USES AND ABUSES
OF THE PAST

Carol Kammen
and Michael Kammen

THIS ARTICLE is an edited version of a joint presentation made at the 132nd annual meeting and history conference of the Minnesota Historical Society, held October 24, 1981, in Minneapolis. Speaking to an enthusiastic and responsive audience at the noon luncheon were Carol and Michael Kammen of Ithaca, New York. Carol Kammen, a graduate of George Washington University, has been an adjunct instructor at Tompkins-Cortland Community College for ten years. She is the editor of What They Wrote: 19th-century Documents from Tompkins County, New York (1978) and writes a weekly local history column in the Ithaca Journal. Michael Kammen, who received his graduate degrees from Harvard University, is the Newton C. Farr Professor of American History and Culture at Cornell University. He is the author of several books, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning People of Paradox: An Inquiry Concerning the Origins of American Civilization (1972) and A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination, which won the American Revolution Round Table’s annual prize in 1978.

CAROL KAMMEN: I begin with a definition, because I feel that “amateur” is a loaded word, and I would like to deal with that. An academic or professional historian is customarily someone who has studied history, who has been accepted by his or her peers, who receives their praise and suffers their criticism, and who earns a living by teaching, writing, or interpreting history, or some combination of these activities. Such a person is relatively easy to spot and to define.

When we deal with the term “amateur,” however, we are on much shakier ground — not because of the activities of amateur historians but because of the word itself. It has come to mean not really good enough, or as good as could be expected under the circumstances. A play by a little theater group, for example, is often called an amateur effort; that is a way of saying it was all right. Yet the word amateur has nothing to do with shoddy or second rate. Rather, it comes from the Latin amator, which means “to love.” Therefore an amateur historian is one who loves history: reading it, knowing it, researching it, perhaps writing and interpreting it. Why, then, has the word been debased? Jacob Burckhardt suggested that “The word ‘amateur’ owes its evil reputation to the arts. An artist must be a master or nothing, and must dedicate his life to his art, for the arts, of their very nature, demand perfection.”

History does not demand any less of us than our very best, but amateur historians tend to be people who earn their livings in other fields. Amateur status, it seems to me, is respectable today solely as a classification for athletes, and then just because only amateurs get to go for the Olympic gold. It is time that amateur historians also go for the gold.

There are some further problems, of course, with being an amateur or local historian. An amateur historian is considered by many people to be a history buff. A local historian, I think, is something more than a buff. He or she must be the master of many disciplines, for local history, with its limited geographic focus, is possibly the broadest field of inquiry within the discipline. At its best, local history is social, political, and economic history; it is religious and intellectual history; and it is the place to find the individual and his reactions to events. (An example appeared in the Fall, 1981, issue of Minnesota History, which considered the place of personality in history.) Local history is where we find women’s voices. It is the place to find information about child-rearing, education, the influence of state and national government upon localities, and about leisure or privacy and sex.

Local history is often coupled with folklore. Properly done, I think each can illuminate the other. Local his-
tory is a field ripe for the cultural historian, the historian of both material culture — clothing, architecture, artifacts — and the historian trying to determine who it is we are as a people, what makes us different, and what we share in common. I think that methods for local history range from the traditional, archival resource methods to oral, statistical, and literary ones.

So here are we two, a professional and an amateur historian, to look at the question of manipulating the past in order to create or to shape the present. This question implies that history is not just studied to be known, but that history is used. But "used" is yet another word with ambiguous overtones. Is history tarnished because it is used? I do not think that the implication is quite as bad as it sounds: We all use history in a variety of ways and for many purposes. We use our national and our own personal histories, altering and shaping them to see what pleases us; we block out the unpleasantness and forget those things that are unflattering. The word "manipulate," however, has overtones too. Let us first turn to how and why people manipulate the past.

MICHAEL KAMMEN: Among the many reasons why people manipulate the past, I think the greatest number result from various forms of chauvinism. Each of us could surely develop his or her own list, but I will suggest some and try to illustrate them with examples from American history.

