

NCPH – “Present at the Creation” – 40th Anniversary Plenary Questions – March 18, 2020

Dr. Andy Anderson – Executive Vice President and Chief Historian, Wells Fargo & Company; Founder and Director, Wells Fargo Family & Business History Center, San Francisco, California.

1. Do you remember when you first heard the term “public history” and what did you think it meant?

I remember it well - a phone call out of the blue in March 1978 from Robert (Bob) W. Pomeroy III, a senior vice president and deputy advisor to the Inter-American Development Bank, Washington DC. Bob's opening line was: “Hello. I'm Bob Pomeroy and I'm helping put together a network of Public Historians across the country and I'd like to invite you to join us.” My brilliant reply was: “What's a 'Public' Historian?” and “Who is 'Us'?” (I remember flashing on a classic Pogo cartoon strip about life amidst chaos in the Okefenokee Swamp – “We have met the enemy and 'They is Us.’” Today I'd probably update that to “This is Us.”)

I had just joined the newly formed History Department of Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco after four years as an historian and archivist at Stanford University and its “semi-autonomous” Hoover institution on War, Revolution and Peace. I was still searching for an identity in the netherworld between academia and the rest of the universe. Bob's great reply to my self-description was: “Perfect! You are a Public Historian and there are a surprising number of us.” I was thinking: ‘Good to know. There's apparently more than two of “us.”’

Bob Pomeroy, my new “colleague” and fellow “banker,” went on to tell me there were three things he hoped I would do:

First, participate in “Business and History: A Dialogue,” (program attached) a seminar being presented by the “Public Historical Studies Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), and co-chaired by professors G. Wesley Johnson and Thomas Fuller. The program defined “Public History” as “a new multi-faceted field of study which put historians on the cutting edge of society's problems and brings historical method and skills to the service of the public.” Sounded pretty noble to me. The “Business Community Participants” in the dialogue were historians and archivists from: Bank of America, Wells Fargo Bank, Hewlett Packard, Arco, Sherman Foundation, Stanford Graduate School of Business (through which I'd indirectly gotten my position at Wells Fargo), Dow Corning, Aspen Institute, University of Alabama Law Center, Inter-American Bank, Pacific Outdoor Advertising, Data Products Corp., Oral History Associates, California State University, Fullerton, a Radio and Publishing personality from Ventura, CA, and, of course, UCSB. Ok, I'm all-in for this.

Second, write an article about “The New Historian” for *The Maryland Historian* (X:1, Spring 1979), a publication of the History Department of the University of Maryland, College Park. Bob Pomeroy and Arnita Jones were the guest editors who wrote the “Introduction: History Careers in a Changing Job Market.” My piece was on “Bank History and Archives.” Ok, I am all-in on this, too, as I could include personal musings about two publications about careers in history that lingered with me in the late-1960s and 1970s. One was the American Historical Association's *History as a Career: To Undergraduates Choosing a Career*, a 16-page booklet “designed to help you decide whether you want to make college teaching a career.” I had checked the ‘yes’ box and hardly noticed the paragraph on “Historians Who Are Not College Teachers.” The other publication was a discourse to young historians by Samuel Eliot

Morison titled “History as a Literary Art,” (first published in his collected essays, *By Land and By Sea*, in 1953; republished by The Serenus Press in 1997), in which he wrote:

“the quality of imagination, if properly restrained by the conditions of historical discipline, is of great assistance in enabling one to discover problems to be solved , to grasp the significance of facts, to form hypothesis, to discern causes in their first beginnings and, above all, to relate the past creatively to the present.”

I opted for the college teaching career, initially pursuing it at The Ohio State University with an M.A. thesis on 17th-century French mysticism (It was the 1960s!), then a PhD dissertation on “The Police of Paris Under Louis XIV” (trying to figure out why the police were so interested in self-abnegating mystics.). The latter I mostly wrote while a Teaching and Research Fellow at Stanford University. While there, I also got a newly-funded National Endowment for the Humanities position in the Archives Department of the Hoover Institution organizing the personal papers of individuals and records of organizations around the world. It was an eye-opening experience to see the global applicability and usefulness of historical knowledge and resources. At the same time, I opted to get an Archives Administration Certificate from the National Archives of the United States.

It’s so funny and so true in history that one thing leads to another – if you’re curious and open to opportunities slowly passing before your eyes. This happened for me when Wells Fargo Bank in nearby San Francisco was looking for historians and archivists to make sense of its 125 year history of helping families and communities finance the future. The opportunity to put together everything I had been trained to do led to building a corporate archives, museums, a fleet of stagecoaches and eventually to writing “the story” of the Company’s history. My takeaway was (and still is) that Morison was right: imagination and historical discipline can help relate the past creatively to the present. In hindsight, I’d add just one more thing from what I’ve learned: “History is always about the future.”

Back to Bob Pomeroy. His third ask was to imagine a national gathering of “public historians” at San Ysidro Ranch in Montecito, California, in the Spring of 1979, as a follow-up to the UCSB Business and History “Dialogue.” Jumped all-in on that too after a further – I’d say passionate – explanation of the program and possibilities by Wes Johnson and Tom Fuller of UCSB and my friend Noel Stowe of Arizona State University. This, of course, became the “First National Symposium on Public History” organized by The Public Historical Studies Program, University of California, Santa Barbara, at Montecito, CA, April 27-29, 1979. (List of participants attached.)

