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Author(s): Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. (Dick) Miller
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A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry

Katharine T. Corbett and
Howard S. (Dick) Miller

Shared inquiry is a key component of reflective public history practice. All good historical practice is reflective, but public history requires a special commitment to collaborate, to respond, to share both inquiry and authority. Because trained practitioners and lay people often seek different pasts for different purposes, public historians may find themselves poised between advocacy and mediation, monitoring and adjusting their own behavior through the process of shared inquiry. Since public history is inherently situational, there is no one-size-fits-all methodology. Drawing on thirty years of shared public history experience, the authors reflect on situations in which they strove to share both inquiry and authority.

Long retired from the needle trades, Jessie Sulkowski sat on her sofa peering at some photographs from the University of Missouri-St. Louis community archives. Kathy Corbett had brought them in an effort to flesh out the documentation for a collection of snapshots taken during an ILGWU-sponsored St. Louis garment workers' strike in 1933. Photographs, tape recorder, and camera in hand, she and a colleague had tracked down a number of retired garment workers in the hope that they could put names to some of the faces, and perhaps breathe life back into scenes long frozen in time. Maybe, too, they could collect oral evidence for a history of the strike.

Suddenly Jessie exclaimed, "That's me and my sister in that picture!" Decades fell away as she warmly recalled co-workers, picket lines, shop-floor culture, and city life during the Great Depression. As Jessie reminisced, the

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strike shrank back to life-size. It had been a memorable event, to be sure, but only an episode in her larger story of what it had meant to be a young working woman in the garment district forty years earlier. Those formative experiences had stayed with her. Other retired garment workers responded in the same way. Old strike photographs triggered memories and launched conversations, but memories unleashed had their own energy and followed their own logic. Jessie and her co-workers quickly moved the conversations far beyond the original quest for photo IDs. The women had bigger stories to tell and insisted on telling them.

"When the interviews were completed," wrote Kathy, "we had less than we expected and more than we hoped." In the course of revealing a few new facts about the strike, the retirees opened wide an unexpected window into the social, economic, and emotional milieu of Depression-era working women. They transformed a modest academic fact-hunt into a nuanced and empowering story of women's work and women's lives.

Jessie and her friends taught us early lessons about the dynamics of doing history with the public. The taped conversations between Kathy and the garment workers were products of creative give and take. The historians' queries triggered memories. In turn, the workers' recollections suggested new questions, and those elicited still more stories and long-treasured memorabilia. Both interviewer and interviewees contributed to the evolving, shared inquiry into the experience of working women in the context of St. Louis labor history. Because oral history interviews are by nature collaborative, both parties shared authority over the content and tone.

The tapes and photographs became the basis of a 1977 exhibit, *Dollar Dresses: St. Louis Women in the 1930's Garment Industry.* Kathy wrote labels around quotations from the interviews, and augmented the archives' images with others lent by the garment workers. Although she did not share decision-making authority over how the material would appear in exhibit form, the underlying give-and-take research process had left the garment workers with a sense of ownership in the outcome. *Dollar Dresses* demonstrated that academics and ILGWU retirees who played off each other's strengths could produce original work that pleased both because it was better than either could have produced alone.[1]

Leaving the Profession

Chance encounters with Jessie Sulkowski and other St. Louisans had drawn us into public history in the mid-1970s. Dick Miller then taught at the Univer-

1. Katharine T. Corbett, "St. Louis Garment Workers: Photographs and Memories," *Gateway Heritage* 2, no. 1 (Spring, 1983): 19–24. *Dollar Dresses: St. Louis Women in the 1930's Garment Industry*, Katharine T. Corbett and Jeanne Mongold, co-curators, University of Missouri-St. Louis and International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, St. Louis Headquarters, 1977.

sity of Missouri-St. Louis, and Kathy was a history graduate student. Shared curiosity about the utility of photographs as historical sources led to a number of collaborative community workshops, the *Dollar Dresses* exhibit, and several conference presentations. At that juncture Kathy became curator of education at the Missouri Historical Society, and Dick turned to research for a study of a local landmark, Eads Bridge, with St. Louis photographer Quinta Scott.[2]

These early ventures led both of us out of the academy, onto the streets, and into the museum. St. Louis had been a converging point for much of early American history, and a jumping-off point for much that followed. The Gateway City's past lingered in the street grid and old structures, in civic traditions and family lore. Our surroundings invited, even demanded, historical practice that was at once local and national, document-grounded and artifact-rich, scholarly and street-smart. Encouraging conversations with St. Louis colleagues Myron Marty and George Lipsitz reinforced our fascination with the place and its people, as well as our conviction that nearby history frequently turned on issues of power and agency.[3]

At the time our efforts were more popular with students than with colleagues. Dick's successful graduate program in historical agencies, launched in 1983, by 1988 had withered for want of departmental support. When Kathy left Ph.D. studies to accept the position at the Missouri Historical Society, a senior academic colleague and friend expressed sincere regret that she was "leaving the profession."

For both of us, "leaving" was an act of liberation. We learned public history by doing as we moved back and forth between academia and the historical society. Dick turned a required undergraduate senior seminar into a shop-course in community history. The historical society education department became an engine of original research and creative public programming for all ages.[4]

Everyman His Own Historian

During the 1970s we were unaware that Donald Schön and other social scientists were formulating a theoretical framework for practices we were ex-

2. Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, "Which Thousand Words?" OAH annual meeting, San Francisco, 1980; Katharine T. Corbett, "The Historical Landscape: Photographs as Evidence," Jean Tucker, ed., *Landscape Perspectives: Photographic Studies* (St. Louis: University of Missouri-St. Louis, 1986); Quinta Scott and Howard S. Miller, *The Eads Bridge* (2 ed., St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1999).

3. Howard S. Miller, Katharine T. Corbett, and Patricia L. Adams, "St. Louis: Communities in Counterpoint," *OAH Newsletter Convention Supplement* (February, 2000); George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (Nashville, Tenn.: AASLH, 1982; 2nd ed., Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 2000).

4. Marla Miller, "Playing to Strength: Teaching Public History at the Turn of the 21st Century: An Overview and Report from the U.S.," *American Studies International* 42, nos. 2–3 (June-October, 2004): 179–80.

ploring from the bottom up. Schön's concepts, especially "reflective practice," "reflection-in-action," and "shared inquiry" were merely new terms for long-familiar techniques, and too broadly inclusive to define any particular field, but they were helpful in distinguishing between the internal and external aspects of competent historical practice. "Reflective practice" was *reflexive*, self-critical, a recasting of the ancient admonition to know thyself. "Reflection-in-action" was *responsive*, a continual monitoring and adjusting of the practitioner's behavior in the light of its effects—a similar concept to the systems engineers' earlier and rather more useful notion of the self-correcting "feedback loop." Reflex and response fused in the process of "shared inquiry," in which practitioners and stakeholders joined in give-and-take discussion to set mutually acceptable questions and to find mutually satisfying answers. "Shared authority," a corollary to shared inquiry, kept issues of agency—who has the power?—at the forefront.

