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Article Title: The Historical Society in a Modern World

Full Citation: Joseph W Snell, "The Historical Society in a Modern World," *Nebraska History* 59 (1978): 526-538.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NHHistoryModern.pdf>

Date: 2/19/2015

Article Summary: This article is the text of a speech given at the Nebraska State Historical Society's fall meeting in Lincoln, September 3, 1977, by Joseph W Snell, executive director of the Kansas State Historical Society. The value of historical preservation and the presentation and use of its materials, with various activities such as film festivals, craft fairs, and living history farms are discussed.

Cataloging Information:

Names: James A Lord, Louie Lord, John James Ingalls, William Inge, Margaret Hill McCarter, Dwight Eisenhower, Dr John R Brinkley

THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN A MODERN WORLD

By Joseph W. Snell

The following speech was given at the Nebraska State Historical Society's fall meeting in Lincoln, September 3, 1977, by Joseph W. Snell, executive director of the Kansas State Historical Society.

A Kansas legislator from the western fringes of our state once toured the home building of the Kansas State Historical Society and loudly proclaimed "What the hell good is a historical society?" As we enter the last quarter of the 20th century I'm sure many persons on the staffs of societies, and others, from time to time, wonder the same thing. On any given morning we can pick up our hometown newspaper or tune in on the *Today* show to learn of an impending crisis in the Middle East, the critical energy supply facing the entire nation, an important space spectacular, the latest economic indicators, too much rain—or too little.

Farm prices are down while the cost of living is up. There are local burglaries, murders and rapes; the city commission hassles over next year's budget which will inevitably mean higher taxes. Idi Amin spouts off about Britons, the President announces a new welfare program, and the English face another severe financial crisis. Significant breakthroughs are made in science; medicine can transplant still another human organ, saccharine causes cancer and laetril doesn't cure it.

These are vitally important events which affect the quality and condition of our lives or even life itself. Many of them require vast amounts of tax dollars, willingly spent or otherwise, and there are few Americans who aren't touched by them to some degree.

How, then, can we in the historical society business justify our existence and the expenditure of taxpayers' dollars on something so "frivolous" as the collection of documents which recount the events of a long ago past? Is saving an old butter churn which requires a museum staff to catalog, restore and preserve it so

worth while in the light of the major events of the day? Are we who serve the public as civil servants laboring in a state or local historical society merely parasites who take but give little in return? Should we forsake public support of historical societies for something more important?

My answer is an emphatic NO! In these days of stress, the likes of which have never before been experienced by man, in these days when an advanced education is equivalent to success, and in these days when men and women have more leisure time than ever before, a historical society plays a vital role. The numbers of persons such a society serves in educational, cultural and recreational fields cannot be counted but it is safe to say they number into the hundreds of thousands. Peripheral advantages such as promotion of an area, direct and indirect sales, and good will are immeasurable. We can live without our historical societies, but we won't live as well.

Americans have long recognized the value of preserving the documents and artifacts of the past in order to relate their own experiences to those of their grandfathers and to understand the reasons for those experiences. The idea of organizations devoted to the acquisition, preservation and dissemination of such materials originated in Europe, apparently, but quickly came to America. Only ten years after the guns of the revolution were stilled at Yorktown and only two years after the United States embarked on its constitutional journey the first state historical society, that of New York, was founded.

Within a short time another state historical society was formed, then another, and still another so that by the time the Civil War came along there were 66 active historical societies in the United States searching out the letters and documents of past actors on the great stage of life.

It seems particularly significant that while our country was still fulfilling its "manifest destiny," settling the frontier and taming the wild land, its citizens would be so actively interested in what had passed before them. If saving those precious fragments of information was so important to these pioneers busily settling the greatest country on earth it cannot be surprising that it is important to us who are equally busy on different frontiers.

