What Happened at Conner Prairie?
An IMH Roundtable

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EDITORS' NOTE

The publication of Berkley Duck's exhaustive account of the legal battles that consumed the Conner Prairie museum and Earlham College from 2003 to 2005 seemed to us the occasion for something more than the conventional book review. Both institutions have been and remain historically important to Indiana. Their fates were tied together by the benevolence of another significant Hoosier, Eli Lilly, who purchased Conner Prairie in 1934 and went on to name Earlham as trustee of the endowment that he created for the site prior to his death in 1977. Finally, the attention that the controversy garnered—not only

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here in Indiana but among historians, museum professionals, and nonprofit administrators across the country—merits a deeper reflection on the lessons learned at Conner Prairie.

The result, which follows, is an online conversation—edited for length and clarity—between the IMH (alongside former IMH board member, Melissa Bingmann of West Virginia University) and three experts selected for their knowledge of a range of issues pertinent to nonprofit funding and management. At the IMH’s request, Russell Lewis, Curtis R. Simic, and Sally Yerkovich each agreed to read the book and to respond to a series of written questions posed by Bingmann and the IMH. We then invited Ellen Rosenthal, president and CEO of Conner Prairie Interactive History Park, to respond to the dialogue from the perspective of a staff member who served during the time of the events under scrutiny.

In the discussion that follows, our experts focused less on the legal details chronicled in Duck’s book than on the broader issues that lay behind them: donor intent, the power and responsibility of state governments to ensure that trustees of public resources maintain public trust, and the complexities that arise when universities accept responsibility for maintaining museums that compete for philanthropic gifts. Earlham had accepted the Lilly gift and the responsibilities of trusteeship with the understanding that Conner Prairie would become self-sustaining, and in the hope that Lilly would offer additional unrestricted aid to the college. For Conner Prairie, the endowment provided a key to the security that would allow creative autonomy and growth. The tension between those differing interpretations had built for decades, even as the site developed growing public recognition (and visitation) for its Prairietown, Liberty Corner, and Lenape Indian Camp reconstructions, as well as for such innovative public programs as “Follow the North Star.” But it was in 2002, as Duck puts it, that the disagreement finally “passed the point of no return,” with each side of the dispute preparing for a separation. A year later—in what was for many Hoosiers their first exposure to the longstanding tensions—Earlham fired Conner Prairie’s board and its director, John Herbst, for refusing to agree to the college’s terms.

The ousted board formed a new group, Save the Prairie, Inc., to press its case. With Save the Prairie and Earlham at loggerheads over the proper administration of the Lilly endowment and questions of day-to-day management, it was left to Indiana attorney general Steve Carter to resolve the dispute. In the summer of 2005, Carter completed the proposal that was ultimately accepted by both sides. The result has been the creation of a new body, Conner Prairie Foundation, Inc., to administer
the trust, and a separate group, Conner Prairie Museum, Inc., to operate the site. The college, for its part, retained a portion of the endowment, as well as the right to appoint two members to the foundation’s board and one member to the operating board.

The “twilight” that fell upon Conner Prairie is not unique to central Indiana. Instead, as the discussion below suggests, museum administrators, university officials, and charitable benefactors will recognize it from their own work. If the challenges of cultural management seldom erupt with the full-scale fury that we saw at Fishers, it is not necessarily because other organizations’ boards are so much better-suited to meet them. As our participants indicate, the kinds of misunderstandings, miscommunications, and incompatible interests that jeopardized Conner Prairie’s survival can arise anywhere. Historians, depending upon academic and cultural institutions for support to pursue their mission, would do well to appreciate the difficult dynamics of financial stewardship and public trust that bedevil even the best-prepared nonprofit organizations and their well-meaning supporters. There are jobs at stake, to be sure. But more important, still, are the prospects for the survival of a place for historical learning and reflection in the daily lives of twenty-first-century Americans.

ERIC SANDWEISS AND MELISSA BINGMANN

Eric Sandweiss: Welcome, everyone. I’d like to start by asking about a slippery phrase that lies at the heart of the troubles that developed between Conner Prairie and Earlham College: “the intent of the donor.”

