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Why Bother with Museums?

by Willard L. Boyd

Editor's Note: Willard "Sandy" Boyd knows Iowa well and knows museums well. Former University of Iowa president, he now presides over the Field Museum. His speech at the Congress of Historical Organizations in Des Moines (partially funded by the Iowa Humanities Board and the National Endowment for the Humanities) has appeared in the *Des Moines Register*. His views may not represent those of the IHB or the NEH.

WHY BOTHER with museums? Why bother with history? Why bother with local museums? Why bother with local history? Why indeed bother with these dull subjects on a lovely June evening

Or even more to the point, why bother with them during the hours museums and historical societies are open? After all, I am interested in life, not artifacts and past events. Artifacts and past events are the dead hand of the past with no relevance to my present or future.

Why should I bother with the past when life belongs to the living and I want to live my life to the fullest?

Why bother with the past? Why bother? Because this is my history and it tells me where I came from, where I am, where I may be going. My history tells me who I am, not just statistically but spiritually as well.

A historical museum or society is more than a place filled with artifacts and a register of past events. It is a place of ideas, a place of ideals. It is my ancestral, cultural home.

My heredity and my environment shape me. Both my heredity and environment were shaped by the past, by those who came before, my ancestors and their community. I am a product of their genes and their culture. They set the stage for my lifetime performance. I am more their progeny than my own person. I am

beginning to understand that as I wonder who I am now that I am sixty.

We do not yet fully understand the impact of our ancestors' gene pool on our daily life, yet the DNA impact on my life is formidable. So also is the impact of the culture in which I was raised. However imprinted on me, I cannot escape it. My culture is my shadow. It follows me everywhere, even when I move away.

My culture is here with me tonight, as you will sense. Five generations of my family have lived in Iowa, two generations before me and two generations after me. Jefferson and Johnson counties are our cultural life spring. The dates and artifacts of those five generations of Iowans are of only passing interest to me. Of overwhelming concern to me is the mental, emotional, and spiritual impact of Iowa's culture on me and my family. You can help me

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understand my heritage, my life, because you are keepers of our common traditions.

Ah — tradition! In song and in prose we always hearken back to tradition. In song, Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof* sings of tradition. In prose, Dorothy Day in her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, wrote:

Tradition! How rich a word that is. To a thinking child it means a great deal. Children all love to hear stories of when their parents were young, and of their parents before them. It gives the child a sense of continuity. . . .

"Tradition," G. K. Chesterton says, "is

democracy extended through time. Tradition means giving the vote to that most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. Tradition is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who are walking about."

I wonder if . . . stories of our ancestors [takes] away the fear of death that comes to us all, or whether it mitigate[s] it.

. . . Their tragedy, their pain made their lives a rich and colorful tapestry for us to gaze at, a Berlioz requiem with its glory and mourning to listen to.

Did they believe? What did they believe? . . . Do happy children ask these questions? Ecclesiastes said, "Only this I have found, that God made man right and he hath entangled himself with an infinity of questions" (pp. 15-17).

Even at sixty, I too have an "infinity of questions." I need to know where I am coming from

Is it true as the lyrics from the first *State Fair* musical put it — "Everything that I am I owe loway"?

to know where I am going. Did my forebears believe in the same values I do? Did they have the same aspirations?

Is there really "an Iowa way, that certain way of doing things" celebrated in *The Music Man*? Or is it true as the lyrics from the first *State Fair* musical put it — "Everything that I am I owe loway"?

"THE IOWA WAY" is homogeneous because Iowa's people have been homogeneous. In the broad vernacular they have been WASP European descendants of the Judeo-Christian tradition. They are Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic. Our forebears had such a strong commitment to God that Iowa was an integral part of the Bible Belt. My father told me often of the tent evangelists and of the "amens" of his youth over a hundred years ago around Fairfield.

Since I was raised to show no emotion, it is difficult for me to imagine northern European stock being emotional over religion. At any rate

we Iowans tend to be quieter about our belief in God today. We are ethical in our conduct toward each other. The Golden Rule is key to our relationships. We treat each other fairly — perhaps because we do not differ markedly in our background. We share a common tradition and a common socioeconomic condition.

Iowa's economy began and remains heavily agricultural. Our European ancestors immigrated to farm as family entrepreneurs. They were the original rugged individualists revered in American folklore. These pioneers made it on their own, but they also helped each other out in time of need. Even though separated by many miles, these settlers had a sense of community.

While they were self-reliant, they were interdependent. This interdependence gave rise to formal communities for trading and schooling. Iowans prospered in farming and trading. Except for the weather there have been no extremes, no large groups of "haves" and "have nots."

Iowa life has been hard but it has been open. Nature can be brutal as well as beautiful. Natural and economic cycles of boom and bust have taken their toll, but Iowans respond by changing to new times rather than clinging to old times.

We have relied on education as a major means of change. We have prepared ourselves

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for new opportunities elsewhere as well as in Iowa. Like our forebears we want "to make it on our own." We Iowans continue to view America as the land of opportunity, of mobility, of freedom. The frontier dominates our thinking, our action, our spirit.

Our traditions run deep. Our pioneering

forebears brought their deep roots with them. Our roots are not place-bound. They travel well. Our roots are in our culture, in our belief, and, for many, in our God.

