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Preserving the Heritage of the People: Local Historical Societies of the American West and Their Contributions to the History of the Region

by
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The human race is passionate about its past, but memory is selective and subject to constant revision. To maintain links to the past, we have long tried to preserve some traces of it, selecting some moments and some forms as more memorable than others. To satisfy the need for preserving the past, historical societies sprang up throughout Europe in the sixteenth-century and spread to the United States in the late eighteenth-century. The growth of historical societies in the United States started mostly on the eastern shores and spread westward in the 1820s and 1830s.¹

Historical societies come in various shapes and sizes. They differ in their specializations, missions, the audience they attract, and in their source of funding. Some operate entirely on private funds, particularly those in the East, while others receive minor or major state appropriations and privileges.

Regardless of these differences, historical societies, state or local, share common traits like collecting, preserving, displaying, and interpreting objects and events of the human past. Essentially, the task that falls on historical societies involves making clear the historical sense of their field of specialization and of the individual communities in which they are situated. This role also involves providing grass-roots information for an accurate national history and crucially linking people to their communities. The value of historical societies is, of course, not limited to discerning the specificity of communities and fields of specialization. Today, many are bending their efforts to define objectives more broadly and to encompass a comprehensive definition of history, in order to better serve as channels through which the streams of constantly

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renewed interpretations and expositions of historical knowledge pass.

Against this background, this paper explores the contributions of local historical societies to the history of the American West and the avenues they use to meet the parameters of preserving the historical past of the region. To illustrate the contributions of local historical societies, the Ellis County Historical Society, located in Hays, Kansas will be used as a case study in that its story reflects the story of the American West. Much of the information used in this paper came from a wide array of historical records: from minutes of meetings to archival materials, from museum texts to articles from scholarly journals, websites, and textbooks. In examining the work and impact of local historical societies, I seek both to illuminate their responses to the challenges of preserving the past and to remind contemporary generations that the recording of history may not completely tell us all we need to know about the importance of local historical societies. The task of preservation, however, helps us to understand the processes these societies have gone through in order to provide us the opportunity to appreciate fully the rich heritage of the American West and to envision clearly those fundamentals, which were responsible for the building of the United States.

As stated above, historical societies, both state and local, began in Europe and spread to the US in the late eighteenth century and to the American West in the nineteenth century. Historians have attributed many reasons to account for the emergence of historical societies in the United States. In *American Historical Societies, 1790- 1860*, Leslie Dunlap says that the term historical society “may properly be restricted to associations organized primarily to collect, preserve, and make available the materials of the history.”² In 1936 when the American Association for State and Local History published the first edition of *Historical Societies in the United States and Canada: A Handbook*, the two countries had a combined number of 583 historical organizations. In the second edition, published in 1944, the numbers had increased to more than 904 with the supplemental list increasing from 15 to 564.³ In *Keepers of the Past*, Clifford L. Lord attributes the rapid growth of historical societies from the twentieth century onward to the development of the automobile industry, which made it possible for people to have easier access to shrines and sites. The emancipation of women also brought them to new posts of power and influence in historical organizations. The progress of science and medicine brought many elderly people to the rolls of active

membership, and the growth in gross national product brought more funds, both public and private, to these types of activities.⁴

The growth historical societies experienced in the middle of the nineteenth century did not escape the American West. Pioneer organizations, state and local historical societies, and genealogical groups began to spring up everywhere with four of the earliest ones formed in the country established west of the Atlantic seaboard: Tennessee (1849), Illinois (1827/1899), Michigan (1828/1874), and Indiana (1830). What influenced the establishment of historical societies in the frontier states, according to Ruegamer, stemmed from the large percentage of the region's populations migrating from older communities in the east, some of whom brought with them "a sense of responsibility for history, a historical conscience."⁵ To frontier people, the issue was not the brief history to record, nor the lack of time, but what little history there was seemed in peril of being lost. Ruegamer remarks that for people in frontier communities looking for some special sense of identity in new and undistinguishable villages, even a brief history was especially valuable.

