

Individuals interested in how mid-western units reacted to the Civil War will find Stott's diary interesting. But they should avoid getting too bogged down in the narrative that accompanies, and too often, overawes the diary.

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### *Everybody's History*

#### *Indiana's Lincoln Inquiry and the Quest to Reclaim a President's Past*

By Keith A. Erikson

(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012. Pp. xiv, 251. Illustrations, notes, index. Paperbound, \$26.95.)

In this fine book, Keith Erikson addresses questions of public audiences and history making in the United States through a case study of the Southwestern Indiana Historical Society. Under the leadership of lawyer John E. Iglehart and (later) Bess Ehrmann, this society focused its activities on a self-styled "Lincoln Inquiry." Hundreds of interested historical enthusiasts banded together in the five southwestern counties of the state to study Abraham Lincoln. They quickly came to the conclusion that a collective, integrated project would give direction to what might otherwise be antiquarian fossicking.

Lincoln Inquiry members included teachers, professors, ministers, lawyers, journalists, and independently wealthy people, many descended from pioneers of the region and some 60 percent of them women. These history makers actively crossed the conventional barrier between "amateur" and "professional," a divide that Erikson shows was not yet rigid. The members aimed to set the life of Lincoln

in the perspective of his boyhood and coming of age in the southwestern counties. Stung by northern Hoosiers' negative attitudes towards the southern counties and by publications that disparaged the region, they sought to raise the status of the land of Lincoln's youth, and of Indiana more generally, in the national Lincoln saga.

Members approached the task by intensive inquiry into the frontier environment and social setting of Lincoln's boyhood. For the history enthusiasts, contemporary Hoosiers' involvement in the Ku Klux Klan added to the need to rescue the state's past from ridicule, neglect, and malevolence. This urge to document an ennobling pioneer experience before surviving memories disappeared was a theme often duplicated across the country.

The Southwestern Indiana Historical Society's members scoured local sources, gathered reminiscences, generated publicity in newspapers, published in historical society magazines, and went on to sponsor a pageant, which was later filmed and exhibited.

Members created model local history lessons for schools, mounted a photographic exhibit of pioneers, helped create a pioneer village, and lobbied against a proposed development of the Nancy Hanks Lincoln gravesite that would have emphasized the unique “motherhood” of the woman rather than the pioneering collectivity.

Erekson treats the history making of this group realistically—that is, as a participatory interaction of ordinary people, achieved through social networks. This, he argues, was not unlike history making in other professional settings, including the academy. Archival research involved human interaction and sharing of knowledge, just as oral history and pageants did. Though the society withered in the Great Depression and lost membership as its core constituency died out, the organization left many residues in the form of historical materials in the state’s repositories and in the memory of individuals.

The Southwestern group’s experience recalls an older world when history consciousness at the local level was not heavily derived from mass media. Or so it seems, though this issue is not directly confronted in this work. Erekson makes a strong case for a healthy, democratic form of local history making in the 1920s, though he does not neglect the negative side of the society’s activities, documented in petty personal rivalries within and without the organization. One wonders, too, how these lovers of the pioneers regarded Native American history, and class or racial topics. (The

membership, after all, does not appear to have represented a cross-section of society). The study does verify the well-known importance of women in the local historical societies, and the role of place in sustaining an attachment to history as an activity.

Well documented, *Everybody’s History* argues that authentic history making is best studied locally. Erekson suggests that interpretation diverges on lines of place, practice, and region—not national controversies. However, it would be just as plausible to state that there exists a reciprocal and uneven relationship between the national and the local levels in the shaping of historical consciousness.

This book nicely complements national-level studies of the relations between the American public and historians. A major revelation is the strong pattern of cooperation between Lincoln Inquiry people and academic historians. Iglehart carried on a fruitful correspondence with Frederick Jackson Turner. Indeed, Erekson extends our understanding of Turner’s influence in the public realm by revealing the willingness of the local historians in southwestern Indiana to adopt the frontier thesis as a frame of reference. One wishes for more studies like this one that might link national-level historiography with the popular construction of American history.

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