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# People, Places, Perspectives

## *Another Look at the Founding Fathers*



SHSI (IOWA CITY) MATHER COLLECTION

by Spencer R. Crew

**T**HE WORLD of museums, historical societies, historic homes, and other institutions devoted to public history has changed dramatically. In the last two decades, creating historical presentations has become a much more challenging and demanding endeavor. Standard interpreta-

tions of American history that primarily highlight the contributions of the rich and famous are no longer enough. Questions are now being raised over what issues to highlight, what events to focus upon, and whose history to accentuate. These queries are forcing a re-examination of the types of presentations

offered by historical institutions, and of the public's role as contributor and visitor.

Much of the push to include new ideas, perspectives, and groups, in fact, has come from cultural and community groups too long overlooked by historians, such as African-Americans, women, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, the disabled, and Native Americans. These groups felt left out of American history. In museums and historic sites, they did not find material that spoke to their experiences or perspectives. Their history was largely ignored by institutions, and by scholars whose research often guided the work presented there. But these overlooked groups are now insisting upon acknowledgement of their own significant contributions to the building of the nation. They are pushing to restructure the histories presented in museums and historic sites to include their stories as well.

As pressure from these cultural communities becomes more assertive, however, countervailing pressures are revealed. Resistance comes from individuals who are more comfortable with traditional methods of presenting history that emphasize military and political events. (These individuals can be formidable roadblocks to change, particularly if they are members of boards of trustees, foundations, or governmental funding committees.) They are not sure there is truly a need or substantial demand to warrant heading in new directions. They correctly point out that these new commitments will cost money, demand more staff or staff energies, and change established ways of doing things.

However, if organizations are committed to presenting historically accurate material that reflects current scholarship, they must break away from the old patterns. Most of the new

work done by historians demands that we revise previous visions of American history and culture. It is not enough to focus primarily on the upper strata of society, the Thomas Jeffersons and the Sam Houstons. They are not the only crucial individuals in the history of this country. To focus on them leaves out people like "Aunt" Clara Brown of Denver or Pio Pico of Los Angeles.

Thirty years ago we did not know very much about people such as Brown, an early Denver settler who worked as a laundress and loaned money to community members, or Pico, the last Mexican governor of California. Since then, the movement to social history has revealed these overlooked individuals and groups in greater number and detail. Historians' innovative research techniques are also telling us a great deal about how different communities functioned, how their self-help networks operated, and what roles their residents played in the settlement, development, and success of our modern world. These revelations suggest we need to reassess how we present the past and who and what we define as historically significant.

**N**EW PERSPECTIVES are needed particularly for collections development — the process of locating, acquiring, documenting, and preserving artifacts and archival documents. Present historical collections tend to reflect old biases. Many collections have come into existence through fortuitous circumstances. They may be the result of a benefactor's massive donation, or a major expedition, or the accumulation of individual objects brought in

#### *About this article and the images*

The photographs in this article portray some of the "unsung heroes of America," as described here by Smithsonian curator Spencer Crew. As guest speaker, Crew presented these remarks at the June 1991 Congress of Historical Organizations (COHO) in Des Moines.

The images represent some of the events, individuals, and groups too long overlooked by historical

organizations and which are now appreciated as rich documentation of everyday life and recent American history. The photographs are from the archives of the State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City and Des Moines).

Photo on preceding page: woman and child on porch steps, circa 1881-1910. On opposite page: coal miner.



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by museum staff members. Dealers, relatives of notable individuals, or private individuals themselves have traditionally offered institutions such material through donation or purchase.

This form of collections development is largely passive in nature. Material is brought to the institution more often than it is actively sought out by curators and archivists, who are frequently limited by funding and staffing. Collection acquisition is relatively easy this way because the staff has simple choices — to accept, reject, or select from the items offered. The shortcoming is that heavy reliance upon this approach can impact the character of the collections. The collections easily can become a holding of material tightly bound to the lives of the movers and shakers in society, because prominent people are most likely to have a sense of the importance of their own history, the wherewithal to preserve it over the years, and the confidence to offer it to a historical institution.

Long-established collections also tend to focus on illustrating the “best” in society, such as fine furnishings, exquisite clothing, and pathbreaking technological innovations. They are, undoubtedly, an important part of the material culture history of the United States, but they do not tell the complete story by any means. Our population comprises groups of differing ethnic and racial origins, cultural foci, economic levels, age, disability challenges, gender issues, and geographic orientations. Historical collections and exhibitions should reflect these diverse characteristics as well as the more traditional representations of the American experience.