The most obvious has to do with state pride and interstate rivalry. One example that comes to mind is the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence, involving the claim that in a backwoods county of North Carolina in May of 1775 — more than a year before the rest of the colonies proclaimed independence — the leaders of one community declared theirs from England. It seems to be virtually certain, although in some quarters dispute goes on to this day, that the so-called Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence is spurious. Ultimately, I think, the whole enduring episode arises from the fact that for a very long time North Carolinians felt — at least in historical terms — that they lived between two states, Virginia and South Carolina, that enjoyed much greater prominence. More important events occurred in those two states: more prominent individuals in terms of their contributions to our history had come from those states; and therefore pride in the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence was a way of claiming that North Carolina, too, had played an important role in the American Revolution.3

A second form of chauvinism, sectionalism or regionalism involves patterns of condescension or neglect on the part of one region toward another. An interesting example that I recently found appeared in the New York Times on December 30, 1888. It was a brief notice with a dateline of St. Paul saving that during the balmy winter

AN EXAMPLE OF STATE CHAUVINISM, BELIEVED BY MOST HISTORIANS TO BE SPURIOUS

Minnesotans were then experiencing, one R. J. Baldwin had found in the historical society a volume indicating that the winter of 1688—89 was also very warm — warm enough so that Baron Lahontan decided to lead an expedition through the Upper Mississippi Valley. He canoed through various rivers without encountering ice. Then the New York Times editorialized, pointing out that 1688—89 was "a date so remote that it sounds very odd in the ears of the Westerner, who regards any event of 50 years ago as belonging to ancient history."

This form of condescension on the part of easterners, coupled with their prejudice that westerners lack a sense of history, has caused in some cases an excessive reaction on the part of those poor souls patronized by people from the Northeast. During the last decade of the 19th century the United Confederate Veterans were very exercised about the problem of textbooks in American his-

3 See William Henry Hoyt, The Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence (New York, 1907). There were two "declarations," on May 20 and May 31, 1775, the second is not quite a declaration, and the first is almost certainly a forgery.

4 Baldwin was probably Rufus J. Baldwin, a pioneer Minneapolis banker, lumberman, and state senator (1861—63). On Lahontan and Minnesota weather, see Stephen Leacock, "Lahontan in Minnesota," in Minnesota History, 14:376 (December, 1933).
tory, because all those then in use had been written by northerners and published in the North. Southerners, especially the veterans, believed them to be unfair. They urged that more historians be trained in the South and that historical research and writing he stimulated. The goals of this veterans' group were promoted by a son of President John Tyler, Lyon G. Tyler, who was president of the College of William and Mary and perhaps the foremost chauvinist of southern history during the first third of the 20th century. Lyon Tyler hated Abraham Lincoln, and long after many other southerners were willing to acknowledge Lincoln’s greatness and importance in holding the Union together, Tyler kept alive in the South a kind of vendetta.

In 1932 he wrote a letter to Albert B. Hart, a prominent professor of history at Harvard, taking Hart to task for his pro-Lincoln writings and explaining exactly why he, Tyler, felt that Lincoln had received a better press than he deserved. Tyler claimed that Lincoln was “a vulgar, dirty talker” and “a tricky politician”; that “he could have avoided the great war in 1861, whereby he reddened his garments with the blood of thousands of fine young men in the North as well as in the South”; that “he used words to produce effect and not to tell the truth”; and that “he was a slacker, and sent thousands of young men to their deaths while he kept his own son out of all danger.” Tyler maintained that Lincoln “might have concluded the war in 18 months instead of taking four years”; that “he destroyed the Principle on which the Union was founded — the right of self-government,” and on and on and on.

Tyler became very angry about a lot of things. Many of you may have grown up with a history textbook by David Muzzey, which most educators long believed was a rather good one. Tyler wrote a number of pamphlets, widely distributed in the South, demonstrating all the ways in which Muzzey had manipulated the past in order to boost the pride of northerners — particularly New Englanders and their contributions to American history — and to minimize the role of southerners.

I would suggest that in some respects sectional pride and chauvinism can be useful in setting the record straight, or perhaps in balancing the historical ledger. For example, when most of us think about the history of Thanksgiving, we assume that the holiday had its origins in New England in 1621 with the Pilgrims’ decision to sit down with the Indians to a meal and thank God for the first harvest. But about 25 years ago a group of Virginians decided that New England had received too much credit for the first Thanksgiving. They organized a not-for-profit organization called the Virginia Thanksgiving Festival, Inc., and they did a great deal of historical research. Their pamphlet argues that the initial occasion occurred in 1619. Almost two years before any colonists set foot in Massachusetts, a band of stolid Englishmen was commanded to establish a settlement in Virginia. Immediately upon landing at their final destination, today called Berkeley Plantation, they thanked God for their good fortune. Every year since, apparently, the event has been commemorated as spelled out in these original instructions. My point is simply that there is some validity to the claims of the Virginians, and they ought to be made better known than they are. This new organization is clearly the result of sectional feeling, but it has also helped to serve as a legitimate corrective.