In the American West almost every county has some form of a local historical society. In the early years, local historical societies relied solely on the services and funds of volunteers and members to operate. In the 1970s, local historical societies began to professionalize by employing librarians, curators of collections and exhibits, and editors of publications to carry out the functions that would allow the society to better serve the public. Around the same period, many local societies began receiving financial support from their respective city and county governments to help offset the cost of professionalization and operation. As result, local historical societies in the American West became effective in rendering real service in education by disseminating historical knowledge on the background and lives of outstanding individuals who had contributed to the political, religious, and economic activities of their states and nation. Through their libraries, museums, and archives they provided, and continue to provide, materials for the researching public. Museums of local historical societies also served as a focus for displaying the past to the present. Today, they showcase in graphic forms the nature of their communities as it was inhabited by Native Americans and the steps frontier people went through to make the American West their home, creating in the process the uniqueness of the region.

The Ellis County Historical Society Museum, established in 1974, illustrates the preservation work of local historical societies. The Society graphically displays the complete dramatic span of Ellis County's geologic and historic past in a broader context of the history of the American West in particular and the United States in general. The museum gallery contains a collage of artifacts, manuscripts, and photographs that lead visitors through Ellis County's history from the time of its Native American inhabitants through the frontier days to the present. At the entrance of the gallery, visitors are greeted with a photographic display of the geographic nature of Ellis County. The mounted exhibits at the entrance comprise a collection of nearly five hundred household tools including arrowheads, spearheads, grinding stones, and digging tools used by Native Americans. Down the corridor, the great significance of the buffalo to the history of the county is exemplified in the "Monarch of the Plains" and "Who Killed the Buffalo" exhibits. Here, the exhibits show how migrating buffalo herds made trails between their major grazing grounds and how these trails came to be used by Indians and later by explorers and frontier people moving into the American West from the East. These trails eventually led to the establishment of the Pawnee and the Santa Fe trails.⁶

On the main floor, the Society presents Ellis County's military past and how this history fits into the entire history of the American West and that of the United States. Starting from the days of Fort Hays, which laid the foundation for the establishment of Hays City, through World War I and World War II, the Society tells the story of the civil defense and combat roles Ellis County and its citizens played in these wars. The U.S. army established Fort Hays as an important army post, which was active from 1866 until 1889. The fort originally started as Fort Fletcher (named after Governor Thomas C. Fletcher of Missouri) and was established for the protection of stage and freight wagons from the Butterfield Overland Dispatch traveling along the Smoky Hill Trail to Denver. Because of constant attacks by Southern Cheyenne and Southern Arapaho Indians, David Butterfield, owner of the Butterfield Overland Dispatch, declared bankruptcy and abandoned the line. The closing of the Smoky Hill Trail led to the closing of Fort Fletcher on May 5, 1866.⁷

Fort Fletcher reopened again on October 11, 1866 and was renamed Fort Hays in December 1866 in honor of Brigadier General Alexander Hays, who died during the Civil War. The fort served as a supply depot

for other forts in the area and a base for troops defending the railroad and white settlements in the area. Nearly six hundred troops were stationed here in the early years. Some of the famous figures associated with the fort included “Wild Bill” Hickok, “Buffalo Bill” Cody, General Nelson Miles, General Philip Sheridan, and Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer. It was also the home of several well-known regiments of the Indian wars such as the Seventh U.S. Cavalry, the Fifth U.S. Infantry, and the Tenth U.S. Cavalry, whose black troopers were better known as “buffalo soldiers.”⁸ The protection the fort provided led many of the people to establish a permanent residence; eventually the surrounding towns incorporated and formed Ellis County. Four of the original buildings of Fort Hays survive: the blockhouse (completed as the post headquarters in 1868), the guardhouse, and two officers’ quarters. The Kansas State Historical Society opened Fort Hays as a museum in 1967 and now operates it as one of its historical sites.

The Society also tells the story of the civil defense tactics deployed by the United States during World War I and II. There are displays of photographs of the thirty-nine fallout shelters established in the county in 1961 for fourteen thousand two hundred and eighty-five people. The United States established a national warning system to connect the county to the telephone system of the North American Air Defense Command headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colorado and to the other seven hundred civil defense warning points throughout the country. Hays City was even selected as a potential relocation site for Kansas state government in the event that Topeka, the state’s capital, could no longer function. During World War II, many counties in the western states, including Ellis County, became important places for Prisoner of War (POW) camps.