To accomplish this breadth in historical collections, more attention must be paid to common, everyday materials. We must collect, preserve, research, and exhibit that which belongs to the unsung heroes of America, the construction workers, sailors, servants, miners, and farmworkers who toil each day, raise families, influence trends, and decide in the voting booth who will hold public office. This material culture may lack monetary value, but it is historically rich because it provides insights into the lives of people previously undocumented.

**F**OR MANY INSTITUTIONS, diversifying collections will call for new mission statements and collection policies that broaden staff responsibilities to locate a wider range of objects. Diversification also will mean building bridges into previously neglected communities and seeking artifacts representative of the residents' lives. Creating these connections will not always be an easy task. Diverse groups must be identified, and new relationships developed. Anger and mistrust among these groups due to past neglect must be addressed. Even if the oversight was unintentional, it still may have bred resentments that must be overcome.

Successfully bridging this gap requires institutions to actively demonstrate their commitment to the history of different cultural groups. Staff members need to learn about the group on site, by meeting the people and attending neighborhood functions. Back in their museums and historic sites, they should sponsor activities, programs, and receptions that specifically attract these new audiences and explain the organization's goals. Staff should invite community members to participate in exhibition research, collections development planning, public programming, and educational activities. As partners in these activities, the representatives of diverse groups must know that their ideas and suggestions will be taken seriously, and that they are an important and honored part of these institutions.

This is often a difficult step for institutions that treasure independence and have labored to be objective. Relinquishing some of this control, however, can result in creative and fruitful liaisons. Historical organizations will surely gain insight about the internal history and priorities of diverse cultural groups as they begin to see the past through the eyes of those groups, rather than through traditional historical accounts accepted for decades. Significant events and leaders may be defined differently, because of different cultural values or experiences.

In articulating a particular view of the past, a

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Right: Young couples, unidentified, pre-1920.



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once-overlooked group may suggest sensitive but important issues for a historical institution to grapple with in exhibitions or programming. Further, the group can voice its perception of the institution and suggest ways to develop a more positive public image.

Confronting this issue, W. Richard West, Jr., the new director of the American Indian Museum at the Smithsonian Institution argues that traditional museums do not serve the interests or the needs of Native Americans. West feels that the museum's exhibitions and programming are counter to the way Native Americans use their objects and live their culture. He is now actively discussing with constituents across the country alternative ways of operating what we call museums. He is convinced that other approaches to presenting historical and cultural information are more appropriate for Native Americans, and perhaps for all museum visitors.

His point is well taken. Historical institutions need to explore methods of effectively presenting the perspectives of the community or cultural group they are highlighting. This can challenge and sometimes disrupt traditional methods of formulating ideas and activities. On the other hand, this process can be quite freeing and uplifting. Fresh ideas may surface and inspire innovative exhibitions and programs. Remaining open to change can allow breakthroughs in how institutions communicate with and attract diverse audiences.

**I**NSTITUTIONS ARE NOT ALONE in their need to be open to change. Their success depends upon the materials available to them, and therefore upon the donors of artifacts and archival materials. Far too many people tend to regard history as events that occurred many, many years ago and that involved only prominent individuals. We all need to think more broadly about how we

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Right: Picnic at Sunset Park, Storm Lake, after the oats harvest, 1945.









Sheep shearer, Iowa Falls, circa 1892-1910.

define history, and therefore what objects and documents are historically significant.

A useful example is the northward migration of African-Americans during and after World War I. This movement had tremendous impact upon the economic, social, and political development of the United States. It affected the growth patterns of northern cities and twentieth-century attitudes on race. Yet participants in this exodus did not think about its ramifications. They focused on individual motivations and concerns — how to escape the suppression they faced in the South, and where to find better opportunities for themselves and their families. They certainly were aware that others like themselves were moving northward, but they did not think extensively about the enormity of the movement. They did not consider that the relocation of hundreds of thousands of African-Americans into northern cities would alter the course of American history.

This failure to see how we fit into the larger picture is a normal perspective, and many of us follow it when looking at our own lives. Yet this viewpoint illustrates the challenges of collecting material culture from Americans previously ignored or misrepresented by historical institutions. These historical “actors” do not place enough value on themselves or on the material records of their lives. Items such as report cards, old photographs, certificates, clothing, and work implements, for example, frequently are discarded. Only rarely is there a conscious effort to preserve them. Instead, in the course of moving, cleaning house, or at the death of a relative, many of these icons of individual lives disappear in the trash pile or in the back of an antique dealer’s vehicle. They are abandoned because they pose a space problem, because they are associated with an unpleasant event or period of time, because they are out of style, or for a myriad of other reasons.