The element of ethnic pride is a theme of the MHS 1981 annual meeting. Of the many different examples one might choose, I have selected one that concerns the rivalry between Nordics and Italians over who had primacy in discovering America. You may be interested to know that in New England during the 1880s all sorts of special Scandinavian-oriented or Norse-oriented associations and groups sprang into being. In part, this had to do with the fact that the Italians were getting very uppity in New England politics generally, and in Boston politics particularly; and the old WASP New Englanders wanted to keep the Italians as well as the Irish in their places. Yankees did not like the idea that in 1892 they would have to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the

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A PORTRAIT of Lyon G. Tyler

5 Tyler to Hart, January 4, 1932; see also William E. Dodd to Tyler, March 12, 1931, both in Tyler Family Papers, Group V, Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va.
discovery of America by Columbus. He was, after all, Italian, and they did not want to give him that much attention. So there was a great deal of lobbying (beginning in 1876) and fund-raising to erect a statue of Leif Ericson in Boston. Finally the sculpture was unveiled on October 29, 1887, with many orations given in praise of Scandinavian explorers. A Scandinavian memorial association was established on the spot, and activity of this sort continued right down into the 1920s, when someone discovered on an island just three miles south of Martha’s Vineyard a rock bearing the name of Leif Ericson in runes with the date MI after his name. Well, it seems pretty clearly to have been a false inscription. That is to say, it was not inscribed by Leif Ericson a millennium ago. What is not clear is whether or not the inscription was simply made by someone who admired Leif Ericson and his contribution, or whether it was actually planted in order to imply or assert the primacy of Scandinavians in discovering North America. 

A recent example of this sort of thing involves what is called the Vinland Map and the Tartar Relation. This famous map, purchased by Yale University in 1965, was dated by scholars to approximately the middle of the 15th century. It clearly indicated a knowledge of the western Atlantic and the likelihood of a landfall by Scandinavians, which therefore would undercut Columbus’ claim. Yale purchased this map in good faith, and it cost a great deal of money. The university authorities did the right thing in buying it, if they believed it was authentic at the time, but Yale showed a certain lack of class by making the press release public three days before Columbus Day, 1965. Be that as it may, in 1974 Yale University had to eat crow, because after a great deal of research it was discovered that this map had been forged by a Yugoslavian professor of ecclesiastical law who wished to undermine Italy’s claim to historical importance. The map turns out to be one of the truly great forgeries in all of American history and is clearly another example of ethnic chauvinism as a stimulus to manipulate the past. 

The fourth type of chauvinism is local pride. I will give just one example. On December 17, 1980, there was an article in the New York Times entitled “Two-Level Outhouse Puts Minnesota Town on the Historical Map.” The town is Belle Plaine. This 109-year-old outhouse is now on the National Register of Historic Places. The reason it was built? Because the Bowler family in Belle Plaine had 12 children, and sometimes more than one had an urgent call of nature at the same time. So they built a rather cleverly designed three-seater on top and a three-seater on the bottom. But the claim that Belle Plaine has the only two-story outhouse in the United States is not true. When Carol and I drove across the United States in 1976 we stopped in Nevada City, Montana, and I have a picture of a two-story outhouse which remains functional there. And there may be others. As I say, local chauvinism is yet another reason why people manipulate the past to serve the present.

The fifth form of chauvinism is perhaps the most common. It involves nationalism and, more particularly, the relationship between ideology and foreign relations. One thinks, for example, of the great textbook controversies during the first half of this century. In the 1920s if a textbook were too sympathetic to Great Britain— if, for example, it indicated that part of the responsibility for the American Revolution may have been on our side, and not all the blame could be placed on Lord North and King George III—the author was likely to find himself in trouble. Investigative commissions in Chicago, in Wisconsin, and in New York State and elsewhere held stormy sessions on the subject. 

