

Public History: Essays From the Field

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Spriestersbach concludes by relating his philosophy of university management, which starts, "Don't accept a position unless you believe in its mission and that of the institution of which it is a part" (237). Spriestersbach's memoirs make evident his deep belief in the University of Iowa, and readers who also care about education will appreciate his dedication.

Public History: Essays from the Field, edited by James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia. Public History Series. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1999. xv, 422 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$48.50 cloth, \$39.50 paper.

REVIEWED BY JAMES E. MCMILLAN, CENTRAL COLLEGE

This latest volume in Krieger's Public History Series reflects the considerable changes and advances in the field since the publication of Barbara Howe and Emory Kemp's *Public History: An Introduction* in 1986. Indeed, a quick scanning of the contents of James Gardner and Peter LaPaglia's *Public History: Essays from the Field* indicates how far public history has gone beyond the four traditional areas of archives, editing, preservation, and museums. These are covered sufficiently, but new additions include record management, historical consultants and consulting businesses, film and media, and policy advisement among others.

All of the essays are new in content and authorship, but several address recurring themes in public history: the age-old battle with academic historians and the continuing question of employment opportunity in just that area. Since the employment crisis of the 1970s opened the door to public history, 35 percent of new Ph.D.s as of 1993 have found jobs outside of academe (up from 10 percent in 1977). Still, as past National Council on Public History president Patricia Mooney-Melvin emphasizes, historians as a whole have been reticent to embrace new applied history directions. The national audience for history has thus been static—if not in numbers, in understanding—and in the process, the entire history profession, audience and practitioner, has been marginalized. This identity crisis of history in the United States is the overriding question confronting the profession: whether to emphasize research and writing, to teach in an academic setting, or to move toward increasing the general public's awareness of the vicissitudes of the nation's past.

The section, "Varieties of Public Historians," reveals changes in the field since its beginnings in the 1970s and formalization in the 1980s.

For example, records management is now regarded as a separate but equal field to traditional archival work; it requires similar training and skills but deals with the promulgation of ongoing current records rather than non-current ones. Similarly, manuscript collectors are differentiated among those dealing with personal papers, artificial private collections lacking original provenance, and special collections assembled for specific research projects. A common concern of all three related areas is keeping pace with continuing technological advance.

Regarded as the "errant child of the monograph" (119), film and media present today's public historians with a new area of frustration and opportunity. As the majority of Americans read fewer and fewer books, their only exposure to history often comes from viewing visual material. Unfortunately, many historians have abdicated a role in the creative process in lieu of acting as detached critics. Hence, the genre is largely in the hands of film and media, but not history, professionals. While media proponents of history are well intentioned, they are often historically naive. Public historians would do well to help develop the historicity of the subject and content material, and the book's essay on this topic would have benefited from specific examples of visual presentations and films that beg for such improvement. On the other hand, a few other essays are almost too personalized in approach and would better serve their topic by branching out in more general and comprehensive directions.

The 15 essays on varieties of public history (including two introductory overviews) are followed by a ten-essay section delineating the "Practice of Public History." Houses and buildings, local history, history from the bottom up, historical sites and parks, museums from the local to the federal level and their corresponding controversial issues (such as the Enola Gay exhibit), history as business, and business as history are all well covered, each essay offering cogent, active recommendations to increase the scope and influence of the field.

The time is ripe for public historians to heighten their profile. Since Alex Haley's *Roots* in 1975, the Bicentennial of 1976, and Ken Burns's work on the Civil War in the late 1980s, interest in American history continues to rise among a public once "jaded by a lost war in Vietnam and left cynical in the aftermath of Watergate," and which now turns to its past for "inspiration and celebration" (334). Public history was born in these years and has carved out a respectable niche. The charge to public historians today is to build upon this established foundation and fulfill the role of historian as educator, not just for the professorate, but for the American public at large.

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