

History organizations from big cities to the heartland have all experienced the winds of change in recent months and years, and for some, the end of economic uncertainty cannot be near enough. For others, change is fully embraced and innovation is a frequent byproduct.

Inspired by this year's annual meeting theme in Oklahoma City, *Winds of Opportunity*, Roberts and Franco share their observations of the history field during this exciting time and help us train our eyes and ears to consider what can we do as history leaders, workers, and fans in the twenty-first century. Please plan to join us in the southern plains this September as we become students and teachers of our "weather" and ultimately return home renewed for the future.

Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko, 2010 Program Chair  
CEO, Abbe Museum

# The Winds of Opportunity

By Laura Roberts and Barbara Franco

"You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows," Bob Dylan sang in 1965 in "Subterranean Homesick Blues." While the counterculture of the 1960s has become immortalized in the collections and exhibitions of history museums and archives, the winds of change keep blowing. In fact, the rate of change affecting our organizations continues to increase and many organizations find it hard to respond. The theme for this year's AASLH meeting acknowledges that while many history organizations have been buffeted by the economic storm that is disrupting business as usual in almost every sector, times of turmoil always present opportunities as well.

## TODAY'S WEATHER

For many history institutions, it feels as though an Oklahoma tornado touched down and left a swath of ruin in its wake. Like a tornado's path, some organizations have been left standing while others have been devastated by deep cuts in budgets and staff. A recent survey of state history organizations showed a range of cuts from five to forty percent. Ohio and Pennsylvania have seen their state history programs nearly dismantled, while nonprofits have had to tighten their belts in the face of declining earned revenues, contributions, and endowment returns.

Regardless of how well a particular organization is weathering the current economic downturn, there is increasing



Levine Museum of the New South's *Changing Places: From Black and White to Technicolor*®, explores how people approach their region's cultural diversity.

acceptance that the typical business model can no longer be sustained. Despite best efforts to achieve professional standards and staffing, history organizations find sustainability an elusive goal. The steady decline in attendance, particularly at larger museums so dependent on ticket revenue, has continued, while we struggle to explain why it is happening and what can be done to reverse the trend.

Recently, a number of important studies have identified long-term shifts affecting history organizations and other public sector institutions. *A Public Trust at Risk: The Heritage Health Index Report on the State of America's Collections* focused attention on the dire need for collections funding. *The Future of Museums and Libraries: A Discussion Guide*, provides structure for ongoing dialogue about the future of museums and libraries organized around nine major themes: changing definitions and roles; shifts in power and authority; "third place" gathering spaces; technology; twenty-first-century learning and skills; new models for collaboration; sustainability grounded in relevance and economic reality; evaluating impact; and twenty-first-century workplace planning.

History organizations have an enormous responsibility as collecting institutions to preserve heritage and culture for future generations. This is complicated by the country's sheer number of libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies. *Building a Sustainable Future for History Institutions: A Systemic Approach*, a study currently underway by Technical Development Corporation (TDC) of Boston, calls for a new "history system" to build a sustainable future and suggests that limited resources preclude individual organizations from fulfilling the needs and expectations of stewardship and public access on their own.

In *Mastering Civic Engagement*, Robert Archibald, director of the Missouri Historical Society, suggests that this new role “depends upon the creation of new and really collaborative relationships, where we do not presume to know what audiences need. In these new relationships we will regard ourselves as reservoirs of information and expertise and will relinquish our traditional authoritarian roles in favor of new responsibilities as both resources and facilitators of dialogue about things that matter most to people.”

Nevertheless, we continue to struggle to understand exactly what is relevant to our constituents and our communities. Cary Carson and John and Anita Durel have published thoughtful essays that argue that the future success of history organizations depends on creating new relationships among audience, institutions, collections, and the process of history.

These studies identify major issues that can no longer be ignored including: demographic shifts that are redefining participation, technological advances, new ways of collaboration, and renewed interest in relevancy through civic engagement and volunteerism. The historic houses and collections that once resonated for longtime residents may have little or no relevance to current denizens who represent diverse nationalities and cultures. What meaning will be found in these organizations and their history if we don't update collections and interpretations? The field is also experiencing a major workforce transition as the large number of Baby Boomers who entered the field in the 1970s is replaced by a new generation of public historians, trained in specialized academic programs, who bring new skills, perspectives, and high expectations to their work.