There are at least four other reasons why people manipulate the past that really do not have anything to do with chauvinism. Each, I think, is a separate category. One has to do with the fostering of group cohesion, group solidarity, or simply group survival. One thinks of the labor movement in this country, which has often found itself in a position of insufficient strength. In 1980 in Lawrence, Massachusetts, for example, there was an elaborate celebration aimed at reliving the famous strike of 1912 in that milling town. As the press reported, the...
purpose of the celebration was in large part to fulfill the labor movement's need to keep its past alive and meet that grim industrial community's need to breathe new life into its future.9

A different reason why people manipulate or use the past has to do with public relations in a capitalist society where entrepreneurship is important. I have been fascinated ever since I began using the manuscripts collections of the Minnesota Historical Society in 1980 by the two great railroad expeditions that took place in 1925 and 1926: the first one went to the Upper Missouri River; the other traveled to the Columbia River, retracing the steps of Lewis and Clark. They were Great Northern Railway expeditions. W. R. Mills, general advertising agent and assistant to president Ralph Budd of the Great Northern, had to handle a great deal of correspondence in connection with these expeditions, which set out from the Twin Cities. Mills always discreetly explained in his letters that his organization was trying to direct "their attention [meaning people invited to participate in these touristic ventures] to the historic background of the Northwest, and this is in reality the intent of the entire expedition."

Budd could be more frank — perhaps because he was the president. In a letter to Lawrence F. Abbott he expressed pleasure "that you believe in the soundness of the work the Great Northern Railway has undertaken and is carrying on in bettering its public relations." He was being quite honest. The historical content of these expeditions was important, to be sure, and they were conducted in a remarkably sensible and educational way; but the plain fact is that those who ran the Great Northern would not have spent all that money and made such great efforts if they had not believed that it would improve their image in the country.10

An eighth reason why people manipulate the past has to do with the need to justify or to validate a present desire. Essentially the basic form it takes is to say, "Well, our great American forebears did it, so why can't we?" For example, people who wanted to end Prohibition during the 1920s and early 1930s often pointed out that George Washington, or James Madison, or Thomas Jefferson, or someone else equally respectable liked to drink. I have seen letters inquiring whether Patrick Henry did not, in fact, serve as a bartender at a tavern near his home, and if it was good enough for Patrick Henry, it ought to be good enough for us.11

In the case of our own New York, in 1967 when the state was near bankruptcy, there was a desire to begin a state lottery. Many people opposed that on moral grounds, so historical research was done and it was found that lotteries had, indeed, occurred in the colonial period: lotteries to raise money to found secondary schools. King's College (which eventually became Columbia University), and so on. Once again, if it was okay for our colonial ancestors, it ought to be okay for us.12

The last reason that I will offer to explain why people manipulate the past has to do with fulfilling very deeply felt personal or psychological needs involving sentimentality, personal ambition, notoriety, and so on. In 1928 a woman named Wilma F. Minor was a young, ambitious journalist living in San Diego, California. She wrote to the editors of the Atlantic Monthly that she had found a lot of love letters that passed between Abraham Lincoln and Ann Rutledge. As most of you know, the pair was supposed to have had a youthful courtship, but there has never been a shred of surviving documentation for that. Edward Weeks and Ellery Sedgwick of the Atlantic Monthly were fascinated. Eventually Wilma Minor sent in 227 typed pages of love letters and various other supporting documents. There were all sorts

9 New York Times, April 27, 1980
10 W. R. Mills to Solon J. Buck, July 6, 1926, Buck Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS); Ralph Budd to Lawrence F. Abbott, August 11, 1926, President's letter book, Great Northern Railway Company Records, MHS. For more on the excursions, see "The Upper Missouri Historical Expedition" and "The Columbia River Historical Expedition," in Minnesota History, 6:304–308, 7:242–252 (September, 1925, 1926). Abbott was an editor of The Outlook magazine.
11 George W. Bright to Lyon G. Tyler, April 7, 1933, Tyler Papers, Group II.
of reasons why the staff of the Atlantic Monthly should have been suspicious, but they weren’t suspicious enough. One month before the first installment appeared, an advertisement announced, “Original Love Letters”; then in the first issue, “Lincoln, the Lover” was the great title, finally, “The True Love Story” was proclaimed all over the country. If Wilma Minor was ambitious for recognition as a journalist, she was also a rather strangely romantic personality. Carl Sandburg and Ida M. Tarbell examined these documents and said they believed them authentic, but archivists and editors like Worthington C. Ford and Lincoln scholars like Paul M. Angle were nonbelievers. Ultimately, of course, the documents turned out to be forgeries. They were forged simply because Wilma Minor was very eager to make a name for herself.