The exhibit on the early settlers of the county allows a visitor to journey back in time to the settlement era when different colonies from the Eastern shore and from overseas struggled to tame the American West. With the exception of Hays City, in which settlement was facilitated by the presence of Fort Hays and a railroad station, early attempts to settle Ellis County were slow because of the difficulties the settlers faced in trying to cultivate the prairie. Like many places in the West, settlements grew very slowly and by 1872, only ten or twelve homestead and pre-emption claims had been settled upon in the county.⁹ In the early 1870s the county saw the settlement of a small group of colonists from Ohio

followed by two other groups in small numbers, one from New York and the other from Pennsylvania. In 1873, George Grant arrived from England and purchased the Railway Company's fifty thousand acres of land in the eastern portion of the county with the purpose of colonizing it with English agriculturists.

This was a great settlement story for the county because during the next two or three years, some two or three hundred Englishmen, many with their families, arrived in the county and settled on the Grant purchase. To begin farming, the colonists brought large numbers of fine sheep and the first black Aberdeen Angus cattle from England. The colonists named the place Victoria after the British monarch, Queen Victoria. Soon, experience taught the settlers that the American West can be a harsh and unforgiving place and Ellis County itself was not agricultural country. Meeting nothing but hardships and disappointment in their efforts at farming, the settlers became discouraged and many moved back to England.¹⁰

Following the English settlers into the county were approximately twelve hundred Volga-Germans from Russia who settled in five separate settlements from 1875 to 1877. The new arrivals immediately began to develop their settlements into towns, which they named after places in their native country. The Society immortalized the history of these early Volga-German settlers when it added a Volga-German house complete with authentic furnishings to its collections in 1982. The Bukovina-Germans, like the Volga-Germans, began arriving in the United States in the later 1800s. Small in comparison with the Volga-Germans, the first wave of Bukovina-German settlers to Ellis County began in 1886, ten years after the Volga-Germans. The settlement of Bukovina-Germans spanned some twenty years and consisted of about thirty-five families made up of Lutherans and Catholics. The migration to the county continued until 1914 when it was halted by the outbreak of World War I. Migration picked up again after the end of the war and finally ended with the beginning of World War II.¹¹

The final group of exhibits at the gallery brings the entire history of Ellis County to a full circle. These displays are both important and interesting for the many characters they show. There are photographic displays on the railroad and its impact on the county, the "defeat" of the Indians, and an exhibit on the bad reputation of Historic Hays City as the "Sin City of the High Plains." The "Sin City" display focuses

on shootings and sheriffs, hangings in Hays City, and personalities like Custer, “Wild Bill” Hickok, and “Buffalo Bill” Cody and the roles they played in the history of the county. The railroad reached Hays City on October 5, 1867, and with it came men to lay the tracks, cavalry to protect the workers, restaurants, hotels, townships, buffalo hunters, and, of course, troubles with the Indians. Here the Society gives a vivid display of the struggles between the Plains Indians and the “white invaders” in an exhibit entitled “Those Wrongfully Dispossessed.” The Indian people were losing their lands in addition to their food supply. The buffalo herds were dwindling through systematic slaughter by the buffalo hunters. As a result, during the years of 1865 and 1866, different groups of Plains Indians were especially active in making sure that the invaders did not overrun them. The Indians claimed the Smoky Hill Valley as their best buffalo hunting territory and fiercely guarded against any attempt by the whites to populate or use it.

Flexibility and good visual impact are the two essential aspects of the Society’s ever-changing temporary displays on the basement level of the museum building. The short-term exhibitions are on view for brief periods and usually deal with relatively smaller topics. There are the annual exhibitions of quilts, wedding gowns, Wild West Fest, fashion shows, and many more. One popular event, started by the Society sometime between 1978 and 1979, is “The Dirty Thirties in Quilts” exhibit. Quilting in America goes back to the colonial days when an ordinary woman’s daily life was hard and difficult. Typically, women did spinning, sewing, food preservation, cooking, and cleaning while at the same time caring for their often-large families. Generally, only women who could afford household help did quilting. The additional help gave the women ample time for decorative needlework.¹²

As the unique and colorful art of quilting spread throughout the United States in the years following independence, it became an intricate part of the culture of the American West and of Ellis County. The Society provides both residents and foreigners alike exposure to this culture. The displays usually depict over a hundred years of quilting with delicate stitch designs and elaborate organization in the use of patterns. The “Dirty Thirties in Quilts” is exceptionally important to the Society because of the Dustbowl’s significance in Kansas history. The era of the depression and its related raging dust storms was a period in Kansas history depicted in these quilts. The display is intended by the

Society to provide a long overdue tribute to the people who survived the Dirty Thirties.

