

Telling Hoosier Stories: Public History in Indiana

The Vigo County Historical Museum, Terre Haute, Indiana

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ABSTRACT: How do local museums, particularly historical museums, make curatorial decisions regarding representations of the past? What do museum curators consider when trying to represent the past of a specific community? When opportunities arise to examine historical events in a new light, what does the process look like? This essay looks at the Vigo County Historical Museum in Terre Haute, Indiana, and attempts to answer these questions, based upon an interview with executive director Susan Tingley conducted by *Indiana Magazine of History* assistant editor Admiral S. Wieland. It marks the first in a series on public history in Indiana, which examines new practices and new sources that tell Hoosier stories.

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This interview was conducted via Zoom on December 2, 2020, and recorded with Tingley's permission. All direct quotes from Tingley can be attributed to this interview and were reviewed by Tingley prior to publication. An extended interview was conducted in lieu of a site visit, due to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. As this article goes to publication, Tingley is transitioning out of her role as executive director of the Vigo County Historical Museum into retirement but will stay on in a consultant role into early 2021. Kerri Wilhelm is the museum's new executive director.

KEYWORDS: Vigo County, Indiana; Terre Haute, Indiana; Wabash Valley, Indiana; Vigo County Historical Society; Vigo County Historical Museum; Ehrmann Manufacturing Co.; Sage-Robinson-Nagel House; Coca-Cola Company; Coca-Cola glass bottle; Root Glass Company; public history; local history museums; museum curation; museum studies; COVID-19 pandemic; Greater Terre Haute NAACP; Facing Injustice Project; Community Remembrance Project; Equal Justice Initiative; George Ward; history of lynching.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Over our 116 years of publication, *Indiana Magazine of History* authors have drawn upon the rich resources of county and state libraries and archives, historical societies, and public history sites, and the expertise of librarians, archivists, county historians, and curators. With this essay we begin an occasional but ongoing series, examining new practices and new sources that tell Hoosier stories.



Local museums are curious things, no two exactly alike. This uniqueness and idiosyncrasy are assets, though for many they are cause for hesitation, with local historical museums in particular inspiring feelings of uncertainty. Many potential visitors may harbor negative expectations: of unimaginative exhibits; lack of organization and funding; and dated ways of conveying history, excluding people and events which do not serve old and uninspiring narratives. In this view, local museums can be considered relics from a bygone time that offer observers a collection of tenuously connected artifacts. For some people, as well, these institutions can be unwelcoming sites which reinforce harmful messages about political and cultural hegemony. What if, however, we were to take a moment to consider what local museums *can* be? Can local history museums display imagination, include the formerly excluded, and authentically depict stories from the whole community, rather than provide easy comfort?

Scholar Amy K. Levin suggests that “local museums allow us to work through and imagine ways to represent the divergent voices and uncertainties of our own times.” What most stands out to me is the process of *working through*. If this is true, it is not only the visitors to the museum who must go through this process, but also the directors, curators, staff, and volunteers. The process of “working through” demands accountability.

While visitors to museums must have a critical eye, they are able only to observe, analyze, and interpret what is being conveyed within the museum's walls—presences and absences alike. A museum's personnel, then, bear the responsibility of communicating messages around history and memory, and the local museum has the added weight of trying to represent and encapsulate those things for a specific place. It is these people who shoulder the messy undertaking of acknowledging when things must be changed and exerting the time, energy, and effort to realize these changes.

