

# A Memoir of the Western History Association

JOHN PORTER BLOOM

Surely no organization of historians and history buffs, of anything like comparable size and importance, has ever been as much fun as the Western History Association. This was evident at the start and it is a delight to observe it continuing in action year after year, even with the great increase in membership that WHA has enjoyed. Still, there is a lot of just plain hard work that goes into our meetings and publications.

There, it came out already—the possessive “our.” Let the reader be aware that I, the present author, cheerfully plead guilty to the contrivance here of a highly personal, possibly even possessive, memoir of the Western History Association.

The leading facts of the case are simple and very much alive in the minds of many friends and charter members. Inspired chiefly by the quiet, persuasive urgings of John Alexander Carroll, a group of us got together in a self-constituted Organizing Committee in 1961 and set up a conference to be held in Santa Fe that fall. It was a smashing success in terms of quality (excellent papers and socializing) as well as quantity (about three hundred persons, when we would have been pleased with one hundred or delighted with one hundred fifty).

472 *South Dakota History*

In a jolly, hastily rigged business session, a just slightly more formal organizational structure was erected, charged (1) to set up another conference the next year, somewhere, somehow, and (2) to propose a constitution or some basic document in order to convey to future generations the great beneficences we were so eagerly embracing ourselves.

A warm, hospitable invitation was offered to us from Denver, to be the site for the 1962 convention, and plans moved forward in good style. A hot, inhospitable fire put the Albany Hotel of Denver largely out of business, unfortunately, just before we were to meet there; but the generous cooperation of the Hilton Hotel made it possible for us to gather in Denver after all. Our recollection of the number of persons who attended, about four hundred, may be slightly inflated, but our impression of the intellectual stimulation and friendliness of the crowd could not possibly be so favorable if it had not been true. We formally established the Western History Association in a much bigger and more formal business meeting on 11 October 1962. The late J. Leonard Jennewein of South Dakota endeared himself to all, and thoroughly jarred the bureaucrats among us, by speaking and voting for anarchy, in opposition to the adoption of any constitution or election of any officers or other puffed-up foolery. The bureaucrats won, of course—must they always?—but the Jennewein point of view has not been forgotten. May it ne'er be forgot!

The name of Ray Allen Billington must ne'er be forgot, either. He cheerfully assumed a prominent role at Santa Fe and helped immeasurably as president pro tem of the organizing group up to Denver, and then he was elected first president of the WHA. The association's booming start owed much to his leadership, embodying preeminently great organizational ability, knowledge, tact, intuition, energy, persistence, and of course prestige. The rest of us as officers and council members were happy, eager, bit players working in support of Billington, the star and master actor.

A basic principle for much of the style of the WHA "play" is derived from the Organizing Committee's determination to meld the so-called professionals, including academics, and the so-called buffs into our organization. We felt that as a group each had much to offer the other. We wanted an association

that would be both valuable and friendly to everyone, and certainly to avoid polarization or exclusiveness. We were all too conscious of the irrationality of dividing people interested in Western history into distinct groups. It cannot be done except in arbitrary, unreal, unhuman ways. Our thought, as it seemed, was not to seek a low common denominator in WHA activities, but to balance our emphasis now one way, now another, and next still another, in convention programs, in publications, and in other functions.

The *American West* magazine was the first of our big dreams to come true. Announced at the third Conference on the History of the American West in Salt Lake City, October 1963, the exciting first issue of January 1964 was followed by even more successful numbers. A. Russell Mortensen and C. Gregory Crampton, as editor and associate editor, established exactly the correct theme for the *American West*—heavily illustrated, beautifully designed, with a wide variety of well-written, solid articles and critical book reviews. It was and is a package that gratifies almost everyone who sees and touches it, likened most commonly to *American Heritage* magazine. Further following the pattern of that excellent publication, the *American West* in 1965-66 came to be published by a separate business firm, set up in our case by George Pfeiffer III, bringing to an end the early, generous support provided by the University of Utah. Currently, we are anxiously studying reports of drastically increased costs of paper, ink, postage, and everything else that goes into a magazine, because a more expensive *American West* means a more expensive Western History Association and we are determined to keep costs as low as possible.

