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# MORE TRAFFIC for a TWO-WAY STREET

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## LOCAL HISTORY and GLOBAL SCHOLARS

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Fred E. H. Schroeder

*AT THE 1988 Northern Great Plains History Conference in Ely, Professor Fred E. H. Schroeder presented an expanded version of the following editorial. A professor of humanities and editor of the Humanities Education quarterly published at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, Dr. Schroeder has been active in seminars and workshops of the American Association for State and Local History; he is the author of two technical leaflets issued by AASLH that deal with artifact interpretation and exhibit design. At our request he has distilled his conference paper into a few paragraphs that offer helpful approaches to historians and historiographers of every stripe. Ed.*

COMMON SENSE tells us that there ought to be continuous communication between academic historians and local historical societies and museums. It should be a two-way street with global historians helping local historians to recognize broad movements and great ideas in the particulars of locale, and local historians helping the academics to make the grand abstractions particular. The local society can humanize great events; the global scholar can dignify small happenings and plain people by putting them into bigger pictures.

That is the ideal, what can be called the humanities approach to historical interpretation, using the particular to embody universals, finding the universals within each particular.

Unfortunately, neither ideals nor common sense prevails. It is not a two-way thoroughfare; often there is not even one-way traffic. It is more like a line of parked cars, with no movement, no exchange, no reci-

procity. The faults lie on both sides. The academic reward system generally scorns local history of familiar locales. This despite the fact that almost all history is local history and that all historical claims must be supported by evidence that is particular to place, time, and person. Not only is the academic reward system geared toward faraway places with strange-sounding names, but academic training does little to prepare historians to connect the history of the houses they live in with great movements or universal themes.

At the other end of the street, local and county societies are immobilized by anti-intellectual bounds and boundaries, sometimes because of sheer provincialism, more often by well-intentioned policies that limit archives, artifacts, and mission by lines on a map. Yet Americans have always leaped the boundaries: Isle Royale copper is at Cahokia; seashell wampum is a thousand miles from the sea in Minnesota; Venetian glass beads are woven into the fabric of Indian life; there are Bavarian, English, and Japanese sherds in every barnyard midden, while farmhouses nationwide have dish-links to outer space. A famine in India affects what is planted in the Red River Valley and what ships are loaded in Duluth. An electronic innovation in Japan can change America's home life-styles. Paradoxically, all local history is world history.

So the problem is twofold. On one side of the street are parked local-county history people, immobilized by white lines on the pavement. On the other side are

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academic historians, immobilized by their inability to drive on anything but expressways. My solution is simply to bypass the parked historians and look elsewhere in the academy for moving traffic. But the initiative must come from the local historians. They will have to cross the lines and start thinking in broader, comparative terms and even more in terms of human universals such as work, play, rites of passage, decision-making, symbolism, communication, and so on.

Once you have begun moving across the local boundary line, where do you look for potentially useful academics outside of history departments? I've got a little list: American studies, anthropology, cultural geography, folklore, and popular culture would be my first choices. Why? Because people in these disciplines are accustomed to thinking of physical artifacts as human documents and because they habitually violate the disciplinary boundaries. Linguistics, sociology, home economics, political science, women's studies, and ethnic studies might be next. Why? Because workers in these fields think in terms of human social dynamics in ways that can bring fresh perspectives to conventional historical interpretations. You might find geology, biology, and medicine helpful for new environmental insights. Communication and rhetoric can give whole new views of dull written documents such as ordinances, court cases, sermons, and ceremonial addresses.

But there are problem disciplines. Narrow humanists in literature, art history, and philosophy—like historians whose “speciality” is not your city, county, or state—will need some help in crossing over *their* lines. I realize that it seems almost bizarre that those who work with cultural and historical knowledge should be so inflexible, but they are members of disciplines that “got hurt in the war,” so to speak. Positivism, New Criti-

cism, and Formalism dominated these and other fields from the late 1920s until this decade. This is not the place to explain (or even support) my statement, but the overwhelming effects have been ahistorical and impersonal. The young scholars were trained to focus on a narrowly restricted object and to analyze its internal structure and inner relationships, rather than to connect objects (poems, paintings, theories) to the world at large, or to people, or even to their own lives and values. So we have a few generations of astute intellectuals who are shy of stepping over lines.

Still, they need not be written off completely. Here is a strategy that might work to bring them into local history: choose the connecting theme and let them loose to suggest relevant fiction, paintings, ethical theories, quotations. If your theme is sufficiently broad, such as *Coming of Age*, or *Ornamenting our Homes*, or *Community Symbols*, or *Momentous Decisions*, or *Coping with the Environment*, or *World Influences on our County*, you might at least gain a few free lectures to open an exhibit and to put your local history into a comparative context. And after all, we can only understand our local uniqueness by comparison.

How does one come up with themes such as these? It takes some freewheeling thinking, and it will help if you persuade some of my “first choice” academics to assist you. With luck, you will get much more than a lecture; you may find new friends of local history who will make use of local sources, who will encourage others (including students) to use them, and who will work to improve your archives, collections, reference library, exhibits, programs, and publications. And you may have fostered something else that I have seen happen many times in recent years—academic scholars who gain a new lease on intellectual life by their participation in local history.



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