It would seem safe to say that mankind has always been interested in preserving a record of its past. Prehistoric peoples recorded important events on the walls of caves while Egyptians

painted them in their tombs. The Bible is a history book; unschooled nations orally passed their histories from generation to generation. In 1977 we who are interested in history are merely continuing the process but as the complexity of society grows so do the programs of the viable historical society.

Today we are intimately involved in the total historical experience, not just a phase of it as were the early societies. Perhaps it is because our vocations give us more time for our avocations. Perhaps it is because the world's past seems infinitely more pleasing than its future. Perhaps it is because we are fired up by the recent bicentennial celebration or from watching a television serial called *Roots*. Or perhaps we really can cope with the future by understanding the past. Whatever the reasons, historical societies today serve the public in ways never dreamed of 50 or even 25 years ago.

The first historical societies were primarily concerned with finding and saving. Occasionally they published a journal or a book. They massed large and valuable collections of diaries, letters, reports and artifacts relating to our past. But they invariably left utilization of these materials to a small group of scholars.

In the 20th century the historical society is as involved in presenting and using its materials as it is in acquiring and preserving them. These materials are no longer guarded jealously and restricted from use except by a chosen few. Quite the contrary. The program is one of involvement and historical societies reach out to the public, asking for their involvement. Consequently it seems to me that the really progressive historical societies have become as important in culture and education as our universities and colleges and as important in recreation as our federal, state and city park departments.

The dictionary defines culture as "intellectual and artistic activity." As simple as that. Perhaps we would carry it a bit further and say that anything which enriches the mind and soul is cultural. And this takes in a large territory.

Music, art, drama, literature—these are all without doubt cultural activities but what about conducting family history research, visiting a museum, reading newspapers, studying 18th century archeological artifacts? Aren't they, too, cultural activities? Actually, there is no end to the subjects which could be listed under such a heading. Most historical societies, and

they alone, are well endowed with the rudiments of so many cultural programs.

Music? Your historical society collects not only published sheet music but also recorded presentations by state and local organizations as well as those created by local artists and presented by nationally known groups. In my state, Kansas, for instance, we have reels and reels of magnetic audio tape which record one Kansan's ideas of what a five string banjo really should sound like. We also have recordings of an opera written by a Kansan but performed by the Santa Fe, New Mexico, opera company. We are collecting the efforts of a young rock group, formed from boys native to our capital city, which is currently high on the charts, as they say. Called *Kansas*, the group performs hard rock which is merely noise to me but to my sons it is sweet as honey. That's culture too.

And art. I dare say there is no historical society in the United States which does not have an art collection of some sort. Not all of us can be as fortunate as the Montana Historical Society which has its large collection of Charles Russell or other societies which have a Bierstadt or a Whistler or a Wyeth. But we all have art and in its way it is as important as the "big" art for it shows the attempts of man to portray a feeling to his fellow man. Grandma Moses was not in the class of Michaelangelo or Titian but she said something with her paintings which the masters did not. So it is with little people, the artists who were good but who never made it to the top. Their work shows us their impressions of a person, a place, an event or a feeling which can be important to our intellectual and cultural development.

We have in Kansas, for instance, quite a few paintings by a rather good self taught artist named Henry Worrall. Now I'm sure most of you have never heard of Professor Worrall, but he was good enough that *Harper's Weekly* often had plates made after his work, and the Santa Fe railroad used his designs for promotional literature designed to sell land in the West. Worrall's paintings are good, at least they look good to me, but even I can tell that they lack the nuances required to make them excellent. And yet these paintings record a Kansas and a Kansas way of life that has long been gone and which can only be partially understood through the written word. His paintings show an appreciation of Kansas sunsets, of wooded eastern hills, and of the boundless prairies. They also record with humor the

artist being treed by a wounded buffalo and Wild Bill Hickok involved in some shenanigans with the Abilene city council. Culture? You bet! Henry Worrall and his contemporaries fit the definition exactly.