How are these curatorial decisions made? What do museum curators take into consideration when attempting to represent the past of a specific community? When opportunities arise to do something differently, what are the processes that occur and how might the results mirror or echo our present moment? In the pages that follow, I set my sights on the Vigo County Historical Museum in Terre Haute, Indiana, which is attempting to provide one set of answers to these questions.¹



According to Vigo County historian Mike McCormick, *Terre Haute* comes from the French term for “high land,” which described the geography along the Wabash River before white settlers platted their village in 1816; the river's name comes from the Miami for “pure” or “natural”: *Wa-ba-ck-ki* or *Wah-bah-shik-ki*. Once known as a manufacturing town, Terre Haute was rich with natural resources: beyond the river were coal, clay, sand, sandstone, shale, natural gas, iron ore, and oil. A large component of the city's manufacturing success lay in the nine major railways that could quickly and easily transport products and resources (especially coal) across state lines. The trains are still a fixture in Terre Haute life, though in a different way, routinely causing long delays for those traveling through town; the phenomenon is referred to as “being railroaded.” The city sits along what was the National Road, which linked the East to the old Northwest Territory. The road was built between 1808 and 1839, and much of the route remains intact today as U.S. Highway 40. The city is home to four institutions of higher learning: Indiana State

¹ Amy K. Levin, “Conclusion,” in Amy K. Levin, ed., *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America's Changing Communities* (Lanham, Md., 2007), 263. *Defining Memory* was particularly helpful in the conception of this article. See also Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia, Pa., 2010).



Exterior of the Sage-Robinson-Nagel House at 1411 South Sixth Street in Terre Haute, Indiana prior to the Vigo County Historical Museum's move to its new location. Pictured also is "Tootooch," the Thunderbird totem pole, commissioned by Mrs. Chapman J. Root, in the 1930s. It was donated by the Root family in 1963, and now resides inside the museum's lobby.

Courtesy, Vigo County Historical Society & Museum.

University, Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana–Terre Haute, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, and Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College. It is also where the Vigo County Historical Museum has resided for more than sixty years.²

On November 5, 2019, the Vigo County Historical Museum officially reopened its doors at its new downtown location at 929 Wabash Avenue—a move that was nearly seven years in the making. Originally built in 1895, the old Ehrmann Manufacturing Co. building is the last historic structure still standing on its city block; an official decision is currently pending regarding its addition to the National Register of Historic Places after nomination in August 2020. The building is a nineteenth-century

²Mike McCormick, *Terre Haute: Queen City of the Wabash* (Charleston, S.C., 2005), 100; Harold K. Buckner, ed., *Terre Haute and Her People of Progress* (Terre Haute, Ind., 1970), 6; Marcus Steiner, "The History of a Terre Haute Staple—Trains," *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, May 13, 2018, https://www.tribstar.com/community/the-history-of-a-terre-haute-staple-trains/article_dc686925-3589-5b8f-a6ec-318608e7a635.html. For more information about the National Road, see Karl Raitz, ed., *The National Road* (Baltimore, Md., 1996).

architectural treasure: designed by Josse A. Vrydagh in the Romanesque Revival style, it is distinguished by its brick façade with mixed limestone accents, short columns and turrets, and arched windows. The eastern external wall showcases large murals painted in black, white, green, and bright red. The mural near the rear of the building depicts a recreated vintage advertisement for Coca-Cola; the other proclaims Terre Haute “the birthplace of the Coca-Cola contour bottle.” Above these images, the words “Vigo County Historical Museum” painted in a pleasing sans-serif font beckon passersby inside.³

To say the museum’s move to the Ehrmann building has been transformative would be an understatement. Before transitioning into its new space, the museum resided within the historic Sage-Robinson-Nagel House—a 15,000 square-foot Italianate Victorian house at 1411 South Sixth Street. The Vigo County Historical Society purchased the home from the Nagel family in 1958 for the purposes of restoration, preservation, and to open a local history museum. Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, the Sage-Robinson-Nagel House is located in the Farrington Grove Historic District of Terre Haute. While the house’s floor plan boasts three floors and fifteen rooms, space and accessibility issues made it an increasingly unsatisfactory location for the museum: some visitors were unable to view the collections on the basement and second floors, and exhibits remained static and largely unchanged over years. The purchase of the Ehrmann building in December 2012 offered a number of possibilities to the historical society, including more than doubling their available space, to nearly 35,000 square feet across four levels. After an extensive renovation period, the results have fundamentally changed what the museum can do and offer the community and its patrons.⁴

³Pending Nomination Form for Ehrmann Building, written and prepared by Rose Wernicke (2020), National Register of Historic Places, <https://www.in.gov/dnr/historic/files/hp-erhmann.pdf>; John C. Poppeliers, *What Style Is It?: A Guide to American Architecture* (Washington, D.C., 1983), 62–65.