Theoretical constructs helped put the practical realities of *Dollar Dresses* and other projects into a broader methodological context. Even so, public historians and other professionals who strove to be true to their disciplines while addressing their clients' needs probably learned the skills of shared inquiry less often from theoreticians than from personal experience and the culture of their own disciplines.[5]

Early twentieth-century historians, notably Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles Beard, and Carl Becker, already had the core elements of reflective practice and shared inquiry well in hand. Turner was a proto-public historian, who crystallized his ideas about the significance of frontiers and other social forces while teaching extension courses to public audiences throughout rural Wisconsin. Beard argued that sound scholarship began with intellectual self-awareness born of critical reflection. Becker's landmark AHA presidential address of 1931, "Everyman His Own Historian," called for historical practice that shared inquiry and authority with "Everyman," the ordinary citizen historians aspired to serve. Every person used history every day to make sense of the world, whether professional historians helped or not. Therefore the burden of engagement lay with the professionals. "Berate him as we will for not reading our books," observed Becker, "Mr. Everyman

5. Rebecca Conard, "Facepaint History in the Season of Introspection," *The Public Historian* 25, no. 4 (Fall, 2003), 9–24; Rebecca Conard and Shelley Bookspan, e-mail memo to *The Public Historian* special issue contributors, 17 March 2004. Donald A. Schön's key works include *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Towards a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (San Francisco and London: Jossey-Bass, 1987). Schön's critics include Peter Reason, ed., *Human Inquiry in Action: Developments in New Paradigm Research* (London: Sage Publications, 1988); John Bray, et al., *Collaborative Inquiry in Practice: Action, Reflection, and Making Meaning* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 2000); and Stephen Newman, *Philosophy and Teacher Education: A Reinterpretation of Donald A. Schön's Epistemology of Reflective Practice* (Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate Publishing Co., 1999). On feedback, see J. de Rosnay, "History of Cybernetics and Systems Science," http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/CYBSHIST.html.

is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities."[6]

Working the Situation

The special character of public history derives less from formulaic definitions than from the nuances and contexts of practice. Public history is always situational and frequently messy; the case-by-case particulars of reflective practice, reflection-in-action, shared inquiry, and shared authority emerge out of experimental give-and-take. In the real world, unwavering pursuit of theoretical schemas often leads to dead ends. Sometimes the best strategy, observes one seasoned practitioner, is to stay flexible, "lay back, let it happen, try out different ideas."[7]

The ways and means of public history are sometimes bound by institutional constraints, at other times dependent on the play of the contingent and unforeseen. The first calls for smart planning, the second for fast footwork. Every undertaking requires its own answers to the perennial core questions: what are the project goals, and who set them? How might the goals be met, and by whom? Who are the stakeholders, and what are the relationships between the stakeholders and the target audience? Can the practitioner work effectively *as a historian* in the setting at hand? G. Wesley Johnson, one of the pioneers of public history, once wisely observed that the public historian's "key skill" is the ability to "to work a situation—to understand its values, construct, context, cultural overtones, and relevant social, economic, and political facts."[8]

Unfortunately, training in situation-working—quickly sizing up circumstances and learning to how to work and play with others—has generally not been a high priority in public history education or a prominent element in what Marla Miller calls the public historian's "fundamental skill set." Although the best scholars and teachers are instinctively self-reflective and share inquiry at every turn, neither graduate work, professional peer review, nor student feedback necessarily help develop mediation skills or an inclination to share authority.[9]

6. Charles Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," *American Historical Review* 39, no. 2 (January 1934), 221–36; Charles Beard, "Grounds for a Reconsideration of Historiography," Social Science Research Council, *Bulletin 54: Theory and Practice in Historical Study* (New York: SSRC, 1946), 1–14; Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1935), 143–68, 191–234; Ray Allen Billington, *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1971), 44–54; Otis Graham, "No Tabula Rasa," *Public Historian* 17, no. 1 (Winter, 1995): 12–14.

7. Cindy Little, personal communication with the authors, 3 April 2004.

8. G. Wesley Johnson, "Introduction," *Public Historian* 9, no. 3 (Summer, 1987): 18.

9. Marla Miller, "Playing to Strength" 181, 183, 193–95. The National Park System's statement of "essential competencies" for historians is similarly light on what Miller describes as "the interpersonal qualities that underlay effective public history practice." www.nps.gov/training/npsonly/RSC/historia.htm.

Public history always involves negotiation with nonhistorians in situations where agency is fluid and even up for grabs. Indeed, while all historians should strive to meet their audiences where they are, public historians must. As Barbara Franco notes, "While we have a responsibility to monitor accuracy, our public partners are seeking understanding and meaning. It is a constant negotiation, based on trust and mutual respect that sometimes takes a great deal of time and work that seems far from the historical practices we have been trained to follow."[10]

The most problematic encounters are face-to-face interviews. Historians can initiate oral history projects, but only interviewees can sustain them. Whether approached as eyewitnesses to past events, as ethnographic culture-bearers, or as people poised for individual or group empowerment, interviewees have agency and share it, or not, on their own terms. Interviewers either become adept reflective practitioners or take up other lines of research. "Caught at the same moment in the creation of conversation and in reflecting upon that creation," writes Ronald Grele, "it is only later that we can reinterpret our initial interpretation." The interplay of agency and reflection is evident in "shared authority," a term Michael Frisch popularized in 1990 to describe a critical aspect of oral history practice. *Shared* authority, writes Frisch, is inherent in the very nature of an interview, "in the faintly implicit hyphen that reminds us of the connection between the very words author and authority." Interviewer and interviewee share ownership of an oral history because they share agency in its creation. Inquiry sharing is similarly inherent in the process of dialogue even if practitioners sometimes come to think of public history as "something 'we' deliver to 'them.'" What practitioners can decide, and often do decide, is how much authority they are willing to share in the public use of materials created with and for the public. *Sharing* authority is a deliberate decision to give up some control over the product of historical inquiry.[11]

Issues of agency and role dog practitioners who work outside the academy. Activist historians often launch community history projects from the top down, only to have community members redirect the initiative from the bottom up.

10. Barbara Franco, personal communication with the authors, 5 April 2004; Barbara Franco, "Interchange: Genres of History," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 2 (September, 2004): 572–93.

11. Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: the Art of Oral History* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, Inc., 1985), 243, 259, 271–72; Michael Frisch, personal communication with the authors, 12 March 2004; Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Michael Frisch, "Commentary: Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Practice," *The Oral History Review* 30, no.1 (Winter-Spring, 2003): 111–13; Linda Shopes, "Commentary: Sharing Authority," *The Oral History Review* 30, no.1 (Winter-Spring, 2003): 103–10; Jeremy Brecher, "Using Ethnography to Enhance Public Programming," Jean J. Schensul et al., *Using Ethnographic Data: Ethnographer's Toolkit 7* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira Press, 1999), 115–49; Lorraine Sitzia, "A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?" *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (Winter-Spring, 2003): 87–101.