My own experiences with a couple who migrated to Washington, D.C., are illustrative. The couple came separately to the city early in the African-American migration to the North and married not long after arriving in the district. Following several moves they settled in a house in the northwest section of the city, in which they remained for more than fifty

years. I was very excited to learn about them because their experiences as migrants and longtime Washington residents made them excellent candidates for an oral interview and potential sources of objects for the exhibition I was developing on migration. While the interview went quite well, I was extremely disappointed in my search to identify artifacts. Neither of them had saved very much from their earlier years in the house because the couple had been more interested in throwing the “old-fashioned” things away as rapidly as they could replace them with modern conveniences.

This story is not unique. Many people do not consider their lives historically significant, or see themselves in the same category as the “founding fathers.” They believe that objects need to be seventy-five years old or older — antiques — to have any possible monetary or historical value. Yet when museum staff and researchers focus on the social history of the twentieth century for exhibitions and publications interpreting the lives of everyday people, common artifacts from this century are vitally needed.

**T**O ENCOURAGE cultural groups and individuals to see their own special story within the larger one, and thereby value their role in history, historical institutions should serve as catalysts. Some of the historical organizations I have worked with have found workshops, public forums, or exhibitions to be effective vehicles for launching this dialogue. The workshops, for example, often take the form of “save your artifact” days. Local residents are encouraged to bring in photographs, clothing, paper objects, and other items they wish to preserve. The host institution then provides simple tips for housing and conserving these objects, such as removing corrosive metal paperclips from documents, or storing photographs in non-acidic, archival-quality materials, or prevent-

ing harsh light from falling on quilts and other fabric items.

The workshops can heighten awareness about the importance of preserving and conserving everyday items, not only as family keepsakes but as artifacts and documents that will convey American history to future generations of the public. Without material culture from a variety of groups, museums are hamstrung. They depend upon individuals to donate artifacts and documents that convey the diversity of the American experience.

It can be a challenge for private individuals to believe that the things they use or wear or create have any real historical value. One way an individual can overcome this is to try to list the artifacts needed to tell one's personal story in an exhibit. For example, what objects or images or written accounts would tell your history? Ponder the events that shaped your life, and try to name the objects that reflect your daily actions. What would accurately convey that story to your descendants? Listing significant personal items illustrates the importance of preserving common, everyday things like toys, tools, or pots and pans. These materials also provide tangible links to past generations, giving us a sense of the kinds of lives individuals have lived. For example, what objects representative of the lives of your parents or grandparents do you wish you possessed?

Considering these questions puts the process used by curators on a very personal and tangible level. As the answers begin to form, the needs of historical organizations to build broadly representative collections become clearer.

The exercise also allows individuals to define more clearly the important historical currents in their lives and communities, and places them squarely in the middle of historical events. With new perspectives come new definitions of the "founding fathers" — that is, who were the most influential men and women in a personal or community history.

In turn, museum exhibits and programs reflecting alternative perspectives will tend to push all visitors to re-evaluate old views of our



Jessup Lasley (or La be ge de wa, "Gray Eagle") and daughters, at the Mesquakie Settlement, 1948.



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past. (This goal should be a significant part of the mission of historical organizations.) Historical interpretation is just that, interpretation — not the presentation of unchallengeable facts. Visitors need to understand that exhibits and other interpretations evolve through choices of available information and perspective.

As we begin to value the objects and documentation of our everyday lives, crucial questions emerge about what should be collected from the present for the future. What pictures of today's American communities will need to be created for audiences of the next century? Who are the people who constitute those communities? What are the objects that will help tell their stories properly? And how does one present a balanced image of the complexity of today's communities?

**T**HOSE WHO INTERPRET history for the public can no longer just reinforce traditional historical canon and expect to remain in the forefront of their field. Too much new material by our colleagues in the academy is revealing important, new visions of American history. Looking around the world in which we live reminds us that it, too, is changing rapidly, as is our role within it. Our destiny is tightly intertwined with people of many different cultures and world views. As educators, historical organizations should remind visitors of the interdepen-