⁴Nomination Form for Sage-Robinson-Nagel House, written and prepared by Dorothy J. Clark (1973), National Register of Historic Places, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/AssetDetail/8f132de2-f3b9-4188-8234-ef0910ed5611>; Lisa Trigg, “Historical Museum moving downtown to Glidden building; Glidden moving east,” *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, December 21, 2012; Brian Boyce, “Sprawling Ehrmann Family Empire Once Operated in Glidden Building,” *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, November 13, 2011, https://www.tribstar.com/news/lifestyles/sprawling-ehrmann-family-empire-once-operated-in-glidden-building/article_b7d3e9df-f345-51ad-a683-47a0c57ddd4a.html. The Sage-Robinson-Nagel House was purchased by a Terre Haute couple in 2019. They currently have plans to repair and renovate the property to turn it into a bed-and-breakfast. Sue Loughlin, “Former Museum Will Become B&B,” *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, April 21, 2019, https://www.tribstar.com/news/local_news/former-museum-will-become-b-b/article_177e396c-f15c-5c98-aead-8b9cd1f0cec7.html.



Exterior of the museum's new location, 929 Wabash Avenue in Terre Haute, Indiana.

Built in 1895, the old Ehrmann Manufacturing Co. building features a brick façade done in the Romanesque Revival style.

Courtesy, Vigo County Historical Society & Museum.

These physical changes are perhaps nowhere more evident than on the museum's third floor. The education and research center holds the historical society's publicly accessible archives. Where the Sage-Robinson-Nagel House had room enough for a single desk and one researcher at a time, there is now space for multiple parties at once, along with a member of the museum's staff ready to assist. Down the hall, the event center provides a venue for community events—something previously unavailable, which required the historical society to rent space elsewhere. Finally, a 130-seat auditorium has been added to provide a place for guest speakers, films, plays, performances, and future programming. Arguably the most eye-catching change, however, appears on the first floor: Apgar Soda Shop,



Eastern external wall of the new Vigo County Historical Museum, featuring two murals paying homage to Terre Haute's roots as the birthplace of the Coca-Cola contour glass bottle.

Courtesy, Vigo County Historical Society & Museum.

a 1950s-style soda fountain where visitors can socialize, eat, and drink together, either after touring the museum, or as an experience all its own.⁵

When the museum moved, Tingley—then development director—and former executive director Marylee Hagan took stock of what was in their collections, and solicited input from historical society board members, local historians, and others to determine how they would create exhibits at the new location. Grouped thematically, exhibits cover a variety of general topics, which allow objects and photos to be switched out and displayed regularly. These thematic subjects include clothing and textiles, arts and entertainment, schools and sports, county history, and Vigo County as a national bellwether. Some more permanent exhibits have traveled from the old location, including *Tours of Duty*, which offers a look at Vigo

⁵Wernicke, "Ehrmann Building," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form; "History Center of Vigo County," Vigo County Historical Society & Museum, <https://www.vchsmuseum.org/>.

County's participants in the U.S. military and dedicates a timeline and individuated space to each armed conflict. "I hope we never have to add another space to that [exhibit]," Tingley said, indicating her wish that the nation would have no more military conflicts. And, of course, a Coca-Cola bottle exhibit now resides front and center on the first floor of the museum. Why the place of prominence? The Coca-Cola bottle, an iconic piece of Americana, is known the world over and possesses quite a draw: Tingley noted that people from across the globe have stopped into the museum year after year, solely interested in learning about the birthplace of the Coke bottle. Founded in 1901 as one of several glass companies in Terre Haute, Root Glass Company competed in a contest put forward by the Coca-Cola Company to award the patent for the soda's bottle design. In 1915, Root's "hobble skirt" bottle—named after the then-fashionable women's clothing item, and which also bears a striking resemblance to a coca pod—won the contest. The contour bottle remains in production today, albeit with a few tweaks to the original design.⁶

