Creating Old World Wisconsin: The Struggle to Build an Outdoor History Museum of Ethnic Architecture.* John D. Krugler. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013. 270 pp.

Reviewed by Ellen Rosenthal

In 2014, *Old World Wisconsin*, a website of the Wisconsin Historical Society (the Society), reveals a magical quilt of family experiences. Visitors are invited to “journey back to the past,” at “a vivid re-creation of the working farmsteads and settlements established by European immigrants in America’s heartland.” The world’s largest museum dedicated to the history of rural life offers a vast menu of activities including authentic chores, crafts and outdoor games. In the “Catch Wheel Fever Experience,” visitors can even ride replicated bicycles and tricycles and sing 19th-century bicycling songs. How and why did such a delightful place come to be? John Krugler, professor of early American history and public history, Marquette University, explains in *Creating Old World Wisconsin: The Struggle to Build an Outdoor History Museum of Ethnic Architecture*.

By mid-20th century, the farmsteads of Wisconsin’s early settlers were decaying and being torn down. Staff members at the Society and others were alarmed by this trend. They realized that these structures revealed much about otherwise undocumented lives, particularly ethnic traditions from the Old World. This was the spark that led to the creation of Old World Wisconsin.

The desire to preserve the buildings of our past started on the East Coast in the late 19th century with sites such as Mount Vernon, and gained momentum in the early 20th century, as Colonial Williamsburg, funded by the Rockefellers, became a national icon. Saving buildings and creating historic villages became a hobby for some wealthy Americans. The trend had spread to the Midwest by the 1920s and 1930s. Henry Ford assembled buildings and opened Greenfield Village, in Dearborn, Michigan, (now called The Henry Ford) in 1933, explaining, “I’m going to start up a museum and give people a true picture of the development of the country.” In 1934, Eli Lilly, purchased the decaying 1823 home of Indiana pioneer William Conner, and surrounded it with early historic structures from around Indiana, and opened it to the public. Eventually his site became Conner Prairie, an outdoor history museum. The originators of the idea for a Wisconsin outdoor museum caught the bug, but had no funders. That is what makes the story fascinating.

Krugler starts with the Wisconsin Historical Society’s earliest thoughts about an outdoor museum in the 1940s and 1950s and then lays out a detailed case study of Old World Wisconsin’s development from first ideas to the disastrous opening day in 1976. He explores wrong turns, misfortunes, calamities and accidental good fortune openly. In doing so, he makes an important contribution to the literature about museums.

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The book is arranged topically with chapters on visionaries, managers, master planners, conflict management, fund-raisers and builders, albeit individual chapters that intertwine threads of other topics. I picked up the book expecting a dry retelling of great visions and triumphs, and instead found a compelling narrative of unbelievable blunders, accidental good fortune and dogged perseverance.

Krugler begins with the “Visionaries,” because, of course, it takes one or several people to recognize a need and champion a cause. The idea for Old World Wisconsin popped up in the 1940s and 1950s after early directors of the Society visited the Farmers’ Museum, part of The New York Historical Association. The project gained momentum when two Wisconsin preservationists, Hans Kuether and Richard Perrin, drew the Society’s attention to the rapid deterioration of immigrant farms.

In the 1960s, the Society moved beyond talking and began to take a hard look at the complexities and costs inherent in creating an outdoor museum. Krugler considers this dawning awareness of the enormous challenge the Society faced in chapter two, “Managers.” After the Society’s curators, or trustees, endorsed the concept of creating an outdoor site that would preserve the state’s ethnic buildings in 1964, it became the task of the Society’s director, Leslie H. Fishel, Jr., to figure out how to make it happen. It was an enormous undertaking.

Fishel faced 360-degree challenges. Although the curators as a group had approved moving forward, individual curators doubted the wisdom of taking it on. Some even questioned Fishel’s competence. Fishel’s task was further complicated by lack of financial resources. The curators understood the need for funding, but were not inclined to dip into their own pockets. Fishel lacked enough staff to manage planning and development. The Historical Society’s statewide sites program was growing and the few sites’ staff members were already taxed with current responsibilities.

Fishel, nevertheless, persevered. Perrin had visited Old Sturbridge Village, an outdoor history museum in Massachusetts and Fishel relied heavily on him for advice. Fishel broke project development into stages, choosing to begin with acquisition of a site. Without funds to purchase land, the Society began negotiations with Wisconsin Conservation, which oversees the Department of Natural Resources. The two state agencies struggled to come to agreement. The Governor became a cheerleader for history and the importance of preservation. History, he asserted, “makes for better citizens and better people” (44). But he offered little by way of real help and financial support.