Clearly, the group known as Save the Prairie interpreted the motivation behind the original Lilly gift in a different way from Earlham, which actually administered the money. In the end, Indiana attorney general Steve Carter had to decide on the donor’s intent. Did he get it right? What have been your own experiences in encountering differing views over such a seemingly straightforward—but actually quite difficult—phrase?

Sally Yerkovich: As a former museum director, I easily took Conner Prairie’s side in Berkley Duck’s fascinating story. Given the luxury of reviewing all of the financial information dating back to the time of Lilly’s various gifts to Earlham/Conner Prairie, one might have come to a differ-
Eli Lilly at Conner Prairie, 1974, the year that the museum's 1836 Prairietown opened. Lilly purchased the site in 1934 and later named Earlham College as the trustee of the endowment he created to support the museum.

Courtesy, Conner Prairie Interactive History Park

ent conclusion from that negotiated by the attorney general. But, then again, one might not. The final agreement was probably the best one could wish for, given the time that had elapsed between the original gifts and the development of the dispute. As Duck repeatedly notes, no one is completely happy with a compromise. Having just completed a workshop in mediation, I was quite impressed with the attorney general's strategies.

As you note, "donor's intent" is a slippery phrase. It becomes even more slippery as time passes between the announcement of a gift and the interpretation of the donor's intent. Mr. Lilly gave generous gifts to Conner Prairie and Earlham and felt that they would be administered responsibly because he trusted Earlham's leadership at the time. But
years later, people's interpretations of those understandings changed, due in part to the changing needs of the organizations involved. One might hope that stricter financial accounting rules and more widely disseminated professional standards would encourage institutions to work closely with donors and potential donors to develop clear, straightforward agreements that are written to avoid the kinds of conflicts of interest that arose from the Conner Prairie gifts.

Russell Lewis: I think that Attorney General Carter accurately identified the intent of the donor in this case. Although Lilly had not clearly spelled out the purpose of the funds and Earlham's responsibilities as trustee, ample correspondence and oral testimony provided clear evidence of his intentions. But I am not sure, ultimately, how important this evidence was to finding a resolution between Conner Prairie and Earlham. If it had been, Carter would have been justified in following a legal remedy to seek return of the funds that Earlham used without authorization, and perhaps even in awarding damages. That Carter chose to follow the path of good public policy seems to me the critical point: rather than asking if he "got it right," it might be more useful to ask: "Did he do his duty as attorney general?" I would argue that he did—by brokering a compromise that allowed two educational institutions, both of which serve the public and are perpetuated through public support, to continue to fulfill their missions. To accomplish this, Carter ignored what had transpired financially between Conner Prairie and Earlham in the past and chose to focus on the future, putting into place a new governance structure and separate sources of income.

The divergent interpretations of Lilly's intent present a lesson in how institutional memory forms, changes, and becomes embedded as truth—even if it contradicts the facts. It seems clear that Earlham president Landrum Bolling accepted responsibility for the college to serve as trustee in the hopes of cultivating the donor further on behalf of Earlham. Given this goal, it is not hard to imagine that Earlham, over time (with the departure of Bolling and others), shifted its understanding of the terms of Lilly's gift. The desirable was recast as the actual, and became embedded as institutional memory.

I have some experience with a museum gift (in our case a large photography collection rather than a financial gift) that was given on a handshake, similarly to the way that Lilly's gifts have been characterized. There is no written documentation about the actual gift; we have a newspaper article documenting the physical transfer and board minutes
discussing the exhibitions that might be drawn from it, but nothing actually accepting the gift. It has been interesting over the years to see how an institutional policy about the collection's origin and use has formed and then been modified—but never quite written down.

I don't mean to cast aspersions on nonprofit fundraisers, but I have seen a pattern of job mobility that results in diminished institutional memory in these areas. As a result, our understanding of the requirements of a gift or the wishes of a donor can be eroded. In the case of named spaces, which donors support in perpetuity, I have been told by fundraisers that if the space is significantly altered after a five-year period, then the space is available for new support and a new name, and the name of the original donor is no longer publicly recognized.