Changes to the museum have not been merely physical, but philosophical as well. Vigo County Historical Society's mission is "to collect, preserve and educate the public on the evolving history and culture of the local Wabash Valley." Tingley is interested in exhibits and programming which explore what that means in a fuller way. "In the past, I think [the museum's mission] had been looked at with a narrow focus," she said, "and what we're trying to do now is to broaden that." Partly, this involves rethinking the scope of what constitutes "local" history by investigating national and international events through a local lens. How did citizens of Vigo County respond to historical events in the wider world? What kinds of stories are yet to be told from the Wabash Valley? Tingley made it clear that broadening the mission of the museum also means bringing the county's history to a larger audience and intentionally including the voices from Vigo County that have not previously been given due or proper attention.

⁶Hagan retired from the executive director position upon the museum's grand opening at the Ehrmann building in 2019, after twenty-five years of service; she is still involved with the historical society on a volunteer basis. Sue Loughlin, "Marylee Hagan Stepping Down at Historical Society," *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, November 6, 2019, https://www.tribstar.com/news/local_news/marylee-hagan-stepping-down-at-historical-society/article_b988a808-fc73-5686-9b25-afbfeb000c7a.html. Information about Root Glass Company found in McCormick, *Terre Haute*, 100; Bill Lockhart, Beau Schriever, et al., "Root Glass Co.," Society for Historical Archaeology, <https://sha.org/bottle/pdf/files/RootGlass.pdf>; "The Root Family and Coca-Cola," Museum of Arts & Sciences, <https://www.moas.org/The-Root-Family-and-Coca-Cola-6-175.html>.



A view of the 1950s-style Apgar Soda Shop located inside the museum.

Courtesy, Vigo County Historical Society & Museum.

“When you come into our museum now, we expect you’re going to see someone that looks like you, something that relates to you,” Tingley explained. One of the places this is most evident is in the Origins exhibit, which features the cultural heritage of Vigo County’s population. The

section on immigration features Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Hungary, India, Ireland, Italy, the Philippines, Romania, Russia, Spain, Scotland, Switzerland, Syria, and Wales as countries of origin for community members and their ancestors. Several glass cases containing cultural artifacts from these places reveal stories and traditions carried to Terre Haute by immigrant families. Another section of the exhibit focuses on the stories of African American pioneers and includes the three documented free Black settlements of Vigo County. Exhibit space in the museum has also been dedicated to the forcible removal of the Miami from Indiana—the result of Tingley’s work with members of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma.⁷

This incorporation of diverse voices in exhibit curation has been intentional on the part of the museum staff and holds the potential to strengthen and deepen ties within the Vigo County community. As Ivan Karp, curator of African Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History, has observed, “When people enter museums they do not leave their cultures and identities in the coatroom. Nor do they respond passively to museum displays. They interpret museum exhibitions through their prior experiences and through the culturally learned beliefs, values, and perceptual skills that they gain through membership in multiple communities.” In a place which, at different points, had strong supporters of the Ku Klux Klan and was considered to be one of the most segregated cities in the state, and at a time when divisions among Americans are felt so deeply, a widened aperture of history, memory, and belonging is necessary.⁸