The vocabulary of audience may no longer be appropriate in an environment in which Web 2.0 users are just as much creators of content as curators or educators. With history playing an increasingly smaller role in formal education, informal history education through museum visits, personal and family research, books, media, and the Internet, may be the major vehicle for Americans' civic education. Websites have quickly become the primary way institutions communicate with the public, as well as how visitors make travel plans to visit them. Social media is replacing traditional media as a way to share news and information. At the same time, electronic communication presents serious issues about how we document history and the long-term storage and accessibility of historical records.

These burgeoning responsibilities of expanding collections, educating the next generation, and staying current with technological tools have all made the need to stay connected and to collaborate with each other more essential than ever.

## FORECASTING OPPORTUNITIES

For history organizations this environment represents opportunities for change that can ultimately lead to new successes and strengthen our institutions.

## COLLABORATION

History institutions, more than ever, have to think beyond the walls of their buildings and individual organizations. TDC's project argues for a system that combines complementary and diverse strengths of many institutions rather than expecting each to deliver all of the services needed.

This systems approach, they argue, would strengthen institutions, each having a unique and viable strategic position while working within a broader infrastructure. This provides greater efficiency through coordination of collections and information sharing and greater impact and richer context for each institution's stories. Consider the parallels with healthcare. A range of providers, from the walk-in clinic to a major teaching hospital, each provides care appropriate for a variety of ailments and patient needs. The success of each narrowly focused provider depends on having the rest of the system offering complementary services.

Indeed, there are many barriers to transforming the field's thinking from individual organizations to a coordinated system. Organizations are often fiercely protective of their turf, fearing that a narrower focus may mean they will lose members, funders, and audience. Being part of a coordinated system requires trusting that every component of the system will do its part reliably and professionally.

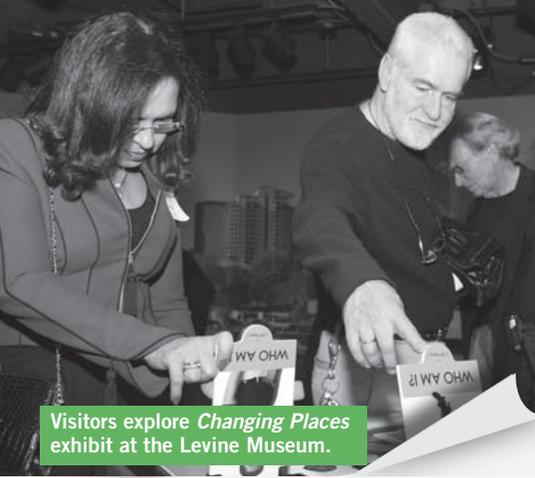
Moreover, one way to shift from being keepers of the past to being useable community assets is to open our doors to real partnerships. It is often easier to build collaboration around programs and to establish trust among organizations by working together on specific, focused, and common goals. As collaborators understand more clearly the potential of working together and feel more comfortable, they are more likely to want to work together. Short-term efforts may become pilots for sustained efforts. The benefits of collaboration may go well beyond functional efficiencies and allow history organizations to expand interpretation, linking local stories to larger regional or national themes with greater relevancy for audiences. But historical organizations should also look outside of the history system for partners. Often the real power of collaboration comes from diverse partner organizations with different audiences, expertise, or perspectives. Collaboration allows partners to accomplish something they could not attempt unaccompanied.

Greater collaboration is also needed within organizations to eliminate departmental silos. Many organizations, large and small, are reorganizing around organizational structures that support greater internal and external collaboration. Cross training is more important than ever in an environment of change and innovation. It is key to strengthening organizational capacity and developing leadership. For example, the Historical Society of Delaware has rewritten job descriptions so half of their employees' responsibilities include fulfilling the mission and learning about state history.

Minnesota Historical Society

Opening of MN 150 exhibit at the Minnesota Historical Society.





