

AMA 50th Anniversary Celebration

Opening Remarks – Bill Worthen

30 March 2016

In 1941 when the Arkansas Territorial Restoration opened it was on the cutting edge of historic preservation in America. How so, one might ask? Thanks for asking! It was here, for one thing, away from colonial or Civil War highlights. Here we are in the trans-Mississippi away from the coast and acting like we have something worthy of preservation? (This was well before the creation of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.) It attempted to preserve a half block, not the usual great man's house. It also engaged the state in the process of restoration and administration.

But when I was hired in 1972, things were changing. Historic preservation was maturing as a profession by leaps and bounds. The work on Independence Hall in the 50s really helped to establish the importance of original fabric in the restoration process; artisans were reacquainting themselves with preservation crafts; landscapes and plants became legitimate objects of research; what had been an historic house centered movement was straining to expand into districts and neighborhoods, with tools like easements to influence the quality of the built environment that we see from the street.

Principles that seemed to dictate restoration were called into question. One of the great questions was what period should a house be returned to --- With the examples of the House of Burgesses in Colonial Williamsburg and the Paul Revere House restored to their earliest incarnations, which didn't connect with their most important interpretive periods. The Revere House was restored to a period before Paul, and the Virginia Capitol rebuilt to its form earlier than the revolutionary decade.

One of the scariest moments in the history of the Territorial Restoration occurred in 1971 when the same kind of scrutiny arrived at the doorstep of the Hinderliter House. Our founder, Louise Loughborough, came up the slogan the "Town of Three Capitols" to help persuade community leaders to support her effort to save our site. Everyone knew of the current State Capitol, and the Old State House, but she added a temporary territorial government building to the mix. The Hinderliter Grog Shop. Wanting to get the hard research done, Peg Smith and Ed Cromwell of the ATR approached Margaret Ross, the historian of the Arkansas Gazette, to write an in-depth article on each of the museum houses at the ATR. She started with the Hinderliter – the Territorial Capitol. She documented this, the oldest remaining structure in the City of Little Rock, but, by darn, she couldn't find hard evidence that the Territorial Assembly met here. And she proceeded to publish the article – first in the Gazette without footnotes, and in the Arkansas Historical Quarterly with.

Our Commission hunkered down, waiting for the public outcry – was the basis for our existence a lie? Or at least faulty research? why did we restore that thing if it wasn't the capitol? Happily, we are still waiting for the public outrage. But, we didn't hold Margaret to the commitment to write about all of the houses. WE did that research ourselves.

When I arrived at HAM we were self-consciously an historic preservation project. Our superintendent had been going to the National Trust meetings, and the first Trust meeting I went to hooked me into the exciting world that was Historic Preservation at the time, and also to the fact that a greater relevancy awaited us at the American Association of Museums and the American Association for State and Local History. So the AASLH and the AAM were my first museum meetings.

The folks in the museum field had been just going through their own self-analysis – what are we? Antiquarians? Connoisseurs? Art patrons? History buffs? Or maybe Community attics and Educational institutions? Are we made up just of active members of the leisure class, or the rejects from other fields, or are we a real profession?

And if we can claim a profession, and we move toward professional guidelines and we establish them with an eye toward standardization, is it the individual whom we need ultimately to hold to standards, or the institution?

The answers to these questions led the AAM first to the Accreditation Program and later to MAP.

As you know, that last question – individual or institutional certification – was the subject of much deliberation – there were models of both from lawyers and architects to hospitals and schools. Given the variety of museums and their places in their various communities, the AAM chose to accredit the institutions, not individuals. And it has been a workable system. Folks like ALHA and NAI provide individual certifications, and any number of institutions provide educational opportunities. But it is our museums which must carry the weight of professionalism.

The implications of that are important. The whole of the institution must buy into the profession, not just the so-called “professionals” working there. Accreditation standards do require one real “professional” at a museum but professionalism has to be reflected in the staff, the board, the volunteers, and the community if we’re doing this right.

And who stands up for the profession in Arkansas? The AMA.

