egalitarian city, where people are judged and accepted on merit. It’s not a very socially stratified place—which I mean as a compliment. The city is open to accepting and embracing newcomers and the best efforts on everybody’s part. You don’t have to be connected socially, which was a big thing in Pittsburgh.

IMH And historically? Do you feel like the story of this place is quite different from the other places where you have worked?

JH Yes, I do, actually. The wide-open space has provided a context for people to achieve here, and make a life for themselves. That’s very different from the ruggedness of the Pittsburgh area, which made it difficult for people to get along and which fostered very top-down leadership. I really do think there’s something about midwestern values, and the egalitarian spirit of this region, that’s very distinct from the East Coast.

IMH What's your impression of the state of Indiana history as an industry—such as it is? Historical work goes on in all ninety-two counties, as you know. Is it healthy, or is it suffering from the economic downturn that's affected all cultural institutions?

JH The good news is that we have very fine institutions in a number of places. Here in the state capital, we partner a great deal with the State Museum, because they collect the artifacts and we collect archival material. Like us, because of the recent serious economic downturn, they have been reduced somewhat in size, but not really yet in scope. Both are still offering the same kind of services that we had, and we are very fortunate in that way. The state has supported the State Museum, while we've developed primarily through philanthropy. We're blessed in this state by the tradition of philanthropy, especially the Lilly family, and now others—in our case the Glick family, whose recent support has allowed us to expand during hard times. But I think the presence of a major philanthropic force like the Lilly family in a sense took up the slack that in other states had to be borne by the state governments. In both Pennsylvania and New Jersey, government support was until recently a major force in establishing organizations. And actually, a lot of money was available in the last thirty years to allow museums to bootstrap themselves and become more professional. We haven't had that kind of support in this state for endeavors like that. Tourism is not as valued as it is, say, in the other two states where I've worked, where it is a big industry. We just haven't had very much in the way of support for heritage tourism here.

IMH Isn't it partly a question of how Hoosiers view the role of government, in comparison with residents of these other states?

JH Yes. There is a small-government, low-tax attitude here. But to bring us full circle, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, and other states I'm familiar with have now all seen tremendous cutbacks in government support. Other midwestern states that had different attitudes toward government than Indiana, like Minnesota and Wisconsin, have also suffered greatly from this economic downturn.

IMH Let's turn from region to venue. You've directed historic sites, museums, living-history centers, and now a historical organization built upon a library and archive. Does each present a different challenge for you?

JH The issue of facilities has faced me in multiple sites. In Pittsburgh, we were in a 1913, 15,000-square-foot building that had filled up in the 1920s and was badly designed for a public history mission. We had to have a new history center if we were going to take care of history in the right way. It took a ten-year effort, door-to-door, to create the 160,000-square-foot Heinz History Center. The Conner Prairie Museum Center was such a poorly planned and dysfunctional building, and we worked hard to make it more effective. The State Museum had already built a new facility that was designed for visitors and for exhibition and display, although we did tinker with the friendliness of it. Here at the Indiana Historical Society, our challenge is to take a monumental building and better tune it to let the public use more of it—and not just the library reading room.

IMH At a more personal level, is there something fundamentally different about working in a historic site—at Conner Prairie, the farm itself; in Pittsburgh, the icehouse; in Paterson the private house that told the city's story—and working in a building meant simply to contain historical materials?

JH I was very fond of the building in Pittsburgh—not so much because it was tied into the industrial story as because it was a big ice warehouse, and you could adaptively reuse the interior in whatever way you wanted. It became a dramatic, classic building that I think will really hold up over the years. We had looked at newly constructed buildings, ten or twenty years old—like the State Museum in Harrisburg—and just felt, “Gosh, those buildings don’t look so good after however many years.” You can make a lot of mistakes with new architecture when you’re really trying to convey a historical agenda. In the case of the Heinz History Center, I picked the building, I helped design every inch of it, and I was intimately involved with all decisions made about it—so I got what I wanted in the end, pretty much. Directing Conner Prairie was very enjoyable apart from Earlham. I guess one thing I don’t miss is how the weather influenced attendance, which is something you have to constantly be worried about for half of the year. Otherwise, that was a unique site, staff, and product, and it really did improve tremendously while I was there. But as far as different types of settings go, I think the Indiana Historical Society, and what it does, offers a fantastic situation for a professional doing public history. There are so many wonderful things about this institution.