Visitors explore *Changing Places* exhibit at the Levine Museum.

Levine Museum of the New South

## NEW AUDIENCES: MAKING HISTORY PERSONAL

Changing community demographics presents new opportunities as well as challenges. If organizations are not providing what people want to see and do, no amount of promotion will solve the attendance problem.

Understanding audiences, especially non-traditional ones, is more important than ever. The Wisconsin Historical Society is changing the way it plans by looking first at the wants and needs of audiences, developing products to address them, and measuring how well they met them.

As Marilyn Hood found in her 1980 study of museum visitors and non-visitors in Toledo, Ohio, people who choose to spend their leisure time in pursuits other than visiting museums have a different set of values and priorities (social interaction, active participation, and feeling comfortable) than habitual museum visitors (doing something worthwhile, having new experiences, and learning). Thirty years later, historical organizations have made little progress in developing a deeper understanding of visitor interests and motivations. (The board of the Visitor Studies Association includes many professionals from science museums but none from historical organizations.)

People have come to expect the ability to personalize their experience. Even the content of history has changed to place greater emphasis on personal stories and connections rather than objects alone. The enormous popularity of StoryCorps, which has recorded stories from more than 50,000 people, is evidence of this. Increasingly, collections are viewed as tools for engagement rather than a sacred trust. Co- and self-production are becoming the norm, from tracing one's family history using online resources, documenting daily life in a scrapbook, Tweeting, or posting videos on YouTube. New technologies, particularly interactive gaming, will undoubtedly shape the way people think about and use museums in the future as partners rather than as consumers.

The Center for the Future of Museums identified the expectation that people can experience narrative, rather than just see it. They cite Conner Prairie's *Follow the North Star*, in which participants play the role of a fugitive slave on the Underground Railroad, as an experience in which the visitor becomes protagonist, rather than passive viewer. Scholastic has created *The Stacks*, a website where young readers can play games based on books, interact with other young readers, and create new experiences around book characters. As these young readers grow up, this experience will undoubtedly shape their expectations about books and stories.

## RELEVANCE AND IMPACT

History organizations are being challenged to justify their value and relevance to society. Some are redefining themselves in terms of their community impact. Some are

attempting to solve real social problems of literacy, informal learning, after-school care, etc. Others are looking at how to build civic engagement, as a neutral and safe third place, a convener that brings people together to help them understand historical information that relates to current issues and contemporary decisions. Nevertheless, the impact of historical organizations remains diffuse and difficult to document. It is intriguing to compare historical organizations with children's museums and zoos and aquariums. The Association for Children's Museums has embraced the challenge of childhood obesity and created *Good to Grow!* "to support children's museums in providing healthy choices and activities for children and families in their communities." The Association of Zoos and Aquariums actively promotes the message of conservation, including it in their accreditation standards; providing members with educational information, planning tools, databases, funding sources, and awards; and sponsoring volunteer efforts, reintroduction programs, and specialized conservation projects. By focusing on a particular issue or message of critical importance, these colleague institutions develop, test, and disseminate successful strategies; create clear public policy messages; and focus on specific, measurable outcomes. Is there a comparable significant, relevant message historical organizations can unite around?

A town may have a series of conversations about race, select a historical book for a reading initiative, or debate the wisdom of sprawl in planning board meetings. Members of the local history organization often participate in discussions, but the organization itself remains silent. We, as historically minded citizens, may walk out of a community meeting shaking our heads at the lack of historical context in contemporary debate, but at the same time, our organizations remain mute. Is it any surprise that we are not seen as relevant?

## TECHNOLOGY

Each year we think technology has transformed our lives and our work, only to witness more dramatic transformations the following year. As the 2000s came to a close, many observers included "Google" as a verb among the most significant developments of the decade. Observers of the 2008 presidential campaign recognized initiatives begun by Howard Dean's campaign in 2004 were just the beginning of a revolution in mass communication, political organizing, and fundraising. As of December 2009, 320 million people belonged to Facebook, which would make it the third largest country in the world. Between October 2008 and April 2009, participation by women over 55 (who are coincidentally, the largest audience for museums) grew by 550 percent, while membership of people under 25 grew by just 20 percent.