⁷ McCormick, *Terre Haute*, 6–7; Alex Modesitt, “Bringing Local History to Life,” *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, January 19, 2020, https://www.tribstar.com/news/local_news/bringing-local-history-to-life/article_402a15d1-c33f-5ed3-a3de-f4bf58770c5b.html; Linda Hardin, “Historical Treasure from Romania to Vigo County: Immigrants and their Legacy,” *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, May 23, 2020, https://www.tribstar.com/features/historical-treasure-from-romania-to-vigo-county-immigrants-and-their-legacy/article_641df598-52e4-5388-a98e-99db16dc8876.html. For more information on Terre Haute’s immigrant communities, see also “Syria on the Wabash,” *Indianapolis Star*, July 20, 1974; Robert Hunter, “‘The Blood in Them’: Founders of the Syrian Community of Terre Haute, Indiana, 1904–1940,” *Connections: The Hoosier Genealogist* 56, no. 1 (2016); Jay M. Perry, “The Irish Wars: Laborer Feuds on Indiana’s Canals and Railroads in the 1830s,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 109 (September 2013); Jack Glazier, “Transplanted from Kiev to Hoosierdom: How the Industrial Removal Office Directed Jewish Immigrants to Terre Haute,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 97 (March 2001) On free black settlements, see Dona Stokes-Lucas, “Early Black Settlements by County: Vigo County,” *Indiana Historical Society*, August 1, 2014, <https://indianahistory.org/research/research-materials/early-black-settlements/early-black-settlements-by-county/>; Anna-Lisa Cox, *The Bone and Sinew of the Land: America’s Forgotten Black Pioneers and the Struggle for Equality* (New York, 2018).

⁸ Ivan Karp, “Introduction: Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture,” in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 3. A Ku Klux Klan roll lists 8,240 members in Vigo County in 1925, near its zenith in the area. Klaverns were established in North Terre Haute and Terre Haute, and

The Origins exhibit is not the only place where staff members work to show the diversity of Vigo County's residents. Incorporation, throughout the museum, of objects and photographs from people of different cultural backgrounds has been the goal, rather than segregating their presence into predictable, tokenized exhibits. This isn't always easy, Tingley admitted, because the museum is limited by the content of their collections. Hearing this, and recognizing that this is a common problem among local museums, I asked Tingley if she felt that it was also a matter of outreach and demonstrating that she, the historical society, and the museum itself were trustworthy in receiving a person or family's objects and stories. Tingley agreed, acknowledging that the changes that have been made at the museum, while positive, are not enough; she spoke about this as an ongoing project. However, the museum has already received valuable feedback from members of the community regarding the impact of these seemingly small curatorial decisions.

Tingley shared one notable example from an exhibit featuring women's clothing from the mid-nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. The dresses themselves were displayed using mannequins, and Tingley stressed how important it was that those mannequins did not have heads or faces because, "We didn't want to give them an identity." Or, perhaps more precisely, she and the staff did not want to *assign* an identity to the mannequins wearing those dresses. Part of the exhibit's preparation included enlarging images from the society's photography archive of women from Vigo County wearing similar clothing from this period. The exhibit included a full-length image of an unnamed Black woman wearing a mid-nineteenth-century dress. The effect, Tingley described, was powerful: "There were children, young people, older people—African Americans—and they'd go into the exhibit and tell me later, 'I was so drawn to that photo. I've never seen a Black woman in a dress like that.'"⁹

This example indicates how purposeful, integrative inclusion can have an impact, not only for members of communities receiving representation, but by those observing that representation. Edmund Barry Gaither, director and curator of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American

a club for Klan members was located for several years along the railroad tracks on North 13th Street, near what is now Spencer F. Ball Park. McCormick, *Terre Haute*, 122–23. Terre Haute was considered one of the most segregated cities in the state during the postwar years; Emma Lou Thornbrough and Lana Ruegamer, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington, Ind., 2000), 126.

⁹ Charity R. Bartley Howard, "Historical Treasure: 1903 Edwardian Era Dress," *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, October 3, 2020, https://www.tribstar.com/features/valley_life/historical-treasure-1903-edwardian-era-dress/article_6dc203ce-1190-5bfe-98ad-98761187f1ab.html.



A glimpse of the Victorian Women's Fashion exhibit in 2020. On the wall beside the cases, photographs from the historical society's collections were enlarged to illustrate women of the era wearing similar fashions.

Courtesy, Vigo County Historical Society & Museum.



Postcard photograph of an unnamed African American woman, included in the Victorian Women's Fashion exhibit.

Photographer and date unknown.

Courtesy, Vigo County Historical Society & Museum.