This goes also for our scholarly *Western Historical Quarterly*. Started under the skilled and dedicated editorship of Leonard J. Arrington and S. George Ellsworth, and continuing now under the latter, WHA's quarterly asserts an academic and technical excellence that will maintain it on a par with that of any scholarly community in America. The Utah connection has been more long-lived than in the case of our magazine: Utah State University has provided generous support and cosponsorship from the beginning in 1970.

The association's other publications have been a newsletter,

474 *South Dakota History*

issued on a quarterly schedule from November 1965 to November 1969, and now on an irregular schedule, as well as three books containing selected papers from WHA conferences. The first, based on the original Santa Fe conference, was *Probing the American West* (Museum of New Mexico Press, 1962). The second, by the same press in 1963, was entitled *The American West, an Appraisal*, and included twenty papers from the Denver meeting. In 1969 *Reflections of Western Historians* was published by the University of Arizona Press, containing papers from the San Francisco conference of 1967. All of these volumes were well received by most readers, but more recently exigencies of publishing and of finding skilled editorial talent willing to work for only glory, not gold, have combined to produce a blank in this department. Perhaps the interesting papers coming out of the WHA conference at Rapid City will stir someone's ambition for another go at it.

For many members, in any event, the conferences themselves are sufficient justification for the association. The prejudices of the Organizing Committee of 1961-62 have persisted in certain continuing aspects of these conventions. For instance, the association seeks out cities with adequate hotel facilities and interesting historical backgrounds. We avoid academic settings where some members might be inhibited in any degree.

The conventions feature on the one hand serious sessions (scholarly disquisitions and such) and on the other hand tours and social events, sometimes formal but often quite unstructured. The arrangements made for Rapid City have been typical in ways and also different, taking advantage of the area's particular historic and scenic opportunities. On Thursday afternoon the conferees have their choice of a partial program of scholarly sessions or an early-departing tour to the Homestake Mine and other Black Hills sites. Those attending the sessions have late-departing buses to bring the whole crowd together at the Game Lodge (cocktails) and the Borglum Ranch Studio (buffalo barbecue). Every year's meeting place offers its own special opportunities for edification and enjoyment, even New Haven, Connecticut, where WHA met in 1972, the only time yet to gather east of the Mississippi River or even the

Missouri.

Members sometimes like to joke about being or associating with hard-drinking cowboy types at WHA conventions, but carousing is pursued more in word than in deed. It has never operated, for instance, to reduce seriously the crowds at the Westerners Breakfasts early each Saturday morning, the last day of the meetings. This traditional event brings together members (and spouses and friends of members) of many of the Westerner "corrals," "posses," or clubs by whatever names, in cities all over the United States and abroad. "Westerners" have participated in the association very prominently from the beginning. These groups are so diverse and full of fun and anarchy as to defy explication in the scope of this memoir. Their contribution is celebrated generously, and many important names given, which we have necessarily passed over here, in John Alexander Carroll's very nice piece, "The Western History Association and The Westerners," in the Westerners International newsletter, *Buckskin Bulletin* (Fall 1971), to which we happily defer for nitty-gritty facts and more flow'ry language than we can command.

In sum, membership in the Western History Association carries with it both tangible and intangible benefits for people in a broad spectrum of interests in and of the West. We hope that many readers of this memoir will share in our delight at meeting in Rapid City, South Dakota, on 2-5 October 1974.

Copyright of South Dakota History is the property of South Dakota State Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

All illustrations in this issue are the property of the South Dakota State Historical Society except those on the following pages: p. vi, from the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1875, p. 410, Walter P. Jenney from the Columbian Library, Columbia University Libraries, New York City, and Henry Newton from Thomas E. Odell, Mato Paha, The Story of Bear Butte, (1942), pp. 420, 427, 432, 434, from the J. Leonard Jennewein Collection, Layne Library, Dakota Wesleyan University, Mitchell (the captions are taken from the original prints); pp. 441 and 451, from the New York Historical Society, New York City; p. 455, from the Montana Historical Society, Helena; pp. 514 and 515, from the United States Department of the Interior Indian Arts and Crafts Board, Sioux Indian Museum and Crafts Center; p. 532, from the Rapid City Daily Journal.