And here we are 40 years later.

2. What were your expectations at your first encounter with public history (Montecito 1979, National Archives 1979, Pittsburgh 1980)

High expectation, bordering on exhilaration, of meeting and joining a new *national* community of confident and accomplished historians, archivists, curators who were exploring the uses of history in ‘the far quadrants of the universe.’ I felt like I’d just been invited to take a ride on the Starship Enterprise. Didn’t know where we were headed, but felt certain it was going to be exciting.

3. Do you have a particular clear memory of the Montecito/National Archives/Pittsburgh meeting?

One crystalline moment for me was the arrival in a big black limo and “a cloud of dust” of Governor Bruce Babbitt of Arizona. (He was later Secretary of the Interior.) He was the brother of my friend Jim Babbitt, archivist of Bank of America, and he was scheduled to be one of our keynote speakers. There was a real buzz when the limo pulled up and two dark-suited security guards wearing sunglasses and bearing deep tans stepped out and opened the car door for the Governor. It felt like a rock star had just appeared. My first thought was: “Wow! Public History has really arrived!”

4. Did your perception or understanding of “public history” change after participating in these events?

Oh yes. There was now a strong sense of professional community and the value of history beyond academia – in public education, in government work (national, state, local and military) in private enterprise and in cultural affairs. It was like there was suddenly a whole world of “colleagues” to talk to and seek or offer advice to. I was reminded, again and again of the Samuel Eliot Morison quote in “History as a Literary Art” about imaginative problem solving.

5. What were your observations about the emerging field at the time?

It gave me great hope that students who were just starting to be trained in “public history” would make significant contributions to society, to the communities in which they lived and to the organizations and agencies they worked for. I remember thinking the graduates of these programs would be great contributors to the family and business history programs I was working on. I subsequently was involved in hiring five “public history” graduates – from UCSB, NYU and Cal State, Fullerton – for fulltime jobs at Wells Fargo.

6. What did you think would be the value of creating an organization dedicated to public history?

I was trained in French History. So, when I heard about NCPH, I was thinking “Aux armes citoyens! This is the French Revolution of Rising Expectations – something social scientists now tell us is a critical moment in every revolution. The first thing you have to do is get organized. NCPH for me was like the creation of the French National Convention in the 1790s – a point of no return. Get organized and get on with it. Fortunately, in NCPH’s founding, there was no Reign of Terror (as far as I know), just a growing sense of legitimacy, confidence and rising expectations for the successful employment of trained historians and archivists.

7. Has NCPH achieved what you hoped? What is your assessment of the organization’s purpose and value?

Ah, the question of the hour. The simple answer is “yes” NCPH has achieved what I hoped it would be – a voice, a platform and just maybe a career launch, for anyone who wants to share their love of history in a meaningful way with other people.

8. Describe some outcomes of early collaborations among public historians.

Beyond the obvious, such as the creation of *The Public Historian* journal, I think some of the most important collaborations were in the development of dialogues, conversations and programs with other long-established historical organizations – American Historical Association, Organization of American Historians, Society of American Archivists, American Association of State and Local History – to try and present a common voice and united front when needed. I remember being especially energized about

professional issues beyond my own work when I was asked to head up the AHA-OAH-SAA Joint Committee on Historians and Archivists.

9. What has been the biggest change you've seen in NCPH or the public history movement over 40 years?

A greater sense of NCPH being *the* home port for those of us not permanently affiliated with an academic institution. It's a great stepping-off point for evidencing connectedness to a professional organization which aspires to serve the public interest.

10. In your view what are the biggest opportunities/biggest challenges in NCPH, or public history?

I'll stay with the biggest opportunity – promoting the notion that “History is always about the future.” Public history has to continue to deliver the message that ‘what is past is prologue,’ as Shakespeare wrote in *The Tempest*, and that someone had the good sense to chisel into the base of the sculpture of *Future* on the steps of the National Archives.

11. What do you think NCPH should be doing to still be relevant 40 years from now?

Marketing Marketing. Marketing The simple definition of the word in the lexicon of Apple, probably the most valuable business franchise in the world, is “to create demand.” NCPH needs to create demand by helping students of history find imaginative ways to make the past the foundation of future planning in people's lives. ‘Storytelling’ a la Samuel Eliot Morison , Ken Burns and David McCullough is one way to get people to pay attention to the “lessons” of history. Data visualization, a la Edward Tufte is another. Family dynamics visualization techniques, geographic mapping projects and DNA and medical genealogies are wonderful ways of personalizing history in the ‘service the public interest.’

12. What advice would you give students or public historians entering the field today?

The same things I've suggested for about 40 years: Focus on clarity of thought and expression – you'll always be speaking or writing about what you know in a way that persuades people you know what you're talking about! Get advice and seek feedback from people who know what they are talking about! Know your audience, which is probably going to be multicultural and multigenerational in this day and age. Learn how to become digital and virtual – contrary to traditional opinion, you can be in more than one place at the same time! Most of all: Share what you know! And go make the world a better place!