CAROL KAMMEN: In less dramatic ways, local historians and local communities also manipulate the past, sometimes consciously and sometimes unknowingly. Chambers of commerce are among the most interesting users of historical fact — and sometimes of historical fiction. Just look at the advertising that circulates about America’s home towns. History is used to make a place look good, or to make a town sound interesting in order to draw tourists to two-story outhouses, or to attract new residents or — and most importantly — potential investors. I have never seen a chamber of commerce flyer that noted a bank failure or stressed that there was malaria in the area. Such promotional literature tends to overlook any unpleasantness in order to enhance the town, and history is a prime way of doing this. In such instances history is used selectively, the positive is emphasized.

Historical house museums often manipulate the past by portraying a static view of what a house would have looked like, whereas most houses that were homes were organic units: they grew, they were altered, they took shape variously, people moved things around. Very few people in 1840 ordered complete roomfuls of ready-made furniture, but today we see a house that looks totally put together. Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello is simply the grandest and most elaborate example of a house that was actually in constant transition. Jefferson was always pulling off one wing, putting on another, or altering great portions of the house. Today Monticello is displayed as a completed, serene period piece. I think historic house museums are one area where we should look to see if we are not portraying a past that is a bit too tidily put together, just as outdoor museums tend to portray a cleaner, calmer, more settled past than actually existed. The pigs and the cattle that once roamed our streets, leaving piglike and cattlelike remains, are carefully sequestered behind fences; yet I have some wonderful documents written in 1820 by a man who commented that he hated to sit behind certain people in church because they always came down the cow pas-

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13 For the advertisement and editorial reactions, see Atlantic Monthly, 142:33, 143:298a, 516–525 (November, 1928, February, April, 1929). See also Don E. Fehrenbacher, The Minor Affair: An Adventure in Forgery and Detection (Fort Wayne, Ind., 1979), a pamphlet published by the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum.
ture and he was offended by the "element of cow adhering to their feet." Our past is not as clean and neat as we often portray it.

There has also been a selective collecting of material in our local archives. Many of them portray, or have documents which portray, a past that accommodated the archivists' own idea of what the past was all about. Once upon a time historical societies sought particular types of documents and papers and artifacts: those of "important" people, of the old families, neglecting at the same time the "unimportant" remains of nonimportant people. This attitude has become institutionalized in some archives so that blacks and members of ethnic groups and "ordinary people" do not think of a historical society as having any interest or relevance to their lives. In many cases that has been true. A major shift in this attitude can certainly be seen in the new MHS book, They Chose Minnesota, which is a celebration of the ethnic diversity of the past of this state. There are other state books somewhat like it. This new affirmation of our pluralistic past, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon.13

We also manipulate and somehow emasculate the past when our historical societies display artifacts such as farm, shop, and kitchen implements as art objects, not as tools that had a function. Lovely hand-hewn wooden rakes are things of great beauty to collect today, but their historical significance is embodied in their function. I am a strong critic of historical societies that display farm tools but never explain how they were used.

The past is manipulated by something I call censorship, although perhaps that word sounds a bit too strong. There is a subtle curtain of silence which a community draws around particular topics—an absence of documentary material on certain episodes and a lack of memory about certain subjects. There is an attitude that says local history is for our pleasure and for our benefit. There is a subtle curtain of silence which a community draws around particular topics—an absence of memory about certain subjects. There is an attitude that says local history is for our pleasure and for our benefit, but it is not something that ought to rack up the past.16

This censorship on the part of a community is not unique. Local historians themselves tend to censor the topics they look into. As an integral member of a community, the local historian frequently accepts its views and values, sometimes adopting a community "line" about certain events. To go against this may be self-defeating and jeopardize access to future sources. I am not saying that we must wash dirty linen in public, but rather that we must look at the whole past and not just those parts that make us feel good.17

I think we manipulate the past by viewing local history as a progression, a steady march from wilderness to settlement to present civilization to civic good, without a misstep along the way. There are various elements in our past that I think we have to acknowledge. By looking selectively we are ignoring the totality of the truth of the past, seeing it in such a way that progress for the common good is never doubted and never thwarted. I don't know about your communities, and I know that Minnesota is a progressive state, but the communities I have studied have taken a lot of missteps along the way, and it is important for us to look at those as well as at the progress.