Curt Simic: The issue is always “means to the end.” No college president has all of the money needed to be able to fund all of the good ideas coming out of the faculty, so they constantly look for any source of capital they can uncover. My experience with one university president for whom I worked paralleled the Conner Prairie/Earlham situation. This president needed $20 million for a medical school project. While we did not have it, we were happy to try to raise it, but that was not satisfactory—the president needed the money “right now.” He suggested that we give him the appreciation on otherwise restricted endowment gifts, because our only obligation was to pay 5 percent on the value of the original gift. My reply was that we had a covenant with each donor to let the appreciation follow the gift as a hedge against inflation and the future growth of the intended programs, as well. He threatened to fire me, saying, “You are more interested in the Foundation than you are the university.” My rejoinder was that the future health of the university hinged on philanthropic support, and that losing the trust of donors was a huge threat to our being worthy of support. Eventually, that president found a new job just in time, having amassed a lot of baggage as a result of his attitude that the ends justify the means.

Clearly, the budgetary needs of the college were jeopardized by its giving up the income that should have been used to support Conner Prairie. I have discussed the book with a colleague from one of the foundations involved in supporting both the college and the Conner Prairie; he felt the college did not act in good faith to the donor's intent.

Melissa Bingmann: I would like to explore Earlham's fiscal policy in regard to Conner Prairie's expansion. Earlham did grow the endow-
WHAT HAPPENED AT CONNER PRAIRIE

ment—is this any indication that the college acted in Conner Prairie’s best interest by controlling expansion? Are there points throughout the story, or examples that you know of, that suggest a tendency of museums to expand too quickly—to borrow from, or, dip into, their endowment? Did Earlham have the right to define the museum’s scope by limiting its growth?

CS: This is a real tendency for museums, as it is for other entities. In the university world, entrepreneurship is essential for faculty members hoping to build the kind of research vitae that leads to tenure. Centers are developed on the premise that they will help attract the extramural support they need to accomplish their agendas. Occasionally, they do not attract that support. I see a parallel in museums. The idea is a good one and the objective is quite laudable, but the potential for generating the support needed to build and then maintain a museum is often not forthcoming. We see this phenomenon in developing capital campaign objectives. The idea may be fine, but is there a defined prospect pool to approach? Passionate advocacy often leads to inclusion of projects—particularly in the arts—that do not have a realistic chance to attract needed support. What typically happens next is that the university is expected to provide that support at the expense of other programs. Careful study of the feasibility of any project or campaign objective is needed. Duck’s book provides little insight into the planning that went into Conner Prairie’s efforts to raise funds to support its expanded program. Of course, the matter was exacerbated by the college’s apparent “skimming” of the Lilly gifts.

MB: You have identified a key issue in the relationship between museums and universities. Several universities (including Brandeis University and Randolph College) have closed their museums or sold artwork once they realized what an expensive enterprise the museum can be. In both of the cases I just cited, the museums had a direct teaching and research function. Did you ever get the sense that Conner Prairie served the college’s mission in a similar manner? Is there any value in comparing the Conner Prairie story to that of universities that have closed their art museums or sold works of art?

SY: Before the recession sobered our ideas of what is possible, I was told by a fellow museum director that if one didn’t expand, one was not perceived to be a vital institution. One needed, he believed, to be perceived
as a big and ever-growing institution in order to matter. Without expansion, an institution could not attract strong board members, significant financial support, etc. In my own case, we were hit with a number of economic slowdowns that prevented us from developing serious plans for expansion, but I often think about this advice.

Is there a tendency for museums to feel that without expanding, they cannot continue to attract audiences? Was this thinking behind Conner Prairie's various expansion plans? Twilight at Conner Prairie did not go into those plans in detail, and didn't reveal whether feasibility studies had been conducted. A sound expansion plan begins with a study that examines not only the feasibility of raising money for expansion but also the feasibility of sustaining the expanded organization. Nonetheless, one too often hears that the expansion will require no additional staff or resources and will, in some cases, reduce operating costs—a sleight of hand that defies logic! Again, Earlham's objections to Conner Prairie's expansion plans were not completely spelled out. Were they concerned that the endowment income would not suffice to maintain the institution after expansion? Or—a slightly different question—were they concerned that Conner Prairie would need to use more than what they considered its fair share of the endowment income, once it expanded?