What amazed me was the Society’s assumption that the outdoor history museum would eventually pay for itself and could even make money if government funds covered administrative costs. Planners were convinced that Old World Wisconsin and the Society’s other historic sites would become major tourist draws. They saw places like Sturbridge Village and Williamsburg benefiting from rising popular interest in America’s history in the 1960s. With hindsight, we know that interest peaked at the Bicentennial in 1976 and has been declining ever since.

Once the site selection ball had started to slowly roll (and gotten stuck several times in the mud), Fishel began to drive design development. As any resourceful museum professional knows,

when you have no money, you turn to your closest university. That is exactly what Director Fishel did. He engaged an expert in vernacular architecture, William Tishler, professor, Landscape Architecture, University of Wisconsin, and his 19 students to craft a master plan for what the class called “Heritage Village.” By the time the class submitted the finished master plan in 1968 the site was called “Old World Wisconsin.” The curators endorsed the plan and urged the staff to move it forward.

Planners attempted to estimate the capital costs of creating the site. Also, they presented projections of operating costs and revenue based on how many people would buy tickets and spend money at the shop. They speculated between 235,900 and 288,390 visitors per year—numbers unrealistically high for a seasonal museum in a rural area. With these outsized expectations, it was easy to convince supporters that the museum would actually make money. To be fair, many other museum dreamers have made the same mistake when, in truth, all historic museums and sites require additional outside support to operate.

The creation and endorsement of a master plan was followed by continuing struggles for the project. Fishel retired as the Society’s director, replaced by Dick Erney, who had always been tepid about the project. With state money tightening, Erney wondered aloud in a memo whether the Society would be better off dropping the project. The project somehow continued to move forward.

The relief that planners felt after the Society and the Department of Conservation finally agreed on a site was short-lived. Residents of Eagle, the nearest town, did not want a big tourist attraction bringing in traffic and unsavory elements. Angry protests erupted.

Finally, lack of funds was a persistent, crippling problem. The Society did not have the professional expertise to manage a capital campaign, nor did it have the volunteer leadership required. As a result, it could not hire experienced builders, architectural restorers or landscapers. And, even then, often could not pay the inexperienced laborers, delaying construction repeatedly. Despite these continuing struggles, Old World Wisconsin opened on schedule in 1976. Krugler’s tale ends on opening day when a massive unexpected rush of visitors got stuck in a huge traffic jam only to be disappointed when they arrived. Few historic structures were in place. Toilets and other visitor amenities were an afterthought and inadequate. A tsunami of negativity swelled from visitors and locals.

Readers already know that Old World Wisconsin managed to survive. It has changed dramatically, no longer a site whose mission is simply preserving buildings. Why? Times have changed since the 1960s and 1970s when the impetus for Old World Wisconsin gained momentum. After decades of attendance declines from 1976 to 2000, the staff of some outdoor history museums realized that the model was not working. Attendance was falling; earned income was falling. It was becoming harder to justify the high operating expenses that resulted from trying to care for vast sites with many old buildings.

For sites focused on ethnic history, the advent of the Internet had made exploring ethnic background and genealogical interests available all the time. Visitors were no longer content to look and listen; they expected to participate. At the same time increasing pressures in everyday

life and full schedules had made “experiences,” particularly shared family experiences, a highly valued currency. And, what is new is now prized; indeed it drives attendance at museums. By the 1990s, outdoor history museums that did not change from year to year came to be seen as a one time in a lifetime visit, “been there, done that.”

That is why the Old World Wisconsin of today is a museum of the visitors’ experience of the past. It bears the stamp of Dan Freas, executive director, formerly the vice president, guest experience at Conner Prairie Interactive History Park, in Fishers, Indiana. Freas has transformed Old World Wisconsin so that it can thrive and serve a modern world. In the words attributed to the famous writer Maya Angelou, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel. Visitors today remember what they have tried out, felt, smelled and touched and how they felt connecting with the past.

Krugler’s original thought was to document the origin stories of the country’s largest outdoor history museums. I can understand why he gave up on that project after investigating Old World Wisconsin.

You could plan an entire museum studies seminar around this book, each week analyzing different topics such as governance, fundraising, staff capacity, leadership, policies and the importance of market research. The final session would be a look at today’s vibrant museum and a discussion of the question, “did the end justify the means?”

The book had added significance for me, because my professional development, beginning in the 1970s, was shaped by the trends Krugler describes. He captures the burgeoning enthusiasm for American history and artifacts before the Bicentennial that led many of us into careers in the history museum field. We had just discovered that we could “read” historic American artifacts in much the same way that archaeologists read the shards and metalwork they unearth. We believed that the general public would share our passion—and some of them did. In the 1960s and 1970s, real or reproduction American antiques were perfect for decorating “Colonial” style suburban homes.

Krugler set out to explore the complex history of Old World Wisconsin, but the resulting book has great value as a unvarnished case study of an important museum project and as documentation of the trends that shaped the history museum field in the 20th century. It should have a place in every museum studies library.

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