Drama came early to the Midwest. Strangely enough even the most remote prairie towns, if they had any size at all, were treated to a variety of dramatic productions by touring companies such as that of James A. and Louie Lord. These people out here were not hicks by any means; they knew what the world was all about and probably saw as much good theatrical material in a life time as any of us do today.

And we know about these affairs because the historical societies have saved the old newspapers which ran critical reviews. They saved play bills, photographs, and letters which described the events. Because of the historical society we know that there was fun on the frontier and plenty of it.

Literature and the historical society, of course, are inseparable. Most state societies attempt to collect everything written by a native son or daughter, about a native son or daughter and about the state. This includes a great deal of non-historical material such as novels, poetry, and so on. Most states have had some outstanding and internationally known writers. In Kansas we are proud to claim John James Ingalls who was famous for his *Bluegrass* and *Catfish Aristocracy*. We had William Inge and Margaret Hill McCarter. Dwight Eisenhower, his son, and his grandson have all left us a literary heritage.

If the historical society did not accumulate all this material in one place who would? The library of the state university probably would have the works of the greatest writers but would they buy the single work of an author who lived a century ago? The state library might have some of this transient literature but its collecting policy is usually more toward the research side and not toward fiction. It's a matter of maybe, maybe not, but for the historical society it is a matter of extreme importance for the "one book in a lifetime writer" is as important in his niche as is the multi-volumed writer whose name is on everyone's lips.

But it is not just the published works of a musician, an artist, or a writer which contribute to our cultural heritage. The letters John James Ingalls wrote home to his family while he was a United States Senator are as literary as are his monographs.

They are infinitely more honest than most descriptions of our capital, for he described the Washington of the 1880s far better than anyone has when writing for the public. The letters of a pioneer housewife, homesick for the East, contribute greatly to our intellectual understanding of her loneliness and despair. The historical society preserves these materials.

Our archeology departments collect and restore evidences of prior civilizations. They reconstruct and display vessels, some of them highly decorated but all of them of particular shapes and materials. Decorative beadwork, woven mats, and even arrow fletching inform us that our early predecessors on the plains were appreciative of things beautiful just as we are today.

Museums present other facets of culture. Pioneer exhibits, for example, suggest that early settlers were self-sufficient, adaptive and clever with their minds and hands. Hand made quilts, whittled spoons, furniture fashioned admirably from local walnut or cedar attest to love of design, color, shape and texture. As settlement progressed so did the ability to appreciate the finer things of life. This came with more leisure time, more money and less fear of what the frontier was all about. Crude but beautiful furniture gave way to highly decorative chairs, buffets and tables. Carpets replaced earthen floors and wall-paper decorated living rooms where newspapers had been pasted up before. Museum period rooms and special exhibits trace the development of American taste from prehistoric to modern times.

Of all the facets of modern historical society work, however, I personally feel it excels in the field of education. Of course our universities and colleges conduct classes to thousands of students each semester; our public schools do likewise. Schools maintain libraries and collect original materials, but none do so on as comprehensive a scale as does the good historical society.

We know, of course, that the graduate student, arduously researching and writing his master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, pores through the papers and documents saved in manuscript and archival collections. We know he studies the newspapers, government documents, and all applicable published materials. The public is well aware of the connection between the historical society and higher education.

But how much of the public realizes that the historical society equally participates in the education of elementary school

children? It does this in many ways, the most obvious being guided tours of museums or historic sites. Here one can be given a general background of regional history or the detailed background of a specific subject. Students may touch and handle the objects of their forebears. They are shown how they worked and will go away with a greater awareness than they ever would obtain from reading or from studying photographs.

Craft demonstrations depict the manner in which wool is carded, then spun into clothing. They see how their great grandparents made soap or dipped candles. They see a blacksmith shape a horseshoe or see a hunter pour his own bullets and measure his own powder. Butter magically appears from cream churned by a housewife. They taste the butter, light the candles, fondle a .44 calibre ball and once they are home, wash their hands with samples of pioneer soap.