Regarding the college's mission and its relation to Conner Prairie, the book gave me the sense that the two institutions were always quite different and separate. Other than the college essentially playing the role of board of trustees for Conner Prairie, it seemed that there had been no attempt to integrate the museum into life of the college. This may be a misimpression—I note that Earlham has a museum studies program and therefore some of the staff of Conner Prairie most likely had a teaching role at the university—but certainly as it's presented in the book, Earlham did not seem to see Conner Prairie contributing to its mission.

MB: Even more drastically than that, Duck tells of Earlham's obvious and blatant takeover of an entire board. Aren't most nonprofit board controversies less drastic, or more subtle, in their scope? In such cases, what ethical boundaries should define the ability of one faction at an institution to shape or control its board? Do we need better ways to ensure checks and balances in nonprofit governance?

SY: Conner Prairie's takeover situation was complicated by the fact that the museum board did not have complete authority over the institution's
finances. Its responsibility was confined to the day-to-day management of the organization, and while the board could ask Earlham for support for their strategic plans, it had no direct influence on Earlham's decisions. As I understand it from Duck's description, Earlham had the authority to dismiss not only the board but also the president of the museum, which they did. This was all within Earlham's purview, as the relationship had been set up.

In my experience, most nonprofit board controversies are internal. And while the issues that divide board members may be ethical in nature, most are just disagreements—large and small. I would venture to guess, further, that most stem from a misunderstanding on the part of board members of their appropriate roles and responsibilities. Members may feel, for example, that they have the right to take a role in the day-to-day operations of a museum, in making judgments about staff work, and in decisions about hiring or firing. Or they may not wish to take responsibility for ensuring that the institution has sufficient financial support to fulfill its mission.

The ethical guidelines are clear. The codes of ethics that have been published by both the American Association of Museums and the International Council of Museums emphasize a board's responsibility to protect its museum's collections and to ensure that the museum has the physical, human, and financial resources required to do its business. A museum's board is a public trust and is responsible for the institution's service to society. The challenge comes in realizing these guidelines, ensuring that each institution's board understands the practical implications of these points. Ongoing board orientation programs, training, and evaluation help focus board members on their roles in fulfilling the institution's mission.

In fact, the Conner Prairie board was exemplary, as Duck so clearly chronicles. Board members worked tirelessly and passionately to help find a reasonable solution to the governance issues that they faced. They supported the staff and helped them weather an enormously stressful and difficult time. And—whatever disagreements they may have had with one another—they were united in their belief that Conner Prairie should continue to serve its essential public educational role.

RL: I think that Sally has it right—governance is governance, and it's about structured relationships, not who is wrong and who is right from an ethical perspective. Earlham and Conner Prairie had to go through this difficult showdown in order to restructure their relationship, which
each side had come to define in very different ways. With few exceptions, nonprofits—and museums in particular—are governed well and their structure is clear to their board members. Although most boards are charged with governance and fundraising, it is also not unusual to have separate governing and fundraising boards affiliated with a single organization. In the case of organizations that are tied to local government, a fundraising board is often necessary to supplement public funds with private support. Yet typically there are no major controversies between such boards. The recent example that resonates with the Conner Prairie/Earlham controversy is the story of Lincoln University and the Barnes Collection. The story pivots on the intent of the founder (Albert Barnes) and how individuals interpreted and acted on his legacy.

The Barnes Foundation headquarters are outside of Philadelphia in the former residence of Albert Barnes. The new museum built to house the art collection opens in May 2012 in downtown Philadelphia.
with fairly disastrous results. You can learn more about how this controversy played out in John Anderson's journalistic narrative *Art Held Hostage: The Battle over the Barnes Collection* (2003) and Mary Ann Meyers's *Art, Education, & African-American Culture: Albert Barnes and the Science of Philanthropy* (2006). I agree that most board issues are internal. I think it is significant that board business typically does not make the local news; this is largely because the board members do their jobs pretty well. As Sally states, most board issues result from misunderstandings among board members about their roles. In smaller organizations, I see increased interest in joining boards, but I also see a dramatic decline in board members' experience. So it does not surprise me that role confusion on boards continues, and may in fact be on the rise. I worry less about a coup from a dissatisfied faction of the board and the need to have some ethical firewall in place to blunt it, than I do about a conflict of interest by a single member or mismanagement of funds.