John Herbst and dignitaries at the dedication for the Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1996. Herbst led the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania during the building of and relocation to the new center.

Courtesy John Herbst

IMH What about the visitor's experience of these different sorts of sites? Do people learn differently, according to whether they are in a historic site or in a box that contains historic materials and experiences? Is there something fundamentally different that goes on at Conner Prairie, for example, as you look out over the fields?

JH Our flagship word there was "authenticity." Setting it outdoors, and having the weather and the seasons become part of the experience, lets people connect viscerally to what others went through. But in the end, no matter what your setting is, authenticity applies for all historical organizations. You have to capitalize on whatever your environment is and what your collections are.

IMH What drove you to make the considerable investment required to create a tactile historical experience here at IHS, in a building that hadn't been built for anything like it?

JH We call it the *Indiana Experience*. Part of it is "You Are There," and part of it is "Destination Indiana." Both grew out of a sense that, as won-

derful a facility as this is, and as well as we maintain collections that we can share with researchers, it was an awfully large place to have only a small part available to the public for the purposes of discovering Indiana history. We started with the fact that the building could do more to connect the public to the past.

IMH Did the board understand that you felt this way when you were first interviewed for the job?

JH The ideas really developed after I was hired and took a hard look at the situation. I truly wasn't looking for an institutional sea change at this point in my career—I thought I had already climbed a lot of big mountains. But when I got here and began assessing what our challenges were as an institution, we saw that our building was under-used, and that people didn't know what was housed here. The public didn't understand our archival collections, and the average person did not get to share them in a meaningful way. Further, as an organization blessed with an income from our endowment, we really hadn't had to go to the public for community support—and that actually was a negative, in terms of our long-term success. It's a healthy thing to have your community invest in you—not just from a pure cash income basis, but for the sense of involvement and value that they place on the institution. We could do a lot of wonderful things before we built this building, but not all of them were wise, and they seldom depended on public input or involvement. So I think we were maybe a little out of touch in some ways, even though we had done fantastic work with county historical societies, and in publishing, and so many other important areas. That, basically, summarizes my motivation: the building could do more for us, we needed to find new ways to share our collections with a broader public, and we needed to broaden public support of the institution.

So we got our staff and board together and we started to brainstorm: What could we uniquely offer visitors that did not compete with or duplicate other institutions in town—particularly our near neighbor and collaborator the State Museum? What new ideas could we come up with to share our collections? The components of the *Indiana Experience* are what we came up with. When we started off I said, "Let's look at our absence of artifacts as not a negative but a positive. We are artifact-free—let's look at that as an advantage. We don't have to worry about having artifacts behind cases or ropes or not touching anything." That certainly



An interpreter and a visiting student in the “You Are There 1914: The Violin Maker Upstairs” exhibit. The society currently features three exhibits allowing visitors to step into a photograph or an event from Indiana’s past.

Courtesy Indiana Historical Society

was liberating, and it led us to some of the ideas for time travel that we do in “Destination Indiana” and “You Are There.”

IMH What are your reactions so far? What’s exceeded your expectations, in terms of transformations in the building?

JH What’s exceeded our expectations is the level of engagement that we are able to obtain with visitors. The photographs that you pass through as you go into “You Are There” have turned out to be a big success—very provocative for people. They’re rating it very highly. Likewise, the “Destination Indiana” program turned out so wonderfully. In the beginning, I challenged the staff: “Let’s do a time travel program where you can travel to a place or explore a topic in the past and use our collections to do that.” The way they actualized this has been so fantastic that it appeals to people of all ages. It has unlimited potential for us to put new journeys on there—there is an infinite number of possibilities. We’re

very happy with that. On the other hand, I knew it was going to be a challenge to establish ourselves as a destination attraction. The building was open for ten years before we introduced the *Indiana Experience* and while we were used by the public for lots of purposes, it really wasn't for history. Our program attendance was relatively small. So we are having to put a lot of effort and resources into advertising and PR and marketing to make sure that we have an audience for this. But I see this as something that's being built up by word-of-mouth and social networking as well as by traditional media: we're giving people such a good experience when they're here that they're telling others and making us a must-see attraction. It's going to take a while for us to build up attendance to a level that I think is exemplary.

IMH Has it had an effect upon how people view the institution?

JH Tremendous financial support certainly is one measure of the satisfaction that people have with us. Corporate and individual support are up; we started our campaign three years ago, and we've raised over \$17 million so far. Secondly, our related sources of revenue—our annual fund, corporate sponsorship, and other areas—have gone up significantly. So I think people are excited about what we're doing. And they're financially supporting the endeavor.

