

# History Is at the Center of Our Human Experience

BY LYNNE IRELAND

**A**s you know, your home for history has gone through some challenging times, and we appreciate that you've pulled together like a family, as reflected by your continued involvement and support. Thank you for that. And thank you for your engagement in this meeting and the lively and thoughtful conversations that help refine the important work we do.

Being exposed to all these great conversations has led me to reflect on some of my own. Being the scintillating person I am, I often start off with, "My name is Lynne Ireland." That's a great opener. "Oh!" is often the response. "I'm from Nebraska," I continue. "Ohhhhh..." is sometimes the reply. Maybe the person will add a comment or two like, "I drove through there once," or, "Have you fired that jerky football coach yet?" But to keep the conversation going, too often I shift the topic to something else.

There are small turning points in these conversations, and I have a choice to make. Do I affirm others' perception of Nebraska as "the middle of nowhere" or do I make the case that as part of our national story, Nebraska is in fact at the center of everything?

If, as Natasha Trethewey suggested to us yesterday, geography is fate, I could point out that the place known as Nebraska is the locus of many events that helped determine our national destiny. It's where Spanish and French forces briefly fought out their conflicting geopolitical aims. It's where indigenous people adapted European technologies to enhance their vibrant cultures and fiercely oppose the invading U.S. Army. It's where Lewis and Clark headed west; where the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails pointed the way to half a million other emigrants; and where the transcontinental railroad started and eventually hauled millions more. It's where a Native American, Ponca Chief Standing Bear, was for the first time acknowledged to be a human being in a U.S. court of law. It's where Crazy Horse was killed, where Malcolm X was born, where the Enola



Bob Beatty

**CHAIR'S ADDRESS  
AT THE  
2013 AASLH  
ANNUAL MEETING**

Gay was built, where America's first television-era mass murderer, Charles Starkweather, shot his way into infamy. It's where journalists fought all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court for the right to cover what transpired in courtrooms, regardless of how heinous the evidence of crime being presented might be. And long before the notion of an American nation existed, it's the place where indigenous peoples and cultures flourished and faded because of the effects of extreme climate change.

So is Nebraska in the middle of nowhere or in the center of everything? It depends on how I choose to look at it, and depending on that choice, how I talk about it.

We have a similar choice to make about state and local history. Is it nowhere in the American consciousness, an afterthought in our school system, STEM's nerdy wannabe follower, a dispensable extra we can only afford when we're flush?

We know better. We know the power of history, of the stories like those our speakers shared yesterday about the Louisiana Native Guard or the 16th Street Baptist Church Sunday school. We know the skills used to understand history—gathering and analyzing evidence and drawing conclusions—form the critical basic toolkit that every citizen in a democracy needs. We know that history not only informs and guides but can entertain and amuse. For many of us, history is at the center of everything.<sup>1</sup>

But all too often, we don't place history in the center of our conversations. When we tell people we work in state or local history, many respond, "Oh, that must be really interesting." We agree that it is—and then proceed to change the subject.

Maybe we're concerned that if we get into the specifics, we'll reinforce the notion that history is about all those trivial names and dates that a teacher named "Coach" droned on about in their high school. Again, it's a matter of choice, what we share. You all might yawn if I told you that my progenitor Thomas Ireland came to Hempstead, Long Island, in 1644. But I suspect you might be more intrigued if I shared the story of the long night after Martin Luther King Jr. was killed that my Methodist minister father worked feverishly with other clergy in North Omaha to help people

respond to their grief in Dr. King's nonviolent way, while my mother and I waited and worried at home.

So it is up to us how we choose to present history, how we create those turning points in conversations to build dialogue about the intersections between our past, our present, and our future. We know that the dreaded names and dates can be presented as "just the facts, ma'am," or they can be details woven into powerful and fascinating stories, stories that can reveal turning points in people's lives.

We can insert into our conversations our belief that history is complex and compelling. It draws us in, in part, because of its uniqueness—like the stories we've heard here in Birmingham of individual ordinary people in particular locations with intensely personal as well as extraordinary outcomes. Unique though our local and state histories may be, we're also compelled because of history's ubiquity. The dramas, struggles, supreme sacrifices, and sublime achievements that are so unique are also universal, if we choose make those connections.

As the novelist shaped by Nebraska, Willa Cather, observed, "There are only two or three human stories and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before." History *is* at the center of our human experience; it informs our present and can help build our future.

We know this. We feel this. So what do we do? Part of the answer is in our association—AASLH serves as not only your home for history but as the convener, the organizer

through which we can translate our beliefs into more effective action. We urge you to continue your membership and participation in this important agent for change—to recruit others—or to join if you are not yet a member.

But I also urge you to help change the perception of the importance of American history one conversation at a time. Improving our nation's understanding of and appreciation for the vital role history plays in all our lives seems like a difficult, perhaps unreachable, goal. But what better place than Birmingham to renew our faith and keep our eyes on the prize? To borrow a phrase from social justice movements: If not us, who? If not now, when?

I urge you to view this experience in Birmingham, as I am, as a reminder that every conversation we have every day has the potential to be a turning point. Let us leave this place with a commitment to infuse our conversations, our home institutions, and our communities with history in ways that put it in its rightful place—not in the middle of nowhere, but at the center of everything. Who knows? Maybe we ordinary people can help create extraordinary change. ©

Lynne Ireland is Deputy Director of the Nebraska State Historical Society and Chair of the AASLH Council. She can be reached at [lynne.ireland@nebraska.gov](mailto:lynne.ireland@nebraska.gov).

<sup>1</sup> Ireland references two addresses from the 2013 AASLH Annual Meeting: Natasha Trethewey <http://on.aaslh.org/TretheweyKeynote2013> and Carolyn McKinstry <http://on.aaslh.org/McKinstryKeynote2013>.



*"But I'm only going to an online conference."*



**LearningTimes**

**Less Hassle.  
Greater Reach.**

Host your next  
museum event online  
and save time and money  
while connecting with  
more people.

**Call us today:  
1.888.222.9749  
[www.learningtimes.com](http://www.learningtimes.com)**