Museum exhibitions are, of course, not the only way through which local historical societies provide glimpses of the past to the public. The Ellis County Historical Society's archive, like others of its kind, serves as a primary research center and assists hundreds of patrons every year. Most of the manuscripts, photographs, books, and maps in the archive relate to the history of the county and the surrounding areas. The Society's archival holdings are especially rich in such areas as genealogical records, maps and atlases, obituaries, court records, the Society's publications, city directories, and photograph collections dealing with the various phases of Ellis County's history. Researchers can also access a wide variety of books dealing with the American West. In addition to these resources, local historical societies have been preserving landmarks important to the history of the American West.

Historic Hays City was a place where "both the famous and the infamous walked the streets." To ensure that important fixtures in old Hays were not lost forever, the Ellis County Historical Society has placed on various streets in Hays City twenty-six bronze plaques containing texts explaining the significance of the site they mark. Some of the twenty-six marked sites are Gospel Hill, Town & County Jail, Paddy Walsh's Gambling Hall, Kansas Pacific Depot, Tommy Drum's Saloon, Santa Fe Mail Co., Union Pacific railroad, and the First Presbyterian Church. Although not part of the original twenty-six marked sites, the Boot Hill site is one of the important fixtures of the Society's preservation program. The Boot Hill cemetery is marked as the oldest cemetery in the United States west of the Mississippi and is popular for the belief that people interred there were buried with their boots on. Most of the interments on Boot Hill were due to violence, such as racial strife, alcoholism, mob action, suicides, and shootouts. The last burial on Boot Hill was on November 9, 1874.¹³ The preservation of Boot Hill was highly important because it served as a permanent reminder of the rough road the county traveled to reach its present state.

While all these places played significant roles in the economic and social life of the county, perhaps the ones that had the biggest impact were the saloons and the churches. During the violent days of Hays City, those who would gladly see such "Godless" spots as the saloons and gambling houses exchanged for churches were in a minority.

Things began to change when on May 27, 1873, Reverend Timothy Hill, superintendent of missions for the State of Kansas, together with the State Missionary Agent, started the First Presbyterian Church with eight charter members. The Society has marked the First Presbyterian Church building, currently the home of the Society, as one of the oldest stone churches in western Kansas.¹⁵

In addition to the First Presbyterian Church, the Society has also marked Gospel Hill and First Methodist Church, and has provided historical information in a brochure on the first six churches established in Ellis County. Gospel Hill was the site of the Armes Dance Hall during the wild days of Hays City. Ironically, it became a meeting place for four different churches during the time that efforts were being made to redeem the county from its raucous image. The First Methodist Episcopal Church was the first of its kind established in the county and started just a few months after the organization of the Presbyterian Church.¹⁴ By marking and preserving the histories of these churches, the Society is allowing historians and visitors interested in the history of churches to get information on the valuable role churches played in transforming Hays City from “sin city” to settled city.

The Society prides itself as an institution committed to the furtherance of education in the county. Education has always been a dominant characteristic of Ellis County, dating back to the early settlers. The foundation of the current educational structure in the county goes back to the days when communities developed small one-room schools to provide education for children. From this meager beginning, the county’s educational system now includes a local university—Fort Hays State University. During National Education Week (November 15 to November 21), the Society emphasizes the importance of local education, the history of the county in particular, and that of Kansas in general, and offers school groups an engaging setting for learning about history. As part of Education Week programs, the museum and archival staff recreate the history of the one-room schools using artifacts from their collection and archival photographs and documents. The Society allows children to see and experience what one-room schools were like. During this week, museum personnel present lectures to area students on Plains Indians, early Ellis County, early Kansas, sodbusters, and childhood at the turn of the century, among other topics. The Society also runs an active adult educational program in the form of monthly

lectures in which prominent scholars of western history present important subjects about the American West.