CS: The confusion and later the controversy could have been avoided through clearer understandings from the beginning. To refer back to an earlier point in our discussion, this situation points out the critical role of very specific gift agreements between the donor and the organization. While the trust that existed between Mr. Lilly and the then-president of Earlham was pivotal in bringing in the gift in the first place, people do move on—making the documents the only basis for continued harmony. In addition to those documents, it's critical that everyone have a clear understanding of the two boards' purviews. In public universities, the reach of the governing boards—in contrast with the reach of the foundation boards—is clear. The foundation does not run the university and the governing board must respect the wishes of the donors safeguarded by the foundation board. Making the gift to the college invited controversy and conflict of interest. I mentioned my experience with one university president who wanted to divert the appreciation on restricted gifts to purposes not even close to donor intent. He would have fired me for not agreeing to move the funds, had it not been for the board standing up for the donors. I applaud the Conner Prairie board both for its stance and for the perseverance it took to get a resolution—although I thought that that resolution, while face-saving for the college, was not completely satisfactory to me.

ES: When all is said and done, the pursuit of historical knowledge (like any cultural pursuit) requires not only brains and creativity but also
practical know-how and access to material resources. At Conner Prairie, two institutions that might have complemented one another in this way instead found themselves increasingly split—in their priorities, their goals, their institutional cultures. Is this friction inevitable? Have you seen good examples of cultural institutions that maintain these complementary qualities without tension or conflict? Alternatively, have you seen two institutions working effectively side-by-side—one pursuing a creative mission while the other manages and oversees its resources, without suffering the kind of irreparable rift described in Duck’s book? I ask because I'd like to think that historians (or artists, or writers, or scientists) can be good stewards of resources, and that administrators and fiscal managers can be creative people. Does your experience tell you that I’m asking for too much?

SY: Partnerships of any kind are delicate balances, even in the best of circumstances. They require flexibility and understanding, among other things. They work well as long as they are beneficial and relevant to the partner institutions. When the balance changes, the relationship can easily begin to fray. And so often, the relationship is completely dependent upon a small number of individuals in each institution who work together, understand their mutual goals, and can make accommodations when necessary.

Had it not been for the inherent conflict of interest in the relationship between Earlham and Conner Prairie, I could imagine a situation in which the two institutions could have worked together productively for an extended time. And even with the conflict, it seems that for some years the issues between the two were not insurmountable. When the leadership at Earlham changed, however, some of the institutional priorities changed as well. I believe this may have been, in part, the beginning of the rift that ultimately fractured the relationship.

I, too, would like to believe (and, mostly, do) that creative partnerships between institutions can benefit both. At the same time, I’m learning that they must be created and carried out with not only openness and sensitivity but also a commitment to enshrining the relationship in each institution’s memory so that it can continue beyond the time of the involvement of its founders or initiators.

CS: As I said earlier, clear documentation is critical for every significant gift. Indeed, even requests for annual, smaller gifts should be worded in a way that governs how the gifts may be used. Of course, the other issue
is the communication between boards. It should be regular and not come to the front only during crisis situations. It is possible to resolve disagreements if there is trust. Stephen M.R. Covey, the son of the author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, has written a book called *The Speed of Trust: The One Thing that Changes Everything* (2006), which I am now sharing with presidents, chancellors, deans, and development officers. It details specific behaviors that generate trust and eliminate unnecessary duplication and delays, leading to greater accomplishment.

SY: Curt is absolutely on target regarding the need for clear documentation for gifts, large and small. Unfortunately, some of our institutions still work with agreements made in the days when a handshake seemed sufficient. Let's hope we've moved beyond that!

RL: I am aware of a couple of examples of organizations that have overlap and intersections yet support each other's missions—although I think that the Conner Prairie/Earlham relationship was fairly unique. The examples of museum-higher education pairings that come to mind are the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, with its School of the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Art Institute of Chicago and its School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I'm sure some tension must exist in each pair, but I would not see it as the kind of conflict that Duck describes. The Getty might be an interesting organization to study in this regard since it has a museum, foundation, trust, and research and conservation institutes all under one roof. One wonders how all of these parts—which seem to be a unique constellation—fit and work together while keeping tensions and conflict to a minimum.