Exhibit consultants sometimes fit in as members of project teams, at other times keep their distance, deliver their assigned work products, and defer to other experts on matters outside their special sphere. "To my mind," says Eric Foner, reflecting on his experience consulting on major Civil War and Underground Railroad exhibits in Chicago and Cincinnati, "the role of the scholar is to insist on scholarship. . . . If other people put their inputs in they're playing *their* roles." Foner, hired for his command of particular historical topics, recognized that other members of the exhibit teams had essential knowledge outside his ken. The role of staff historians in museum settings is to blend outside and inside expertise in the service of interpretation.[12]

Exhibits are inherently cooperative undertakings with institutionally defined tasks, lines of responsibility, and resource priorities. In small historical societies, historians have often been one-man bands who developed the interpretation and wrote the labels, selected and mounted artifacts, fabricated exhibits, planned public programming, and poured lemonade at the opening. During the 1980s, the Missouri Historical Society had just enough resources to employ artifact curators and to fabricate small exhibits, but staff historians still did almost everything else including—within the constraints imposed by the administration—having the final say on the interpretive thrust.

Today some museums have the wherewithal to hire designers, educators, curators, historians, and other specialists, and expect them to work closely together on project teams. Increasingly, teams answer to a newly emerged kind of specialist called an exhibit developer, who is sometimes a historian but more frequently is not. In these situations, lines of intellectual authority and responsibility may blur to the point that they compromise the historian's ability to work *as a historian*. The central question involves the historian's authority over content and interpretation. Although team members and stakeholders may and should participate in the decisionmaking process, the buck stops with the historian. Responsibility without authority spells disaster. Disaster also looms if individual team members fail to take ownership in the whole enterprise as well as responsibility for their own special part of it.

Exhibit scripts are not exhibits, however, and team historians are rarely in a position to dictate how interpretive themes assume tangible form. Designers, fabricators, conservators, curators, and educators also bring essential expertise to the table. Successful inquiry and authority-sharing teams produce

12. Eric Foner, personal communication with the authors, 1 April 2004; Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002). On activist historians' shared inquiry, see James Green, *Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 2–4; Marla Miller, "Playing to Strength," 178–79; Ron Grele, "Whose Public, Whose History?: What is the Goal of a Public Historian?" *The Public Historian* 3, no.1 (Winter, 1981): 40–48; Brass Workers History Project, Jeremy Brecher, et al., comps., *Brass Valley: The Story of Working People's Lives and Struggles in an American Industrial Region* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 169–86; Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

exhibits that are greater than the sum of their parts. Historians who work in museums and historical societies are most successful when they learn to see their own work as other team members see it.

Whatever their particular institutional situations, public historians have to depend on their powers of persuasion and other people skills because their authority ultimately depends on institutional roles defined by their employers. Outside consultants' positions are likely to be strongest during initial conceptual phases, and then weaken as projects take on tangible form and ever more stakeholders insist on being heard. Academic consultants can argue, plead, and go on strike, but outside the ivory tower they cannot appeal to academic freedom or expect deference to tenured rank. Administrators ultimately decide what goes on the wall, what gets published, what programs reach their audiences. Sometimes, as in the case of recent National Park Service reinterpretations of battlefield sites, the historians prevail. More often, as in the case of the Smithsonian's ill-fated *Enola Gay* exhibit, someone else sits in the catbird seat.[13]

How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Community History

The stories public historians want to tell are sometimes not the stories the public wants to hear. Few people dismiss the past *per se;* history wars break out only because people care. Indeed, the most intense skirmishes are not between history's defenders and detractors, but among defenders who champion very different notions of the past and its purposes. "When the academic historian is unpersuasive," writes David Lowenthal, "it is because the public finds his visions of the past not simply aloof, but deeply antithetical to traditional modes of utilizing the past." Lowenthal helped frame the terms of engagement in the 1980s, when he warned that "heritage" was about to conquer "history." Traditionally, history and heritage had been different words for different things. *History* was a narrative of the past, whereas *heritage* was something, often more tangible, that could be inherited. Since the 1950s, popular usage has blurred the terms, but they still stand for different approaches to the past.[14] However defined, *history* and *her-*

13. Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, "Taking Responsibility for the *Enola Gay*," *Exhibitionist* 14, no. 1 (Spring, 1995): 12–14; Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996); Dwight Pitcaithley, "History in the Public Sense: The National Park Service and Education," University of Michigan Research Policy Lecture, 3 February 1998; Nancy McIlvery, ed., "Rethinking the Exhibit Team: A Cyberspace Forum," *Exhibitionist* 19, no. 1 (Spring, 2000): 8–13; "History Exhibit Standards," Statement Adopted by the Organization of American Historians Executive Board, St. Louis, Missouri, April 2000 www.oah.org/pubs/nl/2000may/execbd.html.

14. David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996). Compare Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); James Lindgren, "A Cuckoo in our Nest: Can Historians Handle the Heritage Boom?" *The Public Historian* 19,

itage frame the ways the historically minded decide which pasts matter most and how they sort themselves out into interest groups. The two face off whenever public historians try to be at once responsive to their audiences and responsible to their craft. Success often turns on how closely the past offered fits the past desired, and whether practitioners can mediate mutually satisfactory compromises. If *history* and *heritage* deadlock, the best strategy is often an adroit sidestep that turns paralyzing contradiction into creative counterpoint.[15]

One promising approach begins by acknowledging that heritage, as Carl Becker might have said, is stronger than history. Public history is doomed if practitioners insist that people give up their versions of the past in order to benefit from ours, especially if theirs is comforting and ours disturbs the peace. Public historians might at least reflect upon their relentlessly modern, linear, secular, explanatory approach to the past, and explore ways to incorporate older and more universal forms of past-keeping.

Becker hinted at the possibilities when he likened historians to keepers of the useful myths. The folklorist Henry Glassie has written extensively of his historical mentor, Hugh Nolan, an aged farmer from Ballymenone in Northern Ireland. Hugh Nolan told two kinds of stories, seemingly contradictory, even paradoxical, yet comfortably coexistent. One history was a linear narrative of change anchored in time, something akin to academic history. The other and more important was a cyclical narrative of eternal truths, anchored in space, more akin to myth. In the first, documentable facts were the story. In the second, fungible facts served the story.[16]

Exhibitors and interpreters often find themselves confronting historical double-think. Carolyn Gilman, curator of the national Lewis and Clark bi-

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no. 2 (Spring, 1997): 77–82. For popular perspectives, see Roy Rosenszweig, "Marketing the Past: *American Heritage* and Popular History in the United States," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* eds. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 21–49; "Roundtable: Responses to Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life," The Public Historian* 22, no. 1 (Winter, 2000): 13–44.

15. Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1950), 185, suggested counterpoint as a trope for exploring the apparent contradictions in American "national character." Michael Kammen explored the approach in *People of Paradox* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980). Examples of counterpoint at the grassroots include Robert Weyeneth, "History, He Wrote: Murder, Politics, and the Challenges of Public History in a Community With a Secret," *The Public Historian* 16, no. 2 (Spring, 1994): 51–73; David Glassberg, "Remembering a War," *Sense of History*, 25–53; Katherine Borland, "'That's Not What I Said,': Interpretive Conflicts in Oral Narrative Research," Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, eds., *Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 63–75.

16. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," 231–34; Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 621–55, 664–65 and *passim;* Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1–39; Michael Frisch, "Prismatics, Multivalence, and Other Riffs on the Millennial Moment: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, 13 October 2000," *American Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (June 2001): 193–231, Michael Frisch, "Taking Dialogue Seriously," Frank Munger, ed., *Laboring Below the Line: Perspective on Low Wage Labor and the Global Economy* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Press, 2002), 281–89.

centennial exhibit at the Missouri Historical Society, struggled to interpret a nineteenth century Lakota "winter count," a pictorial chronicle painted on a buffalo hide. The chronicler, Lone Dog, had drawn one icon representing each year's most important event. What struck Gilman were his choices of memorable events, which seemed to her routine and repetitious. Although Lone Dog doubtless knew about the Battle of Little Bighorn, he left it out. It finally dawned on Gilman that Lone Dog had interpreted *important event* differently than she did. Driven by "my European linear sense of history," writes Gilman, "I . . . thought of the unique and remarkable as the ones that had explanatory or causal value." Lone Dog thought the recurring events more notable. "The arrival of Lewis and Clark or Custer's defeat were too unique, they were unlikely to happen again. So Lone Dog rejected them in favor of recurring events that affirmed the stability of history." His Winter Count became a telling artifact in *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide*, an exhibit that acknowledged rather than dismissed an archaic mode of past-keeping.[17]

Interpreting from inside Navajo culture, National Park Service historian Tara Travis interwove sacred space and time into the cultural history of Canyon de Chelly. She moved easily between academic research on how Navajo women have used weaving skills to maintain tribal lifeways during times of great change, and traditional stories of mythic Spider Woman, who taught Navajo women to weave on cross poles of sky and earth. Travis's interpretations counterpointed history and heritage by weaving both into Spider Woman's grand design.[18]

For traditional storytellers, as for most of us, stability matters more than change, and Truth is more precious than fact. It should come as no surprise that what we call heritage often trumps what we call history. Indeed, the two may simply be current labels for enduring double histories whose conflicts are more apparent than real. Glassie, Gilman, Jeremy Brecher, and others have demonstrated that reflective practice can counterpoint history and heritage by finding space inside projects for both. Early in the evolution of Brecher's *Brass Valley* project, he concluded that it was "all right for people to form an understanding of the project that differed from ours." Thus liberated, Brecher "learned how to quit worrying and love community history."[19]

Community history thrives in situations where people feel comfortable enough to confront their own pasts and share with others. Dwight Pitcaithley (borrowing a phrase from Barbara Kingsolver) calls these "the spaces between," where "disparate points of view rub together." Spaces between are

17. Carolyn Gilman, *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 312–15, 389; Carolyn Gilman, personal communication with the authors, 8 April 2004.

18. Tara Travis, "Spider Woman's Grand Design: Making Native American Women Visible in Two Southwestern History Sites," Kaufman and Corbett, *Her Past Around Us*, 69–86.

19. Jeremy Brecher, "How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Community History: A 'Pet Outsider's' Report on the Brass Workers History Project," *Radical History Review* 28–30 (1984): 187; "How This Book Was Made," Brass Workers History Project, *Brass Valley,* Appendix.).

often cultural borderlands, theaters of possibility, or even time-out zones "where differences of opinion can be expressed without shouting," and where history can become a set of questions for personal exploration rather than a set of pat answers delivered from above.[20]

Spaces between are the special terrain of historians who work in public venues open to the play of serendipity. "Working in museums, historic sites, and community history projects," writes David Glassberg, "I encountered perspectives on the past that I never would have encountered solely in the world of professional academics. In presenting history to the public, I soon learned that the public was presenting history back to me as well, and that it was impossible to uphold the separation between the history I practiced and the history I lived and understood."[21]

Our best encounters with the popular past often happen in the spaces between. Along with the vagaries of historical mindset, personal circumstance, and institutional context, they frame the practice of public history. The ability to work in these situations remains, as Wes Johnson insisted decades ago, the "key skill" of public history practice.

Nice Slides, But Our Projectors Never Work

Like many academics of his generation, Dick entered the historical museum through a door propped open by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The NEH has been widely recognized for funding major projects, but deserves much more credit for having decisively upgraded historical agencies at the grassroots level, and for having supplied the fledgling field of public history with a massive federal subsidy.

Shortly after she became curator of education at the Missouri Historical Society, Kathy assembled a team of consulting historians, museum educators, and classroom teachers to write a secondary-level history education grant proposal to the NEH. The timing was fortuitous. By the 1980s the NEH (established in 1965) had fine-tuned its mission and grant guidelines. By making funding contingent on participation by outside experts, NEH provided work for public historians eager to ply their trade in an otherwise poor job market. Their involvement raised the level of historical scholarship in historical agencies across the country, and gave staff historians added leverage within their

20. Dwight Pitcaithley, "Barbara Kingsolver and the Challenge of Public History," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (Fall, 1999): 11–18.

21. David Glassberg, *Sense of the Past*, 22. Examples of "spaces between" public history practice include James O. Horton, "Presenting Slavery: The Perils of Telling America's Racial History," *The Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (Fall, 1999): 19–38; Laura Peers, "'Playing Ourselves,' First Nations and Native American Interpreters at Living History Sites," *Public Historian* 21, no. 4 (Fall, 1999): 39–59; Polly Welts Kaufman, "Who Walked Before Me?: Creating Women's History Trails," Kaufman and Corbett, *Her Past Around Us*, 11–30.

own institutions. By requiring intellectually rigorous, practical projects that could withstand peer review, NEH imposed new performance standards on historical agencies and consulting historians alike.

A successful NEH grant application meant more than money. It was an *imprimatur*, a guarantee of national exposure and a fulcrum for levering local support. The Endowment's greatest contribution, however, was to bring academic historians and public history practitioners into collegial contact—in many cases for the first time. The former learned that historical talent flourished outside the academy, that exhibits and public programs were not merely repackaged lectures and books, that inquiry shared was inquiry gained, and that authority shared was not necessarily authority lost. The latter learned that some academics were actually savvy and even cooperative.

Our first NEH-funded MHS education grant proposed to create instructional materials St. Louis secondary teachers could use to integrate national and local history in their American history classes. Teachers told us that they recognized that the most vivid and engaging history was nearby history, but that they didn't quite know how to fit it into an already overstuffed curriculum. We replied that we were not asking them to do more with more, but offering ways they might do better with different.

We proposed a fifteen-month effort to locate original sources, devise grade-appropriate lesson plans and teacher-friendly supporting materials keyed to national texts already in use, and package them in ten overlapping thematic and chronological units. We envisioned the project both as a stand-alone local resource and as a how-to model for public history educators in other communities. We scarcely appreciated what we were getting ourselves into.

The research part proved easy because we could draw on Missouri Historical Society resources, our academic skills, and prior local history knowledge. The lesson plans were harder because only one member of the team had high-school classroom experience. It took much reflective practice on our part, and even more reflection-in-action, to learn how to think simply without thinking simplistically, to scale down without dumbing down. Our consulting teachers quickly pointed out where our assumptions had led us astray, and explained how stubborn schoolroom realities often sabotaged the best of academic intentions.

We had planned, for example, to include high-quality, copyright-free slides of original documents and graphics from Missouri Historical Society collections. The teachers reviewed our choices and said, "nice slides, but our projectors never work." On the other hand, they welcomed printed versions of the images they could use with opaque projectors or photocopy as hand-outs. We kept the slides but added prints.

