

# Practicing History in the Public Interest

*All human beings are practicing historians. As we go through life we present ourselves to others through our life story; as we grow and mature we change that story through different interpretations and different emphasis. We stress different events as having been decisive at different times in our life history and, as we do so, we give those events new meanings. People do not think of this as “doing history,” they engage in it often without special awareness. We live our lives; we tell our stories. It is as natural as breathing...*

*Being human means thinking and feeling; it means reflecting on the past and visioning into the future. We experience; we give voice to that experience; others reflect on it and give it new form. That new form, in its turn, influences and shapes the way next generations experience their lives. That is why history matters.\**

Cultural resource managers mediate the relationship between the viewer and the past. They determine historical significance; they preserve structures to a particular period of significance; they interpret this understanding of significance to the public. Yet while historians, anthropologists, curators, archivists, historic architects, and educators agree about the importance of preserving the past, commemorations open the question of what the past means to visitors who frequent historic sites and museums. As Gerda Lerner, former president of the Organization of American Historians and author of many books on women in history, points out in the passages quoted above, “all human beings are practicing historians.”

This issue of *CRM* uses case studies to consider how cultural resource managers can facilitate commemorative celebrations that are respectful of historical fact while leaving room for visitors to frame and understand the past from their own perspectives. The essays by David Glassberg and Dwight Pitcaithley provide a framework for understanding memory and history. If the past is contested terrain, perhaps the best we can do is provide a safe place to speak. Managers can use Glassberg’s analysis of history as politics, popular culture, and place to determine what to emphasize as they plan commemorative events.

The sesquicentennial of the California Gold Rush, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, the opening of the Illinois and Michigan Canal, and the Seneca Falls women’s rights convention were all celebrated in 1998. Articles about the last three begin this issue, along with First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton’s

speech unveiling the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A.’s new cultural resource management badge. Efforts to commemorate the centennial of the Civil War, and the dedication of the Robert Shaw memorial statue are considered in following articles. Robin Bachin discusses the continuing importance of a monument to 1886 May Day strikers dedicated this year as a national historic landmark. The Spanish-American War centennial, observed internationally through conferences, publications, and preservation efforts, is covered in four articles. Significant anniversaries of important events in Canadian women’s history are examined by Luce Vermette, a Parks Canada historian.

The 50th anniversary of President Truman’s executive orders ending racial segregation in the Armed Forces and federal employment, and of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly were also marked in 1998. Three articles consider the historic cost of racial segregation during World War II, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt’s essential role in the creation and adoption of the Declaration of Human Rights, and the civil rights struggle led by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Three articles remind readers that the future contains the past. Brit Allan Storey returns us to the concerns of citizens of Illinois and Michigan, who moved earth to contain water in canals for their use—much as the 100-year-old Bureau of Reclamation’s dams and water projects have made gardens in the wilderness. An article by Roger Launius deals with the impending centennial of the first flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, and what is being done to keep that commemoration on track. Cynthia Orlando reviews the 10-year commemoration plan of Fort Clatsop National Monument, where the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition serves as a focus for renewed preservation, research, and educational efforts.

Cultural resource managers have a particularly important role in making the past accessible and understandable to today’s audiences. I hope that the philosophical essays and the case studies presented here will serve *CRM* readers grappling with commemorative events.

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\* Gerda Lerner, *Why History Matters: Life and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 199, 211.

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