I don't think the kind of friction that transpired between Conner Prairie and Earlham is inevitable. Perhaps because of Lilly's wealth, it was inevitable that Earlham would count on more contributions earmarked for its purposes, which created expectations that, when left unfulfilled, morphed into a sense of entitlement and some resentment about Conner Prairie as a drain on resources that the college felt it deserved. This situation was exacerbated by faulty personal and institutional memory that allowed the two organizations' understandings of the intent of the gift, and the role of Earlham in administering it, to take such divergent paths. One aspect of the story that surprised me the most is that the two organizations did not come together under the mantle of education—the overarching missions of Earlham and Conner Prairie. Duck mentions no internship program for Earlham students
and no effort to use Conner Prairie as an educational laboratory. Perhaps Earlham considered Conner Prairie as inferior to its educational achievements and aims, regarding it as merely the play toy of a wealthy amateur. Or perhaps Duck himself (as well as his fellow trustees) could not see this as a common value, and it was not considered significant.

I think that cultural workers can be fiscally responsible and prudent managers of organizational finances; likewise, I believe people steeped in administrative experience and financial management can also be creative and excellent custodians of the nation's cultural heritage. Many twentieth-century art collectors are good examples of people who created and led large business enterprises and amassed fortunes in the process, yet also created incredible private collections that have become signature holdings of our most beloved art museums; some have been at the center of creating the museums. More recently, as some museums have sought new leadership outside of the profession and turned to a CEO model (much to the dismay of many museum workers), those new leaders have become surprisingly effective and passionate advocates of institutional missions, embracing the creativity we associate with museums and academic work. Likewise, seasoned museum professionals who have risen in the ranks can no longer avoid financial issues or the need to make the museum's fiscal health a top priority. In my experience, these people are adapting and learning in order to excel in this duty, and they are succeeding. Ultimately, I think the creative/prudent dichotomy is no longer a valid way to look at museums and no longer distinguishes them from other organizations in the private, profit-making world. Today, you have to keep your eye equally on fulfilling the mission and ensuring a financially sustaining organization, and creativity is the key to both. Managing and leading a museum requires tremendous creativity, whether it is husbanding meager resources to make payroll and trying to identify and capture another elusive revenue stream, creating a memorable brand and marketing it in an incredibly competitive economic environment, developing engaging exhibitions and programs that reflect the social value of the organization in the communities that one serves, or building a new audience that advances our mutual efforts to engage more diverse visitors.

Will we have another Conner Prairie/Earlham fiasco? I think it is possible, despite the emergence of new models for managing and leading nonprofit organizations that do not pit boards and missions against each other. Perhaps these kinds of conflicts will emerge if more museums or
educational organizations attempt to merge, and we see clashes of cultures and trouble reconciling resources (remember: Daimler and Chrysler's merger looked wonderful on paper, but the different organizational cultures proved too big an obstacle to overcome). And as long as donors remain very personal (and sometimes idiosyncratic) in how they redistribute their wealth, and nonprofit recipients struggle at times to meet the terms of their gifts, then everything that was agreed upon can still be mis- or reinterpreted, and all can go awry.

A RESPONSE BY ELLEN ROSENTHAL

Having personally experienced the contentious governance dispute between Conner Prairie and its longtime trustee, Earlham College, I’m delighted to have the opportunity to comment on the discussion of Berkley Duck’s book. I arrived at Conner Prairie as vice president of Internal Affairs and Planning in July 1999 after being recruited from the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center; served as interim director during the dispute; and began my tenure as president in December 2005, just weeks before Conner Prairie became independent. It is from my perspective as a senior staff member who attended both the Earlham and Conner Prairie board meetings and took part in the attempt at a mediated settlement that I would like to weigh in on some of the excellent questions raised by the panel.

Panelists wondered if Earlham saw Conner Prairie as connected to the college’s mission. The answer is no, Earlham did not. It saw the museum as one of three “parts” of Earlham—Earlham College, Earlham School of Religion, Conner Prairie—each with distinct missions. The business of the college dominated Earlham board meetings. As a long-time museum professional with two master’s degrees—one in management—I was frustrated at the time that discussion about Conner Prairie skirted the challenges of keeping the museum vital.