There is no party line in local history. The past should include that of the well-located merchant and the ne'er-do-well peddler, the prosperous farmer and the laborer or tenant on a poor hillside farm, the history of community leaders and the history of community failures, the ill, the down-and-out, the sick, the criminal, the history of the later-comers as well as the first-comers. Now, I too love the first-comers—first settlers are interesting, and many people in my town can name the first three families who arrived there. But I think those people who settled later are also important, they, too, had to leave behind old lives and search out new prosperity. It seems to me that we have to look at the history of hostility to strangers as well as those instances of community co-operation. The plurality of the past is our concern, just as is the comparative history of one community versus another: why one community did well and why another seemed to stagnate. We are at last growing away from Richard Dorson's characterization of all local history as being "old tomes [which] all told one rigid, undeviating story. They began with a reference to Indians and the wilderness topography; hailed the first settlers; noted the first churches, the first schools, the first stores; devoted a chapter to the Revolution and the local patriots; swung into full stride with the establishment of the newspaper, the militia, the fire department, and the waterworks; rhapsodized about the fraternal lodges and civic organizations; recounted the prominent citizens of the community, and enumerated famous personages . . . who had passed through . . . and rounded off the saga with descriptions of the newest edifices on Main Street."18

In addition to the ways we have manipulated the past to create the present, I want to look at the important problem of how the present shapes the past. The in-

16 Peggy Korsmo-Kennon, Waseca County Historical Society, and Deborah L. Miller, MHS, suggested an episode in Blooming Prairie that aptly illustrates this problem: see Harold Seversen, Blooming Prairie Updated, 233 (Blooming Prairie, 1980), and Minneapolis Tribune, October 22, 1981, p. 38.
17 This problem is discussed briefly in John W. Caughey, "The Local Historian: His Occupational Hazards and Compensation," in Pacific Historical Review, 12:1 (March, 1943).
18 Richard M. Dorson, American Folklore & the Historian, 149 (Chicago, 1971).
terests of a historian writing a town history in 1879, for example, are very different from those of a historian writing about that same community in 1900, 1939, or 1981. Historical concerns shift, and while we may consult some of the same evidence, our interest in that evidence is altered by time. In my copies of the three county histories that deal with the area where I live, there is on the back flyleaf of each something I call my Anti-Index. This is not a list of charges against those earlier authors. I am not saying, "Hey, you didn't deal with that. I gotcha on this one." Rather, what I am trying to do is judge what things I look up in these books that an earlier author had absolutely no interest in. The Anti-Index is a gauge of my current historical interests and a barometer of the changes in historical fashion. The earliest county history I use was written in 1879, and the second one in 1894. Both of these are aptly characterized by Dorson's description and embody all of his topics. One town history that concerns me appeared in 1926. It is a business record of my community, with all the business starts, but there is never a failure mentioned. I find it interesting because it reflects the optimism of the 1920s. My Anti-Indexes contain topics such as women and demographic questions. I frequently look for failures of businesses, but one never finds them in those old promotional histories. I look for matters such as philanthropy; sometimes one finds mentions of ladies' aid societies and of charity, but I look in vain for ways in which communities dealt with those massive problems where many people needed help. I look for the status of leaders and leadership in the old histories, and these are not mentioned.

My own interests reflect changes in historical thinking about the past which have occurred over the last 20 years. And they help me to see more clearly what the questions of the 1980s actually are. By asking new questions about the past, we are creating a different history from that produced by earlier writers.

MICHAEL KAMMEN: During the 1920s and 1930s a number of American writers interested in our past, such as Charles Beard, Constance Rourke, and Bernard De Voto, "discovered" that we have been a nation of myth-makers. It became commonplace to insist that there was something peculiarly American about not perceiving properly the distinctions between history and myth, while dignifying many of our myths as acceptable history. On the eve of World War II, however, when people began to be aware of myths, there was such a powerful need for a reassertion of national self-confidence that prominent figures like Stephen Vincent Benét, the poet, and many other writers came to feel that a nation's folklore, its legends — the mythology that they had described — played a very important role in sustaining the nation's belief in its value system and would be absolutely crucial in the war against fascism. Consequently, although you can find recurrent charges about the United States being a nation of mythmakers, after World War II there was a kind of reinforcement of this tendency in quite a different direction than one would have expected. Treasuries of American folklore and mythology began to appear.

