



ON DOING LOCAL HISTORY

BY CAROL KAMMEN

In the Company of Our Peers

Last September in Atlanta I was struck by the importance of “being there”—at the annual meeting: of going off to sessions, program in hand; sitting with coffee, talking; and walking to and fro among colleagues. I liked overhearing the chatter, listening to others discuss a small point or large one, of being among people who love doing local history. There is no substitute for being amidst one’s own people.

I didn’t know a lot of individuals at the meeting. I had heard of some, had gone to speak for others at their history organizations, and some I probably passed by without remembering a name. But I liked the massing of local historians and those who care for local history. We come in all sizes and shapes—some in and some not in shape, of many hues, and of so many different interests. Walking among them felt comfortable. I knew that I resonated with their interests and that I shared with them certain knowledge and problems. It was good to be in the company of my peers.

Working in a locality, or within a historical agency, there is always discussion about means and sometimes ways of getting the work done. There are certainly some differences of opinion. But in Atlanta there was discussion of issues, which generally doesn’t happen all that much in a locality where the day-to-day need of getting the work finished overtakes us.

In Atlanta, there was a stew of ideas and methods. “Oh, he did it that way,” I thought. Why didn’t I think of that? There were aha moments—actually, several of them—when I realized I could adopt something done elsewhere, or I realized what a great topic someone else had undertaken. It was rather like the way the flu spreads, only this was a good contagion.

This happened most especially during the Leadership in History Awards dinner. (And this signifies the importance of

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awards.) Prizes are given for projects well done, innovative ideas, or new themes tackled. Hearing what others had come up with, had found funds for, and had completed was humbling. And being at the award ceremony was a source of great stimulation. Seeing people walk across the stage to accept awards was thrilling. Here were people doing interesting projects with documents similar to mine and they spurred me to think of new ways of dealing with history problems, or methods of communication. And then there were those who had set themselves to topics or resources that I had never considered (and what a revelation that was). At times their projects didn’t seem to fit my circumstances, but in thinking about them, I found other ways of approaching that same topic in a fashion that just might work in my locality.

The meeting was a time to learn what experts had to say about old fields revisited, new topics, or novel ways of communicating. And yes, the meeting was also the place to hear boneheaded ideas and to know that there really were paths not worth taking. This is also something worth encountering. I saw people walk out of one session in disbelief; I saw others shake their heads at another. But I also saw real discussion that was honest and challenging.

An annual meeting is a good place to see our leadership. “So that’s what he looks like,” I said after meeting the editor of *History News*, for the first time. And,

Terry Davis, our President and CEO was so gracious to everyone even while making sure everything was running on time. I had a couple of things to suggest to her and it is good to know who runs our Nashville office, and for them to hear our concerns. Go shake their hands and tell them what is it you need from your organization.

The cost of attending an annual meeting has always been an issue for me. But attending is a professional obligation. It is worth saving frequent flyer miles to manage the airfare, or putting a bit away so that attendance is possible. Our employers should understand that a professional staff needs continual education and many larger organizations often offer aid to their staff. Smaller history societies might help out a bit. I could not afford to go to the meeting every year but attending with some frequency is important for one’s own education and for what we can bring to others. Participating in our professional organization helps us to know what is happening, helps keep us on our toes. It is our adult education.

I met some people for the first time. There was that nice group of people from Oregon. There were some friends too, that I had not seen in awhile. I always have wonderful conversations with Sandra Clark (we talked about doing something with an archival idea). And there was Barbara Franco, with whom I spoke for over an hour about new themes that should be developing within

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the local history community and how Civil War commemorations are being discussed. There was Amy Wilson from the Chemung Historical Society, and Phil Scarpino, along with the Public History

folks, who remind us of our allies in this field, and who give a wonderful cocktail party every year. There were David Kyvig and Myron Marty who have been important in helping local history move into a variety of sources and venues. Mike and I recalled a ten-day trip a decade ago that we took in a small bus traveling across Iowa, not quite like campaigning politicians, but rather as evangelists promoting new ideas for local history. It was one of the most rewarding and interesting experiences I have ever had.

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is always interesting, and sometimes really quite thrilling. We might work alone but we have so much to discuss with each other—to learn from each other.

Do not miss the opportunity to attend the 2008 AASLH Annual Meeting in Rochester, New York, to meet and greet and learn and debate and expand and react. That is what the annual meeting is all about. Come to Rochester, have coffee with me, and tell me what you are doing. I'll be sitting right over there. ©

"On Doing Local History" is intended to encourage dialogue on the essential issues of local history. Carol Kammen can be reached at ckk6@cornell.edu.

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