Our crucial mistakes were in assuming that rank-and-file teachers were comfortable enough with textbook American history to integrate national themes and local examples. We had not anticipated the need for an intelligible, explanatory narrative for teachers (and their advanced students) that paralleled textbook themes, making explicit the connections we hoped the teachers would get across to their students. With NEH approval, we revised our

work plan to add a local narrative and reduce the number of lesson plans. Field-tested in local classrooms and published as five units, *St. Louis in American History* remains in use by St. Louis area teachers.[22]

During the course of the curriculum project we probably learned more about public history than our cooperating teachers did about St. Louis history. Every day was a crash course in reflective practice, reflection-in-action, inquiry-sharing, and authority-sharing. At several national conferences, we offered heads-up advice to others considering curriculum projects: listen to your cooperating teachers since they know what you don't; resist advice to dumb-down, instead up the level of teacher support; expect time and cost overruns that may have to be covered by free-will staff contributions; build in excitement and flexibility if you want teachers to use your stuff; provide solutions for nuts-and-bolts classroom logistical problems; be sure the team includes at least one full time staff member who helped conceptualize the project; write job descriptions that match actual working relationships; and do your best to guard against unequal pay for equal work.[23]

Through Different Eyes

Early in 1989 the Missouri Historical Society opened *A Strong Seed Planted*, an exhibit based on oral history interviews with activists who participated in a 1963 civil rights demonstration at the Jefferson Bank, the pivotal event in the twentieth-century struggle for civil rights in St. Louis.[24]

The exhibit was a turning point for the MHS as well. The education department's Black History Month exhibits and programs, begun several years earlier, had been the institution's first efforts to attract African-American visitors by making their struggles for dignity and equality part of the St. Louis master narrative. The initial stories had been safely cast in the remote past, whereas memories of the Jefferson Bank episode were still vivid a quarter of a century after the fact.

In August, 1963, just two days after Dr. Martin Luther King's March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the St. Louis chapter of CORE had organized a demonstration in front of the Jefferson Bank, which had long welcomed African-American depositors but restricted access to its white-collar jobs. The demonstration was unremarkable until several protesters went inside in violation of a restraining order prohibiting interference with bank business.

22. Katharine T. Corbett, Howard S. Miller, Mary E. Seematter, and Alex Yard, *St. Louis in American History* (5 vols., St. Louis, Mo: Missouri Historical Society, 1989–1995).

23. Howard S. Miller and Katharine T. Corbett, "The Missouri Historical Society St. Louis History Project," OAH/NCPH joint annual meeting, 1984; Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, "State and Local History in the High School Curriculum," AASLH annual meeting, 1989.

24. Exhibit title drawn from Langston Hughes's poem, "Democracy," in Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 285.

St. Louis police arrested the demonstrators and some of the organizers for contempt of court. The city's power elite correctly interpreted the protest as a direct challenge to the racial status quo and closed ranks behind the beleaguered bank. Nineteen people, including middle-class teachers, attorneys, and a sitting city alderman, were convicted, fined, and jailed. The effort to make an example of The Nineteen backfired; for the first time many white St. Louisans came to recognize that the racial status quo was no longer tenable. Former Alderman and Congressman Bill Clay later recalled that "Jefferson Bank broke the back of this town in terms of eliminating the kinds of barriers and obstructions they had placed in the way of black people getting fair treatment . . . It's one of the historic happenings in this town and we ought to remember it."[25]

Starting with community members who had helped them with previous research, Kathy's exhibit team identified residents who had played significant roles in the bank demonstration and other local civil rights activities during the Sixties. They ranged from NAACP attorneys to members of paramilitary black power organizations. From the outset the exhibit team decided to let the demonstrators' words carry the story. Interviewers asked what "Jeff Bank" had meant to them at the time, and where the event fit into their broader quest for civil rights and social justice. They replied with accounts of their efforts to overcome stubborn resistance in a city long noted for its entrenched racism.

Mounted on wall panels around the museum auditorium, *A Strong Seed Planted* featured portrait photographs and brief biographies of the narrators along with vintage news photos and other documents captioned with quotations from their interviews. Kathy and Mary Seematter, the other historian on the team, wrote interpretive panels recounting the history of the demonstration and subsequent local civil rights actions. A timeline put local events in national context.

Throughout the spring of 1989, the museum provided a "space between" forum for civil rights activists to tell a local story that was new to most white residents and even to some African Americans. The activist informants participated in school group programs and in a lively panel discussion before an interracial audience subsequently broadcast on local public television.

Strong Seed was a product of shared inquiry and shared authority, though both were shaped and limited by the politics of the topic and the stance of the participating historians. Kathy and Mary developed the exhibit with an in-house staff and did not involve the potential narrators or other stakeholders in setting the problem. They chose the topic and the interpretive strategy based on their own historical and political agendas, extensive research, and prior professional relationships with several of the activists. They structured the oral history interviews to elicit quotable material for exhibit labels. For their part, the narrators took the opportunity to speak directly to white St.

25. William Clay, quoted in Missouri Historical Society exhibit brochure, *A Strong Seed Planted: The Civil Rights Movement in St. Louis, 1954–1968* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1989), 2.

Louisans who did not yet consider the civil rights struggle a legitimate part of the city's history, and to black St. Louisans who had been waiting for decades to see their struggles acknowledged in the city's mainstream history museum. The Jefferson Bank exhibit deliberately told their story on their terms and in their voices. It was not, and did not strive to be, even-handed. After the exhibit opened, some visitors objected that the presentation was biased. The former president of Jefferson Bank formally complained that the exhibit had not fairly presented both sides—that is, his side—of the story.

Reflecting on the exhibit and its public reception, Kathy wondered whether she and Mary should have included all the stakeholders in setting the problem. Should the business community have had an opportunity to tell its story too? The exhibit had acknowledged that protesters had defied a court order. But the exhibit team had not sought out anyone who presented, much less defended, the bank's position. The nagging questions remained: was it responsible public history to take a stand by presenting some powerful first-person narratives and not others? Did a taxpayer-subsidized cultural institution in a racially mixed city have a civic obligation to be scrupulously even-handed and morally neutral, or could it take a principled stand on the proposition that civil disobedience was a lesser crime than racial repression?[26]

Ten years later, MHS initiated another African-American history project in cooperation with local African-American residents. *Through the Eyes of a Child* was an exercise in shared inquiry and authority because it was based on oral history interviews, but it was unlike *Strong Seed* because it pursued different ends by different means.

Kathy and Jacqueline Dace, an African-American staff member who was an experienced researcher and oral interviewer, though not a trained historian, initiated the project. This time an explicit goal was to share both inquiry and authority with the black community, beginning with focus group discussions to determine what kind of museum exhibit that community wanted to see. The team sought a representative cross-section of the African-American community, but the focus group pool was disproportionately middle-class and middle-aged. These residents firmly recommended against an exhibit on civil rights, music, or sports, all of which they regarded as stereotypical at best. They had a different, though no less pressing, agenda than the Jeff Bank activists had years before: they believed that traditional African-American family and community values were at risk, and that it took strong families and supportive neighborhoods to rear an African-American child. Many of them fondly recalled their own childhoods in the proud, middle-class, then racially segregated North St. Louis "Ville."[27]

26. Katharine T. Corbett and Mary E. Seematter, "'A Strong Seed Planted': Black History Programming at the Missouri Historical Society," *OAH Magazine of History* 4, no. 3 (Summer, 1989): 16–20.