I would like to make a related point: Carol and I have been talking about deficiencies and inadequacies on the part of Americans in misunderstanding or misusing the past, but it is a universal phenomenon. I think that we ought to take a moment to bring that into our perspective. In English history something called the myth of the Norman Yoke has been very important. The theory, which began to emerge in the 17th century, is that before 1066 the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Great Britain lived as free and equal citizens who governed themselves through representative institutions. Then along came William the Conqueror (then known as William the Bastard), who established the tyranny of an alien king and landlord. But the people did not forget the rights they had lost and fought continuously to recover them — with varying degrees of success. That myth was central to both popular and scholarly thought in England for a very long time.

You will notice that while speaking of abuses of the past in this country — specifically the rivalry between Italians and Scandinavians for primacy as explorers — I very carefully avoided the subject of the Kensington Stone, about which you know far more than I do. My impression from reading the literature is that the stone is indeed a forgery and that it was made in the late 1880s just as people were anticipating all the hullabaloos that would culminate at Chicago in the great Columbian Exposition of 1893. One interesting aspect is that people constantly tried to draw upon the expertise of Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish runologists. Those authorities were consulted, but they were never very helpful. One cannot help feeling that perhaps they were just too busy — which is the answer that was usually given. Nevertheless, my impression from Erik Wahlgren's very good book on the Kensington Stone was that in their heart of hearts the Scandinavian runologists really did not want to spoil the belief that, in fact, their explorers

had arrived first. In any case, if you look at a wonderful book called *The Golden Horns*, a study of Norse mythology in Sweden, Denmark, and Germany in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, it becomes very clear that misuses of the past were just as strong abroad as any of the abuses that we have talked about today.\(^{21}\)

Finally, our topic is not even a phenomenon that is peculiar to industrialized societies. We know from the work of anthropologists that among so-called primitive societies, when there is a major change of dynasty — that is, when one family line comes to an abrupt end for some reason such as a coup d'état or a childless ruler — all the genealogies get rewritten, and no one is in the least embarrassed about this. It is the most natural thing in the world for such societies to rewrite their genealogies to accommodate and comport with the new royal family. My point is that we may be guilty of sins of omission and of commission with respect to using the past to shape and create the present, but there is nothing unique about our doing so.\(^{22}\)

**CAROL KAMMEN:** We have commented about misuses of the past, but I would like to look very briefly at four ways that local history is of value to our communities. One is recreational. Local history is really a lot of fun, both for the individual and for the community. It adds to our enjoyment of knowing where we are and having a sense of connection with place, a not inconsiderable quest among a nation that moves so rapidly and so much as we do. On the personal level, it helps people to set roots in communities. The pursuit of local history is also social: its activities are often shared, and it creates a bond for people in communities. Local history is concerned with the environment; it reaffirms the value of our land, our architectural history, our towns and our cities. It is a concern with our environment which we hold in trust for the future and which helps us to place value upon some of the things that we do.

Most of all, local history is educational. It teaches about the particularities of place; it is the laboratory where we study the relationship of one town to another, to a state or region, or even to national history; and it is a means of learning and applying historical methods, of using critical skills and deductive reasoning, of making judgments, of seeking answers from a mass of contradictory and confusing sources, of learning to sort the important from the trivial, and of seeking themes and patterns. Knowledge of local history demands of its practitioners that they sift and evaluate what they know, select the gold from the dross, and seek the truth wherever that search may lead. It requires us to arrange our knowledge and articulate it for other people — education both for ourselves and our communities.\(^{23}\)

**MICHAEL KAMMEN:** One of the problems that I think we have to deal with has to do with the relationship between the researching, the writing, and the presentation of authentic history — history as true as we can make it — and the values of a democratic society. A lot of the evidence that I have seen, emerging from several centuries of history in this society, suggests that in the minds of many people there has been a tension between the ethos of a democratic society and writing honest history, because people want their history to be comfortable. They want a history they can live with, one that reinforces the beliefs they already have. This was a major issue in the 1920s when so many of the textbooks were being challenged. James Truslow Adams, perhaps the most widely read American historian of his day, contended that "if democracy rejects the truth, will it slowly retire again, as in the Middle Ages, to the quiet cell of its cloistered votary?" He went on to add that "the influence of democracy in the long run upon intellectual life has yet to be determined, and there rests upon the more cultured elements among the public a very genuine and solemn obligation."\(^{24}\)