In Kansas we involve as many grade school children as we can by holding small classes in a period room which is designed as a 19th century school room. When the time comes and we have our new museum facility constructed on an 80-acre tract west of Topeka, we will move in a one-room school house and offer it for a full day to fourth grade teachers, who can conduct their classes exactly as their predecessors did 100 years ago. This type of living instruction has been extremely successful in other museum complexes and we think it will work well in Kansas too.

Older children participate in educational games involving the historical society. In Topeka each year schools conduct historical treasure hunts. They are given a list of questions about Kansas or local history and then must find the answers by doing elementary research in the archives, library or newspapers.

High schools are becoming involved in oral history projects which are of necessity coordinated with the local historical society. If I may use my own experience as an example, I'd like to tell you of a project commenced by a high school librarian a few years back. He called me one day and said he wanted to involve his students in researching a local event or person, have them interview living witnesses, compile a photographic record of their research and then make presentations concerning their subjects. Naturally we were delighted to cooperate and we've never regretted it.

One subject chosen that first year was the notorious Dr. John R. Brinkley, the Kansas physician who claimed he could restore

lost male virility by implanting Toggenberg goat glands in men's bodies. Now I'm not saying he was a genius or a quack. There are plenty of people still around who will argue both sides of that question. For my part I'll just stick to the facts as I know them.

The two high school boys assigned to the Brinkley subject came to the Kansas State Historical Society, talked to me, other historians, and our librarians, then sat down and read what had already been done on the man.

With the help of their instructor they compiled a list of persons still living in Kansas who had been involved in the Brinkley medical business and his later political efforts. With tape recorder and camera they interviewed a singing cowboy who had accompanied the doctor on his political swings, former nurses, patients, and the man who is credited as being the first baby born as a result of Doctor Brinkley's rejuvenation operation. The students were diligent in their research efforts and even went so far as to telephone Doctor Brinkley's aging widow who lives in Del Rio, Texas.

Well, the upshot of the thing was that the boys were invited to visit Mrs. Brinkley at her home. They, their instructor, and the historical society raised enough money privately to pay their air fare down and back, and what a time they had. They learned that Mrs. Brinkley still lives in the mansion the doctor constructed in the mid-1930s when he left Kansas. The mansion was in a terribly decrepit condition, and Mrs. Brinkley, now poverty stricken, occupied only the servants' quarters. Mrs. Brinkley, as poor as she is, treated them royally and the boys called the experience the high point of their lives.

But the story is not over yet. The high school set aside a special evening at which all the oral history projects completed that semester would be presented to the public. A standing room only crowd was on hand because the two young men who had visited Mrs. Brinkley convinced her that she should return for a Kansas visit, the first she had had for 40 years, and view their presentation. This she did and Kansas relived the days of the 1930s, when the name of Doctor Brinkley was on everyone's lips.

But the story is still not over. As a result of the contact first made by those two Topeka high school boys, the Kansas State Historical Society just this last spring obtained the papers and artifacts of John R. Brinkley, something institutions had been attempting to do for 33 years, ever since the doctor died.

The papers are not voluminous but they were of the highest quality and consisted of letters to his family, memos to his staff, letters from satisfied patients, motion pictures, radio lectures, still photographs, publications detailing operations performed by the doctor and above all records of the Kansas hospital in which the doctor perfected his operation and in which he worked until he left Kansas. For the first time the world now has access to Doctor Brinkley's side of his medical and political careers. Heretofore all biographical material was provided by court records, newspapers, and other non-Brinkley sources.

I apologize for this lengthy story but it is typical of the kinds of activities modern historical societies are involved in daily. In this case the story ended happily on all counts for the local county historical society was so impressed that it set up a grants program to assist schools in oral history projects. Other schools are becoming involved in similar programs and the state historical society continues to accumulate papers and artifacts as a result.