27. Revealing autobiographical accounts of growing up black in segregated St. Louis include Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House 1969); Dick Gre-

Jackie organized an advisory board from focus group volunteers, and recruited consulting African-American historians to help set the problem. From their discussions emerged the exhibit theme, an exploration of childhood in four predominantly black St. Louis neighborhoods between 1940 and 1980. Jackie was the project's passionate driving force—writing grants, hiring African-American interviewers, working with MHS staff to develop the exhibit, and serving as the point person between the administration and the African-American community.

Through the Eyes of a Child and its supporting programming, which included a one-act play and curriculum materials for neighborhood oral history projects, celebrated middle-class community values and reflected them from the museum back to the community. Although the consulting historians wanted a more focused analysis of the very real class differences among the neighborhoods, the advisory board did not. The choices of theme, and the primary sources themselves, worked against critical class and gender analysis because the interviewers elicited memories of childhood, recollections always prone to nostalgia. The affirming focus on childhood memory did not, however, promise more than it delivered, nor draw conclusions beyond the evidence at hand.

The exhibit was well designed and executed. Visitors entered through a jarring montage of photographs and other vintage documents that told of segregation and racial strife, then passed into a calmer gallery showcasing each neighborhood and offering representations of a living room, school room, kitchen, and church sanctuary. Visitors could listen on audio handsets to childhood memories gleaned from the oral history tapes.

African-American audiences came in droves and loved the exhibit, in large part because it was theirs; they legitimately claimed ownership. Direct and decisive African-American involvement in the exhibit planning stages gave participants a stake in the outcome, and entree into an institution many previously had regarded as alien turf. Dozens of people showed up on closing day to say goodbye and shed a few tears as an exhibit they loved and had helped create came down. *Through the Eyes of a Child* had given St. Louis African Americans the exhibit they wanted, and public historians object lessons in how people lay claim to their past.[28]

A Tale of Today

If *Through the Eyes of a Child* was an example of sharing, *St. Louis in the Gilded Age* was not. In 1992 the Missouri Historical Society assigned us the task of developing a major, NEH-fundable exhibition. We chose to explore how

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gory, *Nigger* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), and Ntozake Shange, *Three Pieces* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

28. *Through the Eyes of a Child*, Missouri Historical Society, 2002; Jacqueline K. Dace, interview with Katharine T. Corbett, 5 May 2004.

St. Louis had come to be a major industrial city at the end of the nineteenth century—the era many residents believed had been the foundation of the Good Old Days culminating in the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Mark Twain's and Charles Dudley Warner's satiric novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873) provided the interpretive metaphor and dramatic design imagery—a depiction of surface glitter masking core corruption, persistent poverty amid progress. We meant the exhibit to be an enduring tale of today—a critical revelation of past times and a commentary on the present.[29]

In-house reflective practice and shared inquiry came easy for long-time co-workers. NEH guidelines mandated consultation with outside academic scholars, but were less insistent on broader community participation. The exhibit team decided to keep authority closely held.

St. Louis in the Gilded Age displayed both the strengths and weaknesses of NEH-style, scholar-driven historical exhibits. The underlying research was thorough, the interpretive themes attuned to the latest scholarship, the exhibits professionally designed and executed, the exhibit catalog a lasting community history resource. The exhibit delivered on its promise to NEH, fulfilled MHS institutional goals, drew enthusiastic crowds to the museum, and received an AASLH Award of Merit. But while most visitors loved the array of ever-popular Victoriana and the engaging computer interactive based on the 1880 census, many missed our edgy interpretive thrust. The exhibit was simply too academic for a general audience. Had we sought more advice from imaginative people outside the history guild, we might have lightened up enough to produce an interpretation more accessible, and hence more effective.[30]

History in the SLO Lane

Part-way through the *Gilded Age* project, Dick reached retirement age and removed to San Luis Obispo County, California. There he fell in with a group of public historians, some of them professionally trained. Kitchen-table discussions over the state of local history led them in 1997 to charter Heritage Shared, a nonprofit whose mission was to foster inclusive, participatory community history.

29. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of To-day* (Hartford, Conn.: American Publishing Co., 1874); Miller and Scott, *The Eads Bridge*; Howard S. Miller, "The Sense of the Place, The Spirit of the Times," keynote address, *The Persistence of the Past: The Legacy of Gilded-Age St. Louis: A Forum for Discussion* (Missouri Historical Society, 12–13 November 1993); *Gilded Age* exhibit interpretation team members included Kathy Corbett, Dick Miller, and Patricia Adams.

30. Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, *St. Louis in the Gilded Age* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1993); Katharine T. Corbett and Howard S. Miller, "Engaging the Public in Urban History: St. Louis in the Gilded Age," poster session, OAH/NCPH annual meeting, 1995; Robert W. Duffy, "Beyond the Glitter," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 7 October 1993; Deborah L. Perry and Evan Finamore, "Saint Louis in the Gilded Age at the Missouri Historical Society: Summative Evaluation Report," Selinda Research Associates, December 1995.

San Luis Obispo (SLO, the universal acronym) is a rural county of open spaces, rugged terrain, and steady habits, where many residents proclaim "I love the SLO Life" on their bumper stickers. Local history flourishes in balkanized fragments lovingly preserved by more than a hundred local history societies.[31]

Heritage Shared strove to broaden local historical perspectives, and thus to help residents see their history whole. The initial effort was a series of three annual community history forums funded by the California Council for the Humanities that featured formal talks by outside experts, informal discussions among locals and visiting historians, content-focused theater and music, and field trips enriched by originally researched site guides. Subsequent projects included a variety of public programs, including a reference guide to SLO county historical organizations, a historic house tour fund-raiser for history education in local public schools, a bicycle tour of historic San Luis Obispo, and an ongoing newsletter.[32]

A reflective self-assessment in 2003–2004 suggested that thus far Heritage Shared board members had successfully shared inquiry and authority. On the positive side, our public programming and a substantial body of original work had raised the level of historical expectation among our general membership. On the other hand, we had come up short in our efforts at institutional cooperation and community outreach, and in our attempts to broaden the SLO historical imagination. As public historians we had focused too much on the *history,* too little on the *public.* We had forgotten that popular history always begins and ends with village storytellers. The fact remained that San Luisans generally preferred their past as it always had been—anecdotal, comforting, and close to home.[33]

Heritage Shared faced a double problem and opportunity: to make our past more acceptable to our publics, and to make their pasts more acceptable to us. Here David Glassberg's admonition came to mind—that the distance between academic and popular history will not be bridged "by historians reaching out to 'the public,' but rather by their reaching in to discover the humanity they share." Glassberg urged historians to balance their carefully schooled,

31. Heritage Shared, *Perspectives* (Spring, 1999): 1; *The Heritage Shared Guide to Central Coast Historical Resources* (San Luis Obispo: 2002); www.historyinslocounty.com. Dick writes here as a reflective participant-observer, not necessarily an organizational spokesman. On the relation of locale to local history, see Joseph A. Amato, *Rethinking Home: A Case for Writing Local History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Glassberg, "Sense of History" and "Making Places in California," *Sense of History*, 3–22, 167–202; and Glassie, *Ballymenone*, 575–665.