Technology has the capacity to share collections more widely and create new ways for the public to interact with us. The Maine Historical Society's *Maine Memory Network (MMN)*, provides access to thousands of items from several hundred organizations from across Maine, as well as over ninety online exhibitions. *MMN* is also the home to the *Maine Community History Project*, designed to foster collaborations between historical societies, public libraries, and schools. Community teams digitize local historical collec-

tions and exhibit them with supporting text on custom-designed local history websites. *MMN* also has a “My Album” tool, which enables individual users to create, edit, and share their albums of images.

*The Commons on Flickr*, begun as a pilot project with 3,500 Library of Congress photographs, now includes images from thirty-one libraries and archives worldwide. Using crowd sourcing to tap the experience of many individuals, the public is invited to tag these photographs, with each viewer adding his or her perspective and additional information.

To assemble a collection for the future National September 11 Museum and Memorial, museum planners have created an interactive website, <http://makehistory.national911memorial.org>. By January 2010, 1,000 users had uploaded more than 3,000 photographs, videos, and personal stories, contributions that will be a key part of the actual museum, slated to open in 2012.

While many institutions have Facebook pages (a search on “historical society” yields over 500 results), fewer have embraced Twitter, the microblog system. Most use it to promote programs, note recent press, and occasionally share collections information. The Massachusetts Historical Society is tweeting John Q. Adams’s daily diary entries, beginning 200 years to the day he left Boston for Russia. The posts link to maps pinpointing his progress across the ocean as well as to the longer entries of other Adams diaries (found on MHS’s website). Similarly, the New London (CT) Historical Society posts a blog by Joshua Hempstead based on the diary he kept from 1711-58.

Technology has already sharply redefined the challenge of collecting. A Stanford University study showed that only one-half of one percent of information produced worldwide finds its way to printed form. The vast majority of information, from daily correspondence and personal journals to public documents and records, is electronic. In an effort to be more environmentally sensitive, we are urged to think twice before printing electronic communication. Doctoral theses, professional conference proceedings, journals, and monographs are increasingly available in electronic-only versions. The era of Senator Edward Kennedy writing his autobiography based on a lifetime of daily journals is fading. At the end of 2009, nineteen senators and fifty-one House members were on Twitter, sharing the thoughts that prior office holders might have recorded in journals or daybooks. Newspapers ended 2009 an endangered species. The *Detroit Free Press* prints only three hard copy editions a week; the *Christian Science Monitor* prints just a weekly edition. How shall we document history when the sources are all ephemeral? How shall those who come after us write it?

## WEATHERING THE STORM

How organizations respond to these challenges and opportunities may well determine our field’s future. Institutions must face the challenge of managing change. It is not easy, and it is particularly difficult to effect deep, enduring change. John Kotter, from Harvard Business School and one of the most cogent theorists of change management, has said that any successful change effort must begin with a sense of urgency. Some organizations will understand the urgency in

these winds of opportunity, put up their sails to catch the breeze, and move toward substantive, lasting change. Others may decide to put up storm shutters, retrench, and wait for winds to subside.

Regardless of how individual organizations respond, the field must respond in a proactive, creative way. The third of Kotter’s eight steps in organization transformation is creating a shared vision. A shared vision of change for our field is beginning to take form, but will depend on stakeholders willing to act on that vision, develop support for change, and institutionalize new approaches. The new paradigm is a shift in focus from the collections to the customer. Access to information will be as important as access to places and things. We will need to be about stories, not merely objects.

Jay Rounds observes that in times of change, adaptive, innovative thinking should replace well-established and proven habits of mind. To weather these winds of opportunity, history organizations need to explore new ways of operating rather than exploiting old solutions. We must create a climate of entrepreneurship that welcomes new, fresh ideas and accepts some risk taking. We need to give up control and instead adopt a new model of stewardship that shares authority and power with audiences and volunteers. We must expand networks and look for new partnerships within and beyond the public history system. We need to find our voice in the marketplace of ideas, bringing the insights and perspectives of history to the issues that confront our democracy. The winds of change are winds of opportunity that shouldn’t be squandered. ©

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