For about thirty-five years now, the Ellis County Historical Society has tried to fulfill its mission of collecting and preserving the material history of Ellis County through various services and programs. Through its museum exhibitions, publications, historical documents, and artifacts the Society offers the county's residents the opportunity to consider their place in the county's history. By inviting non-residents to visit the museum, the Society offers them the opportunity to experience the very places where history happened. The challenge of preserving the past for the future, for all local historical societies, carries with it a considerable burden of responsibility and challenges. Sustainability of membership and funding continue to be the two most difficult challenges local historical societies in the American West face.

According to Eric Cardinal in "Ideas on Membership Development for Local Historical Societies," local historical societies, as compared to other historical societies, have low membership levels irrespective of the population of the locality.¹⁵ The situation is made worse by a recent wave of low membership experienced by historical societies across the nation.¹⁶ To turn this situation around, local historical societies could pay particular attention to attracting people who have an interest in historical pursuits and could encourage passive members to become more active. Adding more services would create ways for members to participate in historical activities and enhance the possibility of keeping a greater percentage of members involved in the Society. The point here is not to diminish the efforts local historical societies have been making to increase their membership by providing members-only behind the scenes tours, museum open houses, and discounts on services and store items, but going a step further could bring in additional members. Offering members enjoyable programs, events, and opportunities to contribute to the work of the Society would generate a membership that truly feels a part of the organization.

Avenues of membership recruitment can range from written appeals to word of mouth and from on-site solicitation at the museum and at other events to information posted on the Society's web site. As simple as word of mouth may seem, it is reportedly one of the significant methods of signing up new members and among the most important membership recruiting tools. Officers and staff of these societies should

use every opportunity to tell people about their societies and invite them to join. Society members or staff attending meetings of other community organizations could take along brochures or handouts seeking new members. Staff and members of local historical societies should also make a conscious effort to hand out membership brochures or handouts at activities organized by their society and at community events in which their society takes part.

Using inventive ways is another method through which local historical societies can promote membership. The Sheboygan County Historical Society in Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin, for example, asks visitors to its museum, “Would you like your money back?” An admission fee is charged to the public but allows free admission to members. Visitors receive a flyer that offers to refund the admission fee if they join as members on the day they visited. The flyer highlights the benefits of membership and the important contributions members make in supporting the historical work of the organization.¹⁷ Other historical societies offer free memberships as door prizes in drawings at community events. Some societies even print the names of all members in an annual report or year-end newsletter to acknowledge their support and encourage them to remain part of the society. It needs to be pointed out that recruiting members also requires the task of keeping members. Local historical societies can increase their chances of retaining members by sending personal letters or making phone calls directly to members at renewal time. This can potentially make members feel well thought of by the Society and it can help in the renewal of memberships.

With respect to funding, it is important to evaluate some of the past trends in the funding climate and how those trends have had an impact on local historical societies. In the early stages of local historical societies, most of their funding consisted entirely of membership dues. It was not until the mid 1970s that many began to receive substantial financial assistance from city and county governments. Over the past three decades, funds from governments have not been consistent. The difficulty here is that because a greater percentage of their operational funding comes from government sources, any cuts the county or city makes disrupt the smooth running and implementation of a society’s programs, not to mention the fact that they usually do not get as much funding as they ask for. Anytime there is a budget cut, many local societies have to either abandon projects or even consider closing down,

as was the case of the Ellis County Historical Society in 1988.

Although the government support is important, this same factor places local historical societies at a constant risk of financial reversal in the event of a crisis at the government level. Components of a healthy mix of membership dues, donations, local government appropriations, earned income, foundations and grants, and income from endowment or investment accounts at an even percentile would place the societies on a better footing in case of crisis in any of the funding sources. It is also vital for a Society to diversify its major funding sources or to increase the percentages of the other sources in order to effectively run and implement its preservation-related projects.

The work of the Ellis County Historical Society illustrates the long road local historical societies have taken to preserve the history of the American West. From far away Europe the early Fathers of local historical societies incorporated ideas from that region with the spirit of the emerging nation and established an institution that has stood the test of time. The institution has also proven itself a dynamic organization responsive to trends within the discipline of history and in many other fields. While concerns remain that the broad and overly inclusive collections and interpretations may inhibit the ability of local historical societies to be advocates of a meaningful history of the region, many of them have managed to accommodate the competing priorities of preservation with emerging trends in technology. The question that remains is whether those in charge of local historical societies will incorporate technological advances into their operations, and take the institution beyond its physical walls.

NOTES

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