32. Representative Heritage Shared publications include *In Search of Chinese San Luis Obispo* (1988); *Historic Byways of San Luis Obispo County* (1999); *Living on the Land: San Luis Obispo County Historic 20th Century Agricultural Sites* (2001); *Deliveries 'Round the Back: A History and Heritage House Tour* (2000); *Pedaling the Past Through San Luis Obispo* (2005); *Perspectives: Celebrating the History, Heritage and Culture of the Central Coast* (1999 to date); and the website www.heritageshared.org.

33. See *Times Past,* Dan Krieger's perennially popular local history columns in the San Luis Obispo *Tribune.* For a more positive assessment of Heritage Shared accomplishments, see Robert Pavlik, "Seventh-Inning Stretch," Heritage Shared, *Perspectives* (Spring, 2004): 4.

detached perspective with the recognition that they too have personal needs for the past. "Our own families, our own communities, can be the source of historical insights, not because we assume that everyone is like us, but because we can establish who we are only by writing from a place, from a community, from a location in the world." By 2005 Heritage Shared was ready to acknowledge that even the SLO past was spacious enough for all.[34]

Meet Me at the Fair

The St. Louis World's Fair (officially, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition) transformed Forest Park into a magic kingdom for only a few months in the summer of 1904, but the event remains the community's most cherished memory and the park a sacred space of civic myth and family lore. The fair symbolized the best of the Good Old Days, when St. Louis reached its pinnacle of influence and cultural aspiration. The Missouri Historical Society, located on the former fairgrounds, is the official Exposition archive and the acknowledged keeper of its memory and memorabilia. Over the decades St. Louisans have come to expect a fair exhibit whenever they visit the museum.

Charged in 1993 with the task of developing yet another World's Fair exhibit, Kathy, Dick and the other members of the interpretation team decided to make its central theme the memory of the fair, not its actuality. We hoped that *Meet Me at the Fair: Memory, History, and the 1904 World's Fair* would stimulate a public conversation about how and why this now distant, one-time event still suffused local history, family history, and civic identity. We hoped that by deconstructing fair memories we could encourage community-wide reflection on the ways all of us continually rehearse the past.[35]

Widespread professional discussions of history and memory at the time sharpened our own curiosities about the social construction of history. The character of the MHS World's Fair collections, mostly graphics generated by the fair's publicity department and small, inexpensive souvenir keepsakes, also invited this approach. The lure of trinkets and images, and the almost hallowed ground of Forest Park itself, fostered illusions of tangible contact with a fabled past.[36]

34. Glassberg, *Sense of History*, 210. Compare Howard S. Miller, "Whose History? Whose Heritage? Recovering Chinese San Luis Obispo," panel session, *Multicultural Perspectives on Community History,* NCPH annual meeting, 1998; John Kuo Wei Tchen, "Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment," Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 285–326, and "Back to Basics: Who is Researching and Interpreting for Whom?" *Journal of American History* 81, no. 3 (December, 1994): 1004–10.

35. *Meet Me at the Fair: Memory, History, and the 1904 World's Fair* team members included Kathy Corbett, Patricia Adams, Dick Miller, and Carol Christ. For broader context see Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

36. On the material culture of memory, see David Thelen, ed., *Memory and American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Mem-*

Meet Me at the Fair opened in June 1996. We designed the exhibit to illustrate how objects and places help fashion personal, family, and civic memories, and how each generation invests these memories with new meanings for its own social and political ends. The project also quickly became an object lesson in how public historians wrestle with shared inquiry and authority when they raise troubling questions about heartfelt family traditions, cultural identity, and civic pride.

Hindsight gave us an opportunity to reflect on how we might have found common ground with two audiences, each with high stakes invested in fair memories. One was the local Filipino community; the other, larger and more diffuse, embraced St. Louisans who identified the charming bric-a-brac of the fair with the event itself, and thus cherished romanticized memories of a fair that never was.[37]

Given the recent end of the Philippine Insurrection (1899–1902) against American occupation in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, it was not surprising that the most popular exhibit at the 1904 Fair was a Philippine Village, where carefully staged islanders entertained fairgoers with displays of their native ways. We wanted visitors to realize that this U.S. government-sponsored exhibit—like every other anthropological exhibit at the fair—had an explicit agenda based on a Social Darwinist theory of cultural evolution. The fair offered visitors exhibits of native peoples in their "primitive" state side-by-side with exhibits of the same peoples "improved" by Western civilization. The Philippine Village juxtaposed tradition-bound Igorots against the more Westernized Visayans, demonstrating how backward races could advance under American tutelage.[38]

We highlighted one aspect of the Philippine Village story to illustrate how a persistent fair memory had fed local racist mythology. A century after the event, many St. Louisans believed that Igorot villagers had been voracious dog-eaters who regularly foraged pets in nearby neighborhoods. The reality was that Igorots at home ate dog only on rare ceremonial occasions. It was the St. Louis fair managers who had insisted that they eat pound-supplied dogs daily because it made for a good show and seemed to confirm the natives' alleged cultural inferiority. Tales of foraging Filipinos running amok seeped into local urban legend, and remain some of the most widely believed memories of the fair.

During the exhibit planning phase, we contacted a local Filipino cultural

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ory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture (New York: Knopf, 1991)*;* Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimlett, "Objects of Memory: Material Culture as Life Review, Elliott Oring, ed., *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: A Reader* (Logan: Utah University Press, 1989), 329–38, and Glassie, *Material Culture.*

37. Susan Binzer, "The Exhibit: Some Like It, Some Don't!," *World's Fair Society Newsletter* (August, 1996): 3. On the edginess of historical memory studies, see Edward Linenthal, "Struggling With Memory and History," *Journal of American History* 83, no. 3 (December, 1995): 1094–1101, and Glassberg, *Sense of the Past*, 205–11.

38. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair,* 154–83.

organization to learn what current Filipino-American residents thought about this pernicious local myth. The president, a physician, explained that Igorot dog-eating stories were painful racist insults to the other Filipinos, especially to the Visayans (her own heritage), who also had had a presence at the fair. She lent us traditional Visayan needlework for exhibit, and arranged for Filipino dancers to perform at the opening. Our relationship deteriorated, however, when she previewed the exhibit and saw a 1904 photograph of Igorots killing a dog.

We had not included her in the decision to exhibit the photograph, in part because we mistakenly believed that she had acquiesced, in part because we wanted to retain interpretive control. We now realized, a little late, that we had blundered into the middle of ongoing racial and class tensions within the Filipino-American community. The sophisticated members of the exclusively Visayan cultural association did not want to be identified with Igorots, or in any way help rehabilitate their historical reputation. They threatened a public exhibit boycott. Ensuing negotiations ended in painful compromise. We balked at changing the interpretive text, but agreed to remove the offending image and to add some historical Visayan photographs. Sacrificing the photograph blunted an important interpretive point about the power of images in the construction of memory. Far more compelling than written accounts, photographs of Igorots eating dogs had fueled the myth.