Several commentators wondered how Earlham could have used such a large portion of Lilly’s gifts on its own operations, spending only what was needed to keep Conner Prairie going. I believe the answer is that the Earlham trustees had a very narrow interest in the operations of Conner Prairie—the William Conner House and Prairietown—while facing difficult financial and operational issues at the college. Not understanding the need for investment to keep the museum dynamic, I believe Earlham saw its role at Conner Prairie as maintaining financial discipline.
Why did the dispute flare up when it did? It is no coincidence that tensions began to climb after general attendance at Conner Prairie hit an all-time low in 1995. By that time, Conner Prairie had not changed significantly in over twenty years. Conner Prairie’s kind of time travel—once a unique tourism magnet, particularly for bus tours—had by then been duplicated all over the country and seemed old-fashioned. Competition for leisure time had become vicious. Virtual time-travel experiences were available in the home, and many other fun, educationally enriching opportunities had become available in central Indiana (think the world’s biggest children’s museum). Conner Prairie became known as the fourth-grade field trip. Most Hoosiers thought that a one-time school visit sufficed for a lifetime.

Conner Prairie had no funds, either from the endowment or via fundraising, to create significant change to attract new audiences. Donors were put off because Conner Prairie was not in control of its future. All of its assets were held by Earlham, and donors could not be sure how new contributions would be used. The museum was becoming moribund and irrelevant to its community. It was trapped without the means to change with the times.

Panelists also discussed if Earlham might have been justified in opposing Conner Prairie’s expansion, as many museums have recently grown without thought to sustainability. This was not the case at Conner Prairie. In fact, Earlham did not oppose change as long as Conner Prairie could raise the needed funding. But that was clearly not possible on any meaningful scale because donors were leery of giving to Conner Prairie.

After independence, Conner Prairie began implementing a strategy that called for changing “exhibits” (for example, replacing 1886 Liberty Corner with 1863 Civil War Journey, opened in 2011) in order to increase the ways visitors could engage with history and to offer more exciting experiences. The 1859 Balloon Voyage, opened in 2009, explores the technology and science of America’s first airmail delivery, which took place in Lafayette, Indiana; it also allows visitors to travel 350 feet up in the air, recreating the original balloon journey. Civil War Journey combines technological wizardry and first-person interpretation in an authentic setting. Because of our location in fast-growing, family-oriented Hamilton County, we introduced more intergenerational hands-on activities, both indoor and out, such as Animal Encounters and Discovery Station. As we are now locally governed, fundraising has become a viable means of supporting new experiences. The result: General admission attendance has grown 122 percent since 2005, mem-
WHAT HAPPENED AT CONNER PRAIRIE

In 1836 Prairietown, a Conner Prairie facilitator entertains school children. The history park offers a variety of experiences and events for children, adults, and family groups.

Courtesy, Conner Prairie Interactive History Park

bership 72 percent, and membership attendance 278 percent. Few museums have shown such dramatic increases.

Finally, let me ponder whether relationships between museums and academic parent organizations need always be fraught with tension. My perception of the Earlham/Conner Prairie situation was that keeping Earlham College financially healthy was such a significant task for the trustees that there was never enough time for Conner Prairie's needs. And the differences in the business models of the college and the museum made Conner Prairie's difficulties in attracting audiences and donors even harder for the Earlham trustees to comprehend. Based on my experience, it is easy to understand the case of Brandeis University and the Rose Art Museum, in which the financial needs of the university made it seem logical and acceptable to liquidate museum collections. But, for some university museums, an academic parent that has greater fundraising muscle can be a safe haven. And some museums, such as the Weisman Museum of Art, University of Minnesota, can thrive as a flagship part of a school.

Conner Prairie is without a doubt better off today than it was ten years ago. It has attracted national attention for its vibrancy and impact
on the community, earning the National Medal from the Institute for Museum and Library Sciences in 2010. It was also named one of nine nationwide Magnetic Museums in 2010 and was singled out as one of the most magnetic museums in 2011, described as an organization that has developed “superior human, financial and social capital, which enables heightened impact and community building, and results in exceptional financial and operational performance over time” (http://magneticmuseums.com). Such accolades could not have been possible without our freedom to dream, to change, and to seek support.