IMH How about the everyday user, the visitor?

JH Our visitor evaluations show a high degree of satisfaction with the *Indiana Experience*. We did a public awareness study in January 2009, right after we had prototyped some of our ideas, and we'll be doing another in January 2011. That should tell us a lot about whether we really moved the needle on general public perception of who we are and what we do.

IMH One of the striking things about your career—and public history more generally—is how often it courts conflict, even at times when we might not expect it. You've been involved in sites that documented the history of conflict—for example, the labor scene in cities like Paterson and Pittsburgh—but you've also been involved in very contemporary conflict in institutions where you've worked. What is it that generates such conflict or tensions in historical organizations—does it come down to competing points of view about history, or is it really about bottom-

line questions concerning money and real estate—the day-to-day stuff that creates conflict in the business world, as well?

JH One of the greatest services that the IHS provides to other historical organizations in the state is our local history services department. It's constantly counseling boards and staff statewide about institutional growth and development and conflict. All not-for-profits and all museums have this, depending on where they are in the evolutionary cycle. I think it has less to do with whether a historical organization tells a story of class or economic conflict, and much more to do with how you run organizations. One issue I ran into in my career is what I like to call "founderitis," which is a terrible disease afflicting a non-professional who seeks to found a museum and then cannot part from it, and will do whatever he or she can to control it. Founderitis has severely hindered a number of organizations. Or it has provoked conflict in organizations that have to grow and move on and dramatically break with their founder. It's often very painful for everybody involved.

The conflict whose resolution I'm proudest of is what happened at Conner Prairie. It was a conflict that had been brewing for thirty years between Earlham College—which thought it was the owner of the museum, but it turned out was the trustee of a public charitable trust—and the community-based board that was running Conner Prairie. My part in resolving the conflict was, first, to identify the fact that there was a glass ceiling over the museum, as far as fundraising and community support (because of Earlham's control of the finances); second, to point out some very unfair practices that were going on with regard to the financial arrangements between the college and the museum regarding the Lilly gifts; and thirdly, to say to the board, "I think this would be important for you to resolve, and you should not make protecting me a factor in working to resolve this." Prior CEOs had worried that a push to resolve this might result in something happening to them and their job. My predecessor, Marcia Semmel, was not there a long time, but she had a lot of interesting plans, and the board had gotten excited about the potential of Conner Prairie. I came in as an actualizer of that potential, and I ran smack into Earlham's control of the museum and the fact that they were really most interested in the income that was available to them through this relationship with the museum.

IMH You paid a high price for your "proud resolution."

JH Yes. I have to admit to having fallen in love with different institutions that I served in my career, and Conner Prairie was one place that I held in a very special regard, which is why I wanted to see this get done. While it turned out really terrific for the museum, I wasn't able to go back and that was a disappointment for me.

IMH So you've seen a number of institutions at a point of crisis or change.

JH Throughout my career, I have faced the challenge of either building an institution from scratch or leading it through a major transformation. My work at Pittsburgh was a product of being very young and ambitious—not personally ambitious but institutionally ambitious. I was convinced that the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania was the organization to take the leadership in creating a history center for Pittsburgh, and that no other organization's institutional mission fit that goal. But it wasn't easy. After we had worked for five years to move this idea along, we hired a consultant to prepare a report on the potential of a capital campaign. And while I personally got high marks, the consultant wrote that people were very negative about our organization's chances in pulling it off. But I looked at that report, and I said, "Well, we've got to use this as a blueprint of what we have to tackle to get this done." And by the end of my time there, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania was a totally different organization. To go from five employees to ninety, to go from a 15,000-square-foot building to a 160,000-square-foot building, from an operating budget of a couple-hundred-thousand dollars to \$4 million over a ten-year period was an amazing transformation. We faced so many brick walls over those years—we'd hit one, then go around it, then hit another—it was really something to be involved in. A lot of people didn't want it to happen, but others came along and did a great deal to make it happen. Ten years is a long time in somebody's career to see that type of process through.

IMH Sounds like you miss it.