We can go too far, however, in trying to democratize the past. My favorite example of that occurred in 1936 when a group of journalists and professors at Columbia University decided to rewrite the Declaration of Independence because there were too many complicated sentences and polysyllabic words. Thomas Jefferson had not written it in language that was sufficiently accessible to the "common man." So they rewrote it in simple language that any idiot could understand, while Jefferson rotated in his grave because all that beautiful Georgian prose that we so much admire was lost.\(^{25}\) Yet there remains the problem of telling communities or societies or nations things that they don't particularly want to hear. The questions are, What are the solutions? What can be done about it? How and why is it important?


\(^{25}\) See *New York Times*, February 13, 1936.
In 1904 a dinner was held at the Nicollet House in Minneapolis to honor James K. Hosmer, who was retiring after 12 years as librarian of the Minneapolis Public Library. One of the speakers, William W. Folwell, made a very simple and obvious point, but one which needs to be brought to our attention again and again: that in a democracy people constantly form opinions in order to make choices about the future. They need a historical basis to do so. Therefore good history, true history, authentic history, is absolutely indispensable to a democracy. Moreover, local history is particularly important because, in this context, it enables people to get at the essence of how specific communities reached their present condition. Herbert Levi Osgood, one of the most prominent American historians early in the 20th century, remarked in an interview that "It is only through the study of local and state history that the real nature of our democratic society can be understood." 26

Looking at various commemorative and historical activities in the years since World War II, I note that they have been most successful at the state and local levels. For example, the Civil War Centennial from 1961 to 1965 was in many respects unsuccessful as a national event; in local terms, however, it was exceedingly successful. In Virginia, for instance, there were 1,147 different Centennial events in which communities could become involved. Obviously Virginia was something of a special case, because so much of the Civil War took place there. But it was true all across the country that the Civil War Centennial and the Bicentennial of the American Revolution energized and interested far more people in history within their localities than as a national phenomenon. 27

CAROL KAMMEN: For a long time, I think, there has been an uneasy relationship between the folklorist and the historian. Their sources and their means of approaching sources are different. But much of what has been accepted as local history in our communities has really been folklore, and it is the folklorist who often knows how best to see this material and how to use it. It is the folklorist who can take a local tradition and show that it is part of a national or even an international motif, for our roots go beyond our own community’s founding, beyond the borders of individual community memory. Folklore reveals the “shared” facts of a people, not quite like the facts of historical evidence at all times, but often the basis of popular action and sometimes of popular belief.

MICHAEL KAMMEN: We began with a definition, or clarification of a definition, and we shall end with one. The word that I want to call to your attention is “nostalgia,” because it has become a kind of buzzword. We read a great deal about it, we hear a great deal about it in the media, and I think it is a word that has become trivialized. It has undergone a kind of banalization. What has happened is that the original meaning of nostalgia has been lost sight of, with unfortunate results. Coined by a Swiss physician in the late 17th century to describe a physiological condition, nostalgia did not mean a simple longing for the past. It had to do instead with longing for the particularity of place, longing for home. Nostalgia was a condition diagnosed among soldiers who languished and wasted away when they were far from their native land. 28 If we go back to the original meaning, I think we can achieve a reaffirmation of state and local history, as well as of history in general, because history has everything in the world to do with a sense of place.

But I would conclude with the point that while nostalgia may or may not be a pathological disease, it does indeed involve, if only secondarily, the yearning for a better time, a Golden Age in the past. Primarily it involves the need for a sense of rootedness. The poet Allen Tate wrote about this sense at some length. In a charming essay on the southern sense of place, he discussed the desirability for the individual to feel a sense of roots somewhere. (The irony is that Tate himself, because of personal complexities in his family life, did not know until the age of 30 where he had been born.) I offer Tate’s essay as a fine example of the genuine human need for a sense of place and, therefore, the value of state and local history as a means of understanding what our relationship to a particular place has been and might be. 29

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