When I began at HAM there was a dip in activity of the AMA. After a start 1966 with Dr. Eugene Wittlake and Peg Smith, and others giving us a push, we sort of foundered until some of us revived it. Phil Klopenstein became our first president in our reincarnation in 1976 with Helen Boyd and, John Preston and Lucy Robinson in active roles. I came on the board in 1977.

What has the AMA done for me? Any number of things!

I have been entertained and entranced by our museums in Arkansas, and the AMA has been the connecting link –

And they have always raised wonderful questions:

That Mid America Museum, why’d they put it there? You can’t accidentally drop by....

And Pam.... I liked Oil and Brine!

Josh - What do you mean it’s not “Old Washington” anymore!?

Marcie - Did Bernie Babcock really keep a private part in her desk drawer?

Heather Marie - They’re going to have WHAT in Bentonville?

And of course - Surely they can’t close the UofA Museum – it’s accredited and everything!

I never underestimate the importance of an excuse to bring people together, in so many different locations – join the AMA and see the world! at least the world of museums in Arkansas. We have shared so much over the years. New museums, new people. We are in this together, and doesn’t it help to know that? By hearing of the trials and tribulations others have endured – I am not sadistic, but, by darn I can learn from the experiences of others! You show me anguish and pain – or even joy and triumph – and I’m gonna try to avoid the former and facilitate the latter. We are a learning community.

There is an emotional, social aspect of this that gives us a place to do the content stuff. Long ago we used to go bowling! And sometimes we still go drinking! Or eating ice cream. I guess we need excuses to gather, but the gathering itself is so important.

It gives us a place for the content stuff.

Cause, you know, almost everyone is a collector of something....and museums are the professionals at collecting. So the community of collectors wants us to love them and their collections.

Accept the fact that few of them will understand us and all of our rigmarole.

Accept the fact that no one knows how much trouble it is even to accession something into the collection, much less put it on exhibit.

Accept the fact that as collectors, some will know that they know how to do anything we do, and they will assume that we ought to want their collections – of whatever.

Accept the fact that even the savvy ones might ask you to appraise something for donation – can we all say conflict of interest?

Accept the fact that most have never heard of NAGPRA.

Accept the fact that in perpetuity for some donors is “until I want it back.”

Accept the fact that some folks will have it refinished before they give it to us.

Also accept the fact that some in your community will value you as the treasure you are.

And if they don't, come to the AMA and bitch about it!

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We almost always fall back on the profession when responding to the community.

We have a mission, and if it doesn't fit the mission.

We have bylaws, we have an organizational structure to work through.

We have policies covering public use.

We have exhibit plans and schedules.

We have emergency procedures.

We have collection policies and procedures.

We also have professional examples around the state and beyond – so stealing ideas from our fellow museums is just being open to professional inspiration.

We have a professional rationale for all we do, though it always has to be tempered by the community we serve.

We can and do learn from our communities, and they are blessed to have us among them!

To elaborate – everywhere we have a museum there is some kind of consensus that the community has earned a place in art, science or history, and the collecting of objects and the education related to them are an appropriate expression of that status. By tending and presenting the community's collection we are shepherding the community's history or aesthetic – its values in one way or another. We're doing something of what the priesthood handled in the old days.

Now, I'm not going to go all the way and kiss Bishop Pate's ring – at least not in front of all you guys – but there is something precious, something close to sacred, that we have the opportunity to participate in. Community life might seem vibrant and healthy, but all lives are fragile in one way or another. To the extent we support identity, comprehension, cohesion, perspective, in our communities, we are there for the greater good.

Our museums can, at their best, offer the people in our communities a place to be.

And all of us know institutions like the Holocaust Museum and the Memphis Civil Rights Museum, places which presume to place us in the immediacy of life and death, of good and evil, and offer us perspective on the human condition.

Those museums of conscience often open us to a question – what would we do if, what can I make of a pile of the shoes of murdered prisoners, etc. People are more present in a place where they have a question. They are open to the world and to themselves. They are here now, if I may use that new-agey phrase. People remember where they had questions, and they remember because the whole of them is more engaged.

So we have the charge to carry community memory and values, and an opportunity to open the community to self-reflection and greater awareness.

Don't shy away from these roles – remember, you are there for the greater good, and the community is blessed to have you!

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