JH Well, I do have an affinity for Pittsburgh. But I got such a great experience there that it has certainly helped me in the rest of my career. And it brought me to Indianapolis, which I love. Conner Prairie was, of course, viewed as a very difficult situation, impossible to resolve as it was not in Earlham College's financial interest to resolve it. Earlham had

to fire the community board of directors and me to avoid a resolution. I think that I played a major role in doing so, but I have to credit Berkley Duck, the chairman of the board at the time. He was an exemplary leader, and he lent so much courage, credibility, and energy to that whole messy battle. Berkley reconstituted the board as a not-for-profit called "Save the Prairie" and he made the legal arguments to the Attorney General that resolved the issue. No one could have replaced him, in my view. He was one of those unique individuals who appears on the scene at just the right time, gets involved, and has a unique tool bag to fix the problem, including the backbone to see it through.

IMH Let's turn to the future: What do you see as breakthrough models, or exemplars, in historical practice—things that either represent the way things are already going, or that in some way you could imagine a future generation taking advantage of?

JH Let me address that by posing another question that's more direct to this institution: someone might ask, "Do the things that you have just implemented—at a fairly substantial price tag—represent where you see the IHS in five years?" What I would say to that is, "This happens to be what we're doing right now, using technology that's available to us at the moment—the fog screen element and hologram for "You Are There," the technology for time travel in "Destination Indiana." But while I'm pleased and excited and proud of all we've been doing, in seven years or ten years we may be doing something very different. Twenty or thirty years ago, I couldn't have imagined the technique of stepping into a photo as we do in "You Are There" or the technology for "Destination Indiana." But we started "You Are There" with the idea that many people who have looked at the historical photographs have thought, "Boy, I would love to step in there and be part of that—to see how it really was." That was a kind of inspiration for us in working this out. But I don't think we could've imagined stepping literally into the photographs, and we certainly couldn't have imagined a technology that would get us to "Destination Indiana." Which means that right now, we probably can't imagine new things on the horizon, especially given the way technology is so rapidly changing.

IMH What really got you there was not the medium itself but the long-standing desire to step into the past, right? Are there other long-standing instincts that draw people to history?



John Herbst, aged 22, at the start of a career in public history in 1974 as a new teacher at Paterson Catholic High School, New Jersey.

Courtesy John Herbst

JH Yes. The technology is just the means to get people to realize that desire. I did a presentation, using clips from books, movies and television, about time travel and popular culture. It is several hundred years old or more, this fascination with going back in time.

IMH When you look at the history of museums, you see many that have made what they thought, at the time, was an unprecedented step into the past. Streetscapes like they have in the Detroit Historical Museum, which now seem so old and quaint, were wonders of their day.

JH As a child, I remember being romanced by the diorama of New Amsterdam at the Museum of the City of New York. I just thought that was the coolest thing to see the city in that way. When I first started teaching, I had a photograph of that view that you could put together in overlapping pieces, and I displayed it around the perimeter of the classroom.

I also remember a school book called *America, My Home*, about one family in upstate New York, from colonial times to World War II. I grew up in a blue-collar family, and we didn't have a lot of books in our house, but my uncle had left his school books, including this one, in the attic. Each period began with a view of the same place—first, a cabin on the river overlooking the falls, then a community around a mill, and then around factories and businesses. The family house remained there—until it was made into a museum at the very end. That book mesmerized me. I read it a million times, and later realized I was attracted to any book that showed the same place over a period of time or the story of the family over time.

IMH When you were a child, and when you subsequently started studying history, did you imagine yourself on a career path like the one that has brought you to Indiana?

JH When I was an undergrad majoring in history, I was focused on being a high school teacher; I intended to teach social studies for grades eight through twelve. I had no idea about museum work. I had visited tons of historic sites and knew people who worked there, but I really was focused on teaching. Then after three years of teaching, a job opportunity came along at the city museum in Paterson, and because I'd worked on local history projects with my students, I was able to enter the field without museum training. I then did some training in curatorial work and I got my masters degree later on. So really, it was very much by accident. The only deliberate part was the time spent with my junior historians' club, which I started as a branch of the New Jersey Historical Society. I very deliberately thought, "This is how I'm going to spend unpaid time and summers: working on history projects with the kids." None of it was compensated; it was just something I wanted to do. Once when my wife complained about the time I was spending, my father-in-law—who was a teacher—said to her, "Let him do this, you never know where this might lead." She's a dedicated teacher herself, but here I was spending my summers hauling kids around to do research all over Paterson in a derelict '67 Dodge with some doors that wouldn't open and some windows that wouldn't roll down. He was a visionary who said, "You never know where this could lead." It led me here.