WHILE WE LIVE in the Iowa countryside, we constantly observe nature's changing diversity. Humankind is a part of nature's greater context. We have the opportunity to grow in a world of diversity and change. Each of us can add to our cultural legacy. The WASP in me tells me I have a duty to nurture a better cultural legacy for my progeny, my children and their offsprings as they are also evolving through my culture as well as through my genes.

Too often our own homogeneous culture limits our vision. We become narrowly culture-bound and fearful of diversity and change. In fact there is a place in our lives for diversity and change as well as homogeneity and stability.

I work in a museum about diversity and change. The overarching theme of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago is diversity: environmental diversity, cultural diversity. We recognize diversity as fundamental to life. Change is key to that diversity. We are a contemporary museum concerned with the present and future issues of the changing and diverse world of nature and cultures.

The Field Museum is both a research institute and a public educational center. Our research and teaching focus on nineteen million specimens reflecting the world's diverse geology, biology, and cultures.

Together with the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois, we make Chicago a world center for the study of evolutionary biology. Perhaps we do more fieldwork in South and Central America than any other American institution. We are concerned with the ecology of the neotropics. That ecology directly affects the ecology of Iowa and Illinois. Indiscriminate cutting of tropical rain forests can adversely affect our rainfall, temperature, air, and bird life in the Middle West.

The Field Museum anthropological collections of over 600,000 objects tell us about the

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indigenous people of the non-European world. In a shrinking world no longer dominated by Western Europe, we need to know more about others. In a changing Chicago where WASPs are a minority, I need to know more about others, about their roots. Several upcoming exhibits will give us this opportunity.

In November the Field Museum will open a new exhibit on a culture in which we all have roots. Ancient Egypt is the fount of all cultures. There were black pharaohs. There was Oriental trade on the silk route. Egypt was the source of Western, Middle Eastern, and African civilizations. Our Egyptian exhibit begins with a unique descent into the tomb of a king's son and next leads us on a tour of Egypt then and now. The exhibit deals with the lives of both nobility and commoners in the marketplace and the burial place.

In subsequent years, the Field Museum will use our extraordinary South Pacific ethnographic collections to examine how the physical environment affects the life of islanders. We will concentrate on how the islands were peopled by seafaring families. Indeed, we will confront the debate as to whether the various colorations of the Pacific people are due to the merging of races or due simply to the evolution of families in different places.

Later we will turn to the African-American community in Chicago and scholars from Africa to guide a remounting of our West African collection. Our purpose will be to relate the past and present culture of Africa to the culture of present-day African-Americans. Alex Haley vividly pointed out the transitional role of the slave culture between West Africa and contemporary America. Before him, W.E.B. DuBois, in his time, ranked black song and story a more significant contribution to the nation than black

toil. Denied the right to read and write and worship by slave owners, blacks turned to God and the oral tradition to nurture their roots. Many descendants of those slaves are now nurturing their roots in modern Chicago.

Approaching its centennial in 1993, the Field Museum came into being to carry forward the new field of anthropology generated as an essential ingredient of Chicago's World Columbian Exposition. The founders of our museum properly focused on the native peoples of the Americas. In the United States and Canada, the first people have been overwhelmed by later immigrants. In Meso- and South America, however, native people were able, by their larger numbers and civilizations, to have a greater impact on the changing cultures of their places. Indeed, Chicago's growing Hispanic population has deep native roots in the Americas south of our border. A new Field Museum resource center allows us all to learn about the roots of the first peoples of the Americas.

As I learn more about other peoples, I find I have much in common with them. We share the same values, the same aspirations, even the same God. Our similarities are greater than our differences. But differences exist, and I respect them. I can even learn from those differences. In doing so, I will be branded as a traitor to my

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culture by Secretary of Education William Bennett and by Allan Bloom, who in his recent best seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, closed his own mind.

Messrs. Bennett and Bloom advise us to hold tight to Western culture, to eighteenth-century "enlightenment," and to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Without ever mentioning God, Bloom believes that not enough of the best students in the best universities are reading the Bible. Yet as a frequent taxi passenger, I am

convinced that more taxi drivers per capita than WASPs are reading the Bible. Chicago cab drivers are either black Americans or new immigrants from the non-European world. Most of them have a Bible either on the front seat next to them or on the dashboard. The Muslims among them have the Koran. In either case, it is the same God who is everywhere.

The WASP tradition does not have a monopoly on wisdom. Indeed, with most Christians living in the Third World, we should see even

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more clearly the need to reject the bad news of bigotry and spread the good news of the Golden Rule.

We do not need a shared tradition to possess shared values. It is from shared values that a shared tradition emerges. *E Pluribus Unum*.

To have shared values, we must be open to others. We must respect each other. We can learn much from each other if we apply critical analysis without a double standard rooted in cultural bias. The WASP intellect in me tells me to be analytical about others. The Judeo-Christian ethic in me tells me to be open to others. Indeed as I wrote this conclusion on Sunday, May 29, 1988, the Daily Word told me to "open the windows of my mind and let in the fresh, new ideas."

And that is why every day you and I should bother with local history museums. That is why the citizens of other localities, whether in downstate Illinois or Chicago, Stockholm or Timbuktu, bother with their local history. Our culture is our shadow. It follows us. It changes with us as we change and diversify. Our museums help us understand where we are coming from and where we are going. We all need to bother with our local history. □