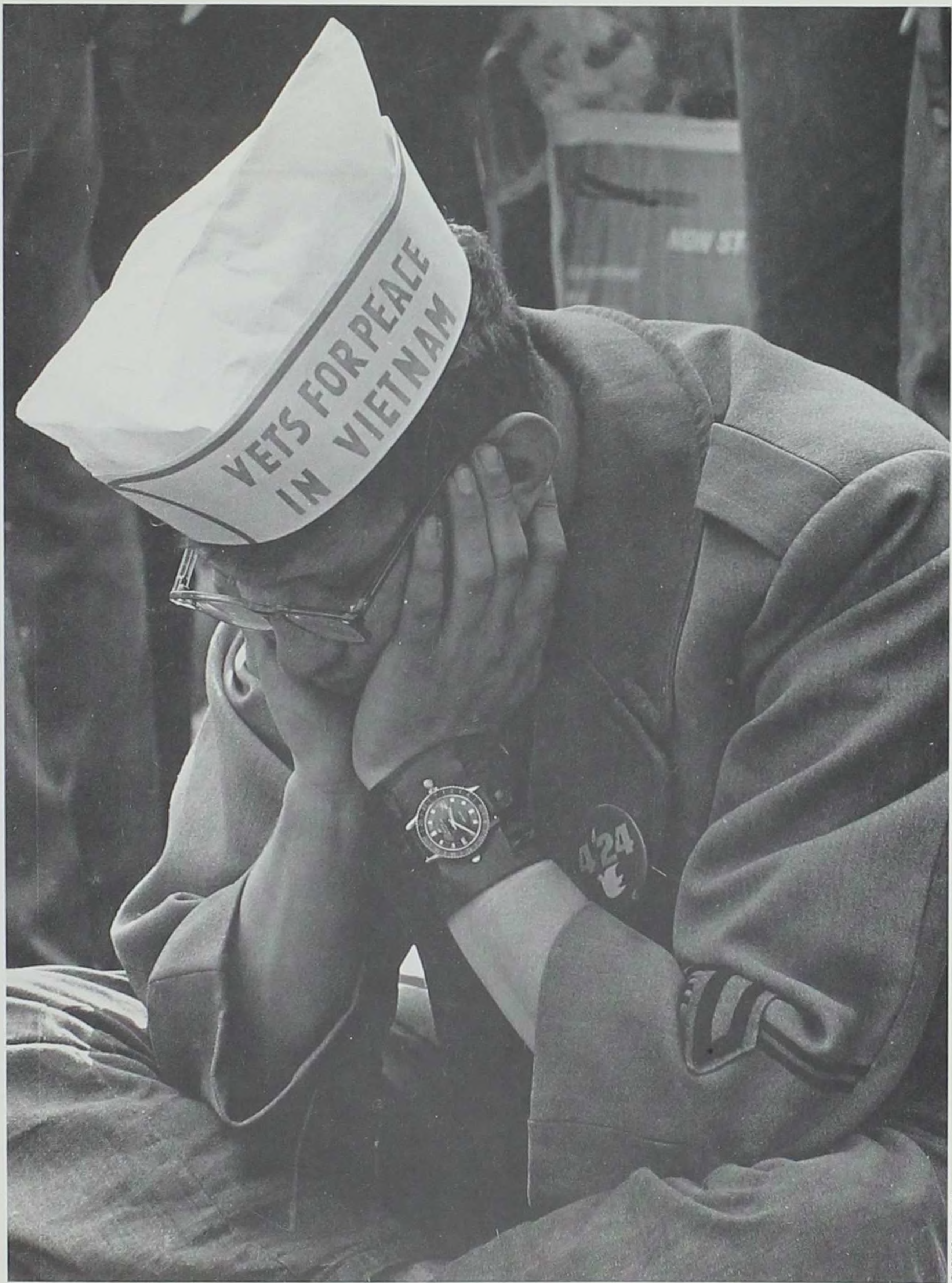
Right: Student Walt French at a 1971 protest demonstration in Washington, D.C.

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dent nature of people's lives — a century ago and today. Exhibits should introduce their audiences to the struggles and the triumphs of other groups with whom they live. Visitors should be offered alternative ways of looking at historical events or cultural experiences.

The American story is not one of just glory and success. It also includes violence, deceit, and tragedy. Presenting the full spectrum of that experience is not unpatriotic. It can be humbling, but that is not bad either. In depicting the American experience, various viewpoints of different cultural groups are essential. It gives our visitors new perspectives and ideas to ponder. While agreement and acceptance are not guaranteed, we might hope for thoughtful reconsideration and increased respect and understanding of the contributions and struggles of others.

A primary role of public historians and educators is to educate the public to think critically and broadly. We all need to know about George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, but also about people such as Black Hawk, Barclay Coppoc, Jessie Field Shambaugh, and Alexander Clark, all important figures in Iowa's history, and therefore America's history. George and Ben will not suffer from lost attention if other figures grow in importance as their stories are revealed in new exhibits. And in such broadly based historical presentations, visitors will receive a rich and diverse educational experience. In the end, this is what should be acquired when one walks through the doors of institutions dedicated to public history and education. □



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