Artists and special consultant at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, has argued that in a pluralistic American society museums need to engage their increasingly diverse communities in creative ways that will “delight and educate,” without paternalism or condescension. “We must embrace a fresh understanding of the American experience. We must reject models of American experience that express—directly or indirectly—a concept of *either/or*. We must not tolerate thinking in which folk are *either* African American *or* American. Lurking behind such concepts are constructs such as *separatist/integrationist*, *we/they*, and *ours/theirs*. Instead, we must honor the comprehensive character of American experience.”¹⁰

The museum is also working to confront an ugly chapter of local history, in collaboration with the Greater Terre Haute Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The Terre Haute NAACP’s Facing Injustice Project, of which Tingley is one of seven coordinators, is part of the nationwide Community Remembrance Project run by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI). A national non-profit organization fighting for racial and economic justice, the EJI established the Legacy Museum and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. The EJI’s Community Remembrance Project “collaborates with communities to memorialize documented victims of racial violence and foster meaningful dialogue about race and justice.” The Terre Haute NAACP’s Facing Injustice Project is working to memorialize the well-documented lynching of George Ward on February 26, 1901, in Terre Haute.¹¹

“That’s a difficult story to tell,” Tingley said. “There’s been some push-back—people don’t want to hear the bad stories. But there is a healing that happens in a community when you bring these stories to life—stories that have been in the background of a community. You bring them out, you have the discussions, you open up the dialogue, and there’s healing that

¹⁰ Edmund Barry Gaither, “‘Hey! That’s Mine’: Thoughts on Pluralism and American Museums,” in Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities*, 56–59.

¹¹ The National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, honors the Black victims of enslavement, racial terror, lynching, Jim Crow segregation, and police violence in America. “Facing Injustice,” NAACP Terre Haute, <https://naacpterrehaute.org/facinginjustice/>; “Community Remembrance Project,” Equal Justice Initiative, <https://eji.org/projects/community-remembrance-project/>; Ray Thurman, “The Lynching of George Ward,” February 26, 1901, Wabash Valley Visions & Voices Digital Memory Project, Indiana Writers Program Collection, Special Collections Department, Indiana State University Library, <http://visions.indstate.edu:8888/cdm/ref/collection/isulib/id/4737>; Sue Loughlin, “Terre Haute Remembers Injustice of the Past,” *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, March 2, 2020, https://www.tribstar.com/news/local_news/equal-justice/article_0a47977f-5cfe-5f1a-844c-07f4f0284d9f.html.

happens.” A historical marker will be placed at the site of the lynching near Fairbanks Park in Terre Haute. On March 1, 2020, just weeks before Indiana governor Eric Holcomb issued an executive stay-at-home order in response to the rapid spread of COVID-19 in the state, a soil collection ceremony was performed at the site of Ward’s lynching. Three jars of soil were filled, each of them labeled with Ward’s name and the date he was murdered. One jar was sent down to Montgomery, to join a collection of other jars filled with soil from the sites of lynchings across America, each inscribed with the victim’s name; one jar went to the family of George Ward; and one jar sits inside the Vigo County Historical Museum. It is currently accompanied by text which speaks to the significance of the soil collection ceremony, but soon it will be added to a forthcoming exhibit about the lynching.¹²

“You come to a museum with certain intentions and expectations, and this would just be another step in that. It really just goes back to being inclusive—telling *all* of our stories, not just the stories that are easy to tell,” Tingley said. “I mean, it’s wonderful to take an 1880s gown and put it on a mannequin and fluff it up: it’s a great image. But that’s not all there is to our history, and if we’re going to actually learn from our history, then you’re also going to have to learn the difficult parts of our history.” The exhibit has the potential to educate and reach people who either have not yet been exposed to or have been resistant in coming to terms with Indiana’s history of racist violence—a subject that might not be discussed within family and friend networks or taught in school, a subject that’s rarely spoken about at all and many want kept hidden out of sight and forgotten. Museums are uniquely positioned as places that can foster insight. Australian social worker Sherene Suchy describes the process in this way: “Insight happens when we *see* something that arouses an emotional response *and* we are allowed time and space to reflect and meditate on why this makes a difference to us.” Exhibits, then, have the potential to offer powerful experiences to those willing to be open to them, particularly when connecting to the history of where we call home, and the memories held in the land under our feet.¹³

