The Editor's Perspective

Marvin Bergman
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THESE ARE DIFFICULT TIMES for almost any agency funded by state tax revenues in almost any state. Certainly the State Historical Society of Iowa, a state agency that uses some state tax revenue to support the Annals of Iowa, is not immune from those difficulties. In such situations, the appropriate role of government in supporting history becomes a contested issue.

Ambivalence about how to fund the work of the state's historical institutions is not new, of course. Rebecca Conard's new book, Benjamin Shambaugh and the Intellectual Foundations of Public History (University of Iowa Press, 2002), shows that Shambaugh wrestled with similar issues when he was superintendent of the State Historical Society of Iowa from 1907 to 1940.

Most readers of the Annals of Iowa will not need to be convinced of the importance of public support for historical institutions. You know that much of the work that is so essential for providing the resources needed to produce the kind of articles you read in this journal—work such as collecting, preserving, and cataloging historical materials—goes on behind the scenes. As a result, such work may not be particularly appealing to private funding sources. Yet it is in the long-term public interest of any civilized society to preserve the records of its deeds for posterity.

You are also aware that historians have made significant strides in recent decades toward making history more inclusive—making history the story of all of us, not just those with the resources to preserve their story and to support those who would retell it. Some of that progress is the result of the individual interests of academic historians and the cultural changes that shape their interests. But the increasing inclusiveness of public history is made possible at least in part by public funding for historical institutions. Public funding frees historical institutions from the expectations that often accompany private donations.

Public-private partnerships can, of course, have significant benefits for both parties. They make possible the preservation
and processing of the materials left by such prominent Iowans as
the Hubbell family. But even those benefits are maximized when
the public work is grounded in a solid core of public funding.

Furthermore, such partnerships may be harder to come by if
the subjects are less well connected. What if we want to pre-
serve traditional barns built by average Iowa farm families? Or
collect, preserve, process, and interpret materials related to
Mexican-American families with histories extending back to the
early twentieth century in Muscatine, West Liberty, Mason City,
and elsewhere across the state? In such cases, and in many
more, we will need to rely heavily on public funding.

I hope you agree that it is important to preserve and build
on the gains we have made in making the history of Iowa more
inclusive. If so, it is a case that must be made; it cannot be as-
sumed that all citizens and their representatives share it. As
state budget cuts go deeper and deeper, core functions of the
State Historical Society—its historic preservation, museum, li-
brary and archives, education, and, yes, publications programs
—are increasingly at risk. We need your help to maintain essen-
tial state support for them.

As we enter a new political campaign season, readers of the
Annals of Iowa need to make your voices heard—in conversa-
tions with other members of your communities, in letters to the
editor of your local newspapers, in forums where issues are be-
ing raised with legislative and gubernatorial candidates, in let-
ters to those candidates, and wherever else you can. Tell them
why the work done by the State Historical Society of Iowa is
important to you and your descendants—and to all Iowans,
present and future. And tell them that you believe that main-
taining public funding is essential to continue that work.

Good government is the result of a vigorous discussion of
the critical issues it addresses. Everyone with a keen interest in
the preservation and interpretation of the history of the state
that this government represents needs to be a part of such a dis-
cussion. Raise your voice!

—Marvin Bergman, editor