More importantly, we realized that we had not been sufficiently sensitive to the internal dynamics of Filipino-American culture. Had we involved local Filipino Americans in give-and-take discussion before we put the photo on the wall, we all might have been able to agree on its value in the exhibit. Had we been more reflective, more willing to share inquiry and authority, we might have achieved a cultural counterpoint instead of a grudging cultural compromise.

Nevertheless visitors thronged to the exhibit and loved the displays of fair memorabilia. Since exhibit-goers always construct their own experience from the materials at hand, most left satisfied. Because so many St. Louisans recognized objects similar to those in their grandmothers' curio cabinets, the displayed artifacts successfully triggered memories that linked civic event and family heritage.

As an inquest into the process of memory-making, however, *Meet Me at The Fair* proved only partially successful. Surveys by professional evaluators showed that visitors did accept one of our main interpretive points—that fairgoers had a multitude of experiences at the time, and hence a multitude of later recollections that varied with their individual and social situations. Moving from the general notion of myriad pasts to a new understanding of a particular event, however, much less to an appreciation of memory as a social and political construct, was for most visitors too much of a stretch.

Meet Me at the Fair was a telling reminder that agency plays a pivotal role in the planning and staging of public history. Although—and to some degree because—so many St. Louisans treasured their fair memories, we had made

little effort to involve the public in the exhibit development process. We did not seriously reach out to the community to set the problem or to share the inquiry. We held authority close in part because we suspected that St. Louisans would resist a critical look at their most revered historical episode. When conditions forced reflection-in-action upon us, our responses were tentative or defensive. Lacking sufficient faith that deeply reflective practice and sincerely shared inquiry could lead us to common ground, we hesitated to risk it.

The resulting exhibit asked visitors to take the fun out of the fair, to trade enjoyment for analysis, heritage for history. That they refused ironically proved our point about the force of memory, but meant that we had not pierced the veil of myth and lore that kept St. Louisans from seeing their fair in a new light. Visitors walked in with all the authority, and kept it. They wandered in the exits and left through the entrances, ignored some artifacts altogether and looked at the rest in any order they chose, all in search of something that piqued their interest because it touched their hearts and minds. Our visitors controlled the conversation, as visitors always do; the most we should realistically have hoped for was an opportunity to join in. In spite of our best efforts to turn the conversation our way, most visitors left as they had come, chatting about collectibles that reminded them of the glorious summer when St. Louis was the center of the world.[39]

That's Me and My Sister in That Picture!

Critical shared reflection suggested that over the decades we have done pretty well practicing for our publics, but less well practicing with them. On most projects we have shared too little inquiry or authority during the formative stages, thereby limiting our opportunities to counterpoint our history with our public's varied pasts. Honest sharing, a willingness to surrender some intellectual control, is the hardest part of public history practice because it is the aspect most alien to academic temperament and training. Comparing her dual roles as an academic and a talking head in historical documentaries, Carol Berkin notes that historians "are neither natural nor trained collaborators," who often prefer archival solitude to engagement with the living. "Perhaps no profession in the world, except poetry writing and lighthouse keeping, allows such independence, such control over the process of creating and completing a project."[40]

Oral historians and activists seem better at collaborative history than most, both out of practical necessity and personal conviction. Linda Shopes speaks

39. Randi Korn & Associates, "A Summative Evaluation of *Meet Me at the Fair: Memory and History and the 1904 World's Fair*, Prepared for the Missouri Historical Society, May 1997; Katharine T. Corbett, "How Exhibits Mean: Memory, History, and the 1904 World's Fair, *Exhibitionist* 18 (Fall, 1999): 38–41.

40. Carol Berkin, "So You Want to Be in Pictures? Tips From a Talking Head," *OAH Newsletter* 33 (February, 2005): 1, 10.

for both when she observes that "collaborative work is personally and intellectually demanding, requiring an ability—even the courage—to deal with people and situations that can be difficult." It also demands a certain "tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty about how a project will work out; a willingness to take risks, not follow established protocols, and make decisions based on the logic of the work itself."[41]

Genuine two-way public engagement is a sometime thing, and never easy. Anne Valk's experience coordinating research for the Duke University *Behind the Veil* oral history project left her with the realization that essential community collaborators and scholars had different stakes in the outcome. "They sought evidence of local exceptionalism, which might become the basis for economic development or historic celebration," she recalled. "We, on the other hand, approached each community seeking evidence of broader historical patterns." Similarly, Linda Shopes describes her public history experiences as "quite mixed, often quite frustrating," because locals tended to take the local story, as they defined it, as self-evident. "My job, gently, carefully, is to suggest that their story is part of a broader story . . . And so we go back and forth, in a conversation about the very guts of history: what we remember and why we remember it."[42]

Confronting the agency issue head-on at the Minnesota Historical Society, Benjamin Filene's exhibit team made a deliberate effort to let the public take the lead in recovering neighborhood history. They took a large neighborhood plat map into the community and invited residents to mark what was where and when. Contributors flocked around, argued, and corrected or crossed out each other's notations in their collaborative effort to get it right. "The process of memory, reflection, and conversation (with us and especially among the participants) was at least as important as the final product. We were trying to elicit a point of view rather than control it." When Filene later displayed the marked-up map at the Minnesota History Center, "we found the conversations and memory-making continued unabated, even without pens in hand."[43]

These and other practitioners' experiences reinforce our own observations and conclusions. The first is that the operant word in "public history" is *public.* All good historical practice is reflective, but public history requires a genuine commitment to engage. All historians should attend to what the public thinks about the past and its purposes, but public historians are obliged to do so as a condition of successful employment.

Moreover, public history practice is situational. The field has no one-size-fits-all methodology because every occasion has to be worked in its own way.

41. Shopes, "Commentary: Sharing Authority," 106.

42. Anne Valk, personal communication with the authors, 28 March 2004; Linda Shopes, personal communication with the authors, 5 April 2004.

43. Benjamin Filene, "Object Lessons: Open House," *Common-Place* 3, no. 3 (April, 2003): www.Common-Place.org; Benjamin Filene, personal communication with the authors, 4 May 2004.

The essential element is agency: the key questions for practitioners are who has legitimate power, who is willing to share it, and under what conditions?

Capital H History itself is problematic. The past is a universal referent, but trained practitioners and lay people often seek different histories for different purposes. Because all of us use the past to help make sense of the present and to find meaning in our lives, popular histories are more deeply rooted in culture than the academic version perfected in learned seminars. Professional practitioners can neither ignore the popular past nor shout it down, but with effort and luck, we can join in the public's ongoing conversation. Like other keepers of the useful myths, we are mediators between the past and the present, between the truths we want to tell and the truths people want to tell us. To do our jobs well, we have to remain flexible, responsive, always open to a chance encounter with a Jessie Sulkowski, who found herself in a snapshot and shared a past we otherwise would have missed.

Katharine T. Corbett was curator of education at the Missouri Historical Society, 1980–1990, and Director of Interpretation, 1990–1997. Since retirement she has lived in Maine and continues to consult on exhibit development.

Howard S. (Dick) Miller taught history at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, 1971–1991. Since retirement he has lived in California and continues to develop exhibits and public history programming.

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