Today's active historical society deals with people, not just abstract thoughts and finds fulfillment in having patrons experience history, not just study it.

It is not unusual, for instance, for a progressive society to conduct weekly or monthly lectures, not just about history, but about the quality of life, international affairs, ecology and so on. Some of the lectures take on a philosophical tone but others are nitty gritty "how to do it" periods of instruction. In many cases they are a sharing of experiences.

Film series trace the development of the motion pictures from the earliest attempts at story telling to the avant garde creations of Andy Warhol. Maybe they study the manner in which Hollywood depicted our national experience, first in the early 1900s and then in the 1970s. They might commence with the *Great Train Robbery*, progress through William S. Hart, Gene Autry, and John Wayne to conclude with the spaghetti westerns of Italy or the realistic efforts of Sam Peckinpah.

As patrons of the film series sit through each showing they are not merely being entertained, they are instructed in the development of a media and involved in the changing mores of our society. Whether they come out of the series any the better for the experience is difficult to say, but if they were awake at all they will certainly have a better understanding of our predecessors and of their own country.

Some historical societies sponsor summer weekend activities on their own grounds or in the city park. These range all the way from rock concerts to historical reenactments. They serve several purposes: (1) They acquaint people with the fact that there is a living historical society nearby. (2) They provide entertainment while offering some type of cultural experience or instruction. (3) They bring people together to share a common experience which, hopefully, they will remember kindly as a valued part of tax dollars spent on what they might otherwise consider a stuffy old historical organization useful only to the senile.

There are many other benefits from such performances, some of them as practical as earning a little money to supplement governmental appropriations. In such case a historical society holding a rock concert is not as wildly inconsistent as we might at first think.

Craft exhibitions, which we touched on earlier, are a current activity indulged in by nearly any historical society. These consist of persons demonstrating early methods of doing and making things. On hand might be a soapmaker, a lady carding wool, a man winding rope, a blacksmith, a candle maker, someone cooking taffy, and someone else pressing cider. Aggressive demonstrations might include black-powder shoots, steam-tractor operations, or antique automobile roundups.

Often at these craft days persons demonstrating the crafts dress the part and maintain a running commentary of instruction as they perform their tasks. The value of such craft demonstrations are obvious. For children they show, far better than by words or pictures, how great grandmother spun her wool, cooked her meals, and kept her house. They tell how great grandfather hunted for some of the family's food, how he had his tools repaired and perhaps even how he milked a cow. Surprisingly enough, there are children here in the Midwest who have never seen a cow give up her milk to the hands of a skilled farmer.

Older persons view the craft demonstrations as a bit of nostalgia. Some find it great fun to know more about the craft than does the demonstrator. Retired grandfathers are given a golden opportunity to explain the why and how of machinery and methods their grandchildren know nothing about. For them it is an ego trip. Totally, craft days keep alive the ingredients of life which developed America and suggest more appreciation from

those of us who live in the era of air conditioned supermarkets, paved streets and luxury automobiles. The key word is involvement and there is no better way to do it.

Activities which still involve, though on a lesser scale, include historic tours conducted via bus or automobile caravan. Some tourists prefer to travel alone so programs which permit them to read and drive are more acceptable. Cassette tape recordings can be rented or loaned out and the tourist drives and listens as he goes along at his own pace.

Historic tours bring people closer to history than perhaps any other thing. I can only describe as thrilling the feeling I get when I stand on the very spot where an important event occurred or where a person I have long admired once performed an act recorded for posterity. Perhaps I am overly sentimental but if so there are countless others who share this same feeling.

Some historical societies are now offering conducted national and international tours which relate to our European, Asian, or African roots. No longer is a state historical society hemmed in by its geographical boundaries, for all historians know that history knows no political limits—that to study history properly one must study precedent. Imagine the effectiveness of a guided tour of the Oregon Trail in telling the exciting story of our westward expansion and how much more retention the average person would have of its history than if he merely read about it.