¹²Sue Loughlin, “Terre Haute Remembers Injustice of the Past,” *Terre Haute Tribune-Star*, March 2, 2020, https://www.tribstar.com/news/local_news/terre-haute-remembers-injustice-of-the-past/article_0a47977f-5cfe-5f1a-844c-07f4f0284d9f.html; Eric J. Holcomb, “Executive Order 20–08, For Directive For Hoosiers to Stay at Home,” State of Indiana, March 23, 2020, https://www.in.gov/gov/files/Executive_Order_20-08_Stay_at_Home.pdf.

¹³As of the writing of this article, there is still no federal anti-lynching law on record; it was first introduced in 1918 and was voted on again in the United States House of Representatives in

When asked about whether she has a dream exhibit, Tingley replied, “I dream of programming.” She spoke of the hopes she has for future collaborations, both with members of the community as well as with people and organizations outside of Vigo County, for a speaker’s series and to bring traveling exhibits to the museum. Many of these plans, however, have had to be shelved to work around the difficult realities presented by the COVID-19 virus. “We were only open four months before the pandemic closed us,” Tingley said. The museum has since reopened, with mask requirements and social distancing protocols, with content being uploaded to the museum’s Facebook and YouTube accounts, including photos, videos, blurbs, and recorded live-streamed events. However, regular community events such as the Time Travelers Club, which includes tours of historic buildings and talks about the people and places around Terre Haute, as well as the “Lunch and Punch” program, a monthly brownbag lunch talk open to the public, have either been amended to include outdoor activities only or have been suspended for the time being.

The day Tingley and I spoke, the number of cumulative positive coronavirus cases in Indiana surpassed 350,000. She knows that this is a historic time, and the museum offers a place on its website where citizens of Vigo County can send in photos, videos, and stories about how COVID-19 has impacted their lives. So far, there have not been as many submissions as one might expect, but Tingley is hopeful that may change when the pandemic is over. “A lot of times, when you’re in the depths of it, it’s hard to see that it’s history.”¹⁴



Coming away from my conversation with Tingley, I was struck by how the move from the Sage-Robinson-Nagel House to the Ehrmann Manufacturing

2020. “Anti-Lynching Legislation renewed,” United States House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Temporary-Farewell/Anti-Lynching-Legislation/>; Sherene Suchy, “Connection, Recollection, and Museum Missions,” in Hugh H. Genoways, ed., *Museum Philosophy of the 21st Century* (Lanham, Md., 2006), 48.

¹⁴ “Coronavirus in Indiana: The Latest—Wednesday, Dec. 2,” Indiana Public Media, Updated December 2, 2020, 12:00 PM, <https://indianapublicmedia.org/news/topics/coronavirus-in-indiana.php>; “Wednesday’s Indiana Coronavirus Updates—Dec. 2, 2020,” WTHR Indianapolis, updated December 3, 2020, <https://www.wthr.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/indiana-coronavirus-updates-for-wednesday-dec-2-2020/531-430f6c84-0d5b-4b14-8f47-4e424fcee3f>; “Programs,” Vigo County Historical Society & Museum, <https://www.vchsmuseum.org/programs>.

Co. building seemed to be a catalyst for the museum in many ways. More space demanded a reevaluation of the materials held in the historical society's collections and a reimagining of the exhibits and programming the museum could offer. This necessitated finding new approaches to presenting the history of Vigo County to appeal to broader audiences both inside the community and out. Tingley and the volunteer staff of the Vigo County Historical Museum have taken it upon themselves to discover what it *can* be and are doing necessary work to make their local history more accessible, inclusive, and resonant for visitors. While that work is not done, their community-focused approaches demonstrate one path local historical museums can take to reconsider how they represent the complex histories of their own locality and people—an always important, worthy, and crucial project, but one that is essential at this time.