The living farm concept is another growing kind of patronage involvement in modern historical societies. Here a live-in farm family conducts its business and life as closely to that of the late 19th century, or whatever period is chosen, as possible. Visitors can see the housewife's method of cooking, canning, washing, mending, cleaning, gardening and so on while the husband feeds the stock and tends the fields without the aid of modern machinery and technology. As the seasons change so will the operations of the farm. Patrons may make several visits just to observe different conditions as seasons change.

At our new Kansas facility we plan to introduce patrons to the ecology of the region, for the environment had a great deal to do with settlement patterns, farming methodology, construction, business, and professions. Health, social life, education, and nearly all aspects of life were affected by the environment in some manner.

Luckily the new Kansas museum site contains woods, a small

stream, and a large open area so that various native trees and shrubs can be identified as can grasses, flowers, and other greenery. We plan to develop this program in order that visually and physically handicapped persons may benefit from it as well as those who have no infirmities. This is a new approach to the interpretation of history and one we believe will contribute greatly to our total historical education.

In archeology historical societies are providing all these benefits—education, cultural enrichment, and recreation—by involving amateur anthropological associations in digs, seminars and publications. In my own society just this year a two-week dig at a Quiviran site was conducted in cooperation with the Kansas Anthropological Association where 50 amateurs spent the entire time attending instructional periods, digging at the site and assisting in the field laboratory. This is not the first year such a program has been carried on in Kansas and its success is demonstrated by the yearly increased interest on the part of amateur archeologists, kibbitzers and the media. Never have we had such newspaper, radio and television coverage as we had this spring. Portions of the dig will even be used to illustrate a television course on Kansas anthropology sponsored by Washburn University and aired over the local PBS station.

Modern historical societies offer extended lecture services on many aspects of their operations and reach countless hundreds of persons each year. Subjects range from historic preservation, history, and archeology, to architecture, museology, and antique furniture. There is scarcely any limit to what well trained professional members of the historical society staff can speak on. Recipients of these lectures range from grade school children to church groups to professional organizations in similar fields.

Publications offer historical societies still another way of effectively reaching the public. With but few exceptions they issue scholarly journals which recount in scientific detail the events of a specific local or regional history subject. These articles provide the bricks on which the larger structures of historical publications are built. They are the meat of the historical environment.

Other publications may not be so academic in their approach but deal effectively with certain subjects for a certain segment of the reading public. Pictorial histories are extremely popular today. There is not much text to read and the picture captions

are short, but the history told is explicitly drawn through paintings, drawings, and photographs. For the person not interested in detailed history or the worker who has not time for extended reading, the pictorial history is the perfect answer. Even for those who prefer the scholarly publications, pictorials offer data in each illustration reproduced. A good photograph of an historic place or event can tell immeasurably more than can words in the same amount of space.

Coloring books for children are being built around historical subjects. Perhaps the child is not especially interested in history but as he colors the open pictures he assimilates a little knowledge of the subject which in later years may be added to further infusion of data.

Newspapers stored lovingly by most historical societies are sometimes reproduced in gigantic volumes so that persons who have no opportunity to visit a historical society may benefit from the information those old papers contain. Books of maps, of lists of postmasters, and other subjects bring the history which societies are attempting to preserve into wider readership and availability.

Your Nebraska State Historical Society is a leader in the field of publications and in its archival, library, newspaper, and archeological endeavors. It is an outstanding progressive state historical society giving just value for tax dollars spent.

I apologize for mentioning my own state historical society so much, but Kansas and Nebraska are inseparable—we have been since man first set foot on these great plains. The Kansas and Nebraska societies are as inseparable as are the states. We work hand in glove with one another.

To see a good state historical society look at Nebraska, or Kansas, or any number of other nearby state societies. They are growing with their states and are a vital part of them. I for one am proud to work for Kansas through my historical society and for the betterment of life which all societies are providing.