LOOKING FORWARD:
A SOCIETY AT THE CROSSROADS

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URING the past three years I carefully planned for this moment. My presidential address would be a departure from the precedents of the past. Even the title would be different, "A Society at the Crossroads," sub-titled, "The Legacies of Our Foundering Fathers!" However, every time I started to write I discovered that someone had appropriated a line here, or a line there. For example, the original opening lines were to be quotes from Charles Dickens's A Tale of Two Cities. I would look out over the luncheon audience and intone, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

That line wound up in the wastebasket after former Sen. Mike Mansfield spoke at Kansas State University, and titled his address after Dickens's famous opening. I was flattered with the thought that the senator might have picked my brain by ESP, but the labor of starting over again made me wish for a line from an obscure Afghan poet, whose work was only read inside the fastness of the Hindu Kush!

The intent of Dickens's opening was to express a mood which I have felt very strongly since becoming an officer of this Society. It is almost a lament that I have heard from past and present officers, staff members, people who visit our historic sites, and even the general public. All of that communication, at varying times, says, "The Society is doing great today, but it sure was poor in the past." Or, "The Society is doing well today, but tomorrow disaster will surely strike." Or, "They don't keep the sites up the way they used to." Or, "If only I had joined the Society 20 years ago I really would have been in it at the height of its power and influence."

All of that reminded me of a refrain that ran through dozens of speeches I wrote while in the governor's office during 1964-1965: "We point with pride"; or, "we view with alarm." The trick in those days was to remember what you pointed to with pride last month, so you did not wind up viewing it with alarm this month!

In 1975 Ed Langsdorf presented the Society with a history of its first century of existence. Last year Homer Socolofsky presented a look at the centennial celebration. It is time to look ahead. Let us go back to those discarded opening lines for a moment. In thinking over the problems of the Kansas State Historical Society, it occurs to me that those problems now, and the ones to come in the next 100 years, are always the product of the times, be they the best or worst of times.

People still quote Dickens because he hit on a basic truth about the duality of how human beings will view any event. It reminds me of the old definition of the difference between an optimist and a pessimist. A half-filled glass for an optimist is half full; for a pessimist it is half empty. If our Society is to successfully meet the ever changing times of the next century of our corporate existence, we will need to keep redefining our perspective on when things are better or worse. I am sure there will be many times when the problems and opportunities of the future will find no scale for judging them by the past. We must continue to rework our understanding of where we have been, where we are now, and where we can go.

When I decided to break with the tradition of the out-going president presenting an historical sketch, I did so with the knowledge that I am one of the few presidents of this organization who has a background as a working historical administrator. There is a great advantage in that circumstance, but there is also possibly a disadvantage as well. I have broken the tradition in the hope that my action will be followed by more and continuous communication between my successors and our membership.

The advantage of my profession is that I, in the words of Prof. Harold Hill of Music Man fame, know the territory. Historical adminis-
tration has been my turf for almost a dozen years. In addition, during the past 13 years I have had the opportunity to view this Society from the perspective of the governor’s office, the perspective as a member, and the perspective as a director and officer of the Society. During each one of the past 12 years, in my capacity as director of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, some good citizen has reminded me, by mail, phone, or in person, that our library exists to serve the American people, at whatever point they are in their understanding of the subject matter of our institution. Those reminders have led to constant change, growth, and continuous reevaluation of procedures. We are reminded that we do not exist to serve and enjoy ourselves. Looking over the recent past of the Kansas State Historical Society, I do not find that a similar lesson has been taught at the state level. I will have more to say about that later.

Allow me a short aside on criticism. Criticism is part of the American way of life. If you read Ed Langsdorf’s centennial article, you will find that the Society has had its share over the years. The American bent for criticism probably started with Columbus. You will recall that the crew was criticizing him all the way across the Atlantic. You can almost hear them now, “This trip is a bummer; it’s too hot; it’s too cold; the food is bad; the water is low; and what’s more Crazy Chris doesn’t know where we are!”

With that kind of a beginning it is a small wonder that the habit is so entrenched. Every national group that followed had that same fun-filled sea voyage to master, and complaining became the national pastime in the New World. Today people in any organization accept it as their inalienable right. If you can’t gripe about the place where you work, then you may have to accept the idea that you haven’t been thinking about it lately. During the years I taught in college I was often reminded of what was said about college deans. The dean is to the academic world what a fireplug is to the canine! So are executive secretaries of historical societies, so are directors of presidential libraries, and of late it would seem that some politicians probably feel the relationship. The big problem for the critical employee, or even the citizen generally, is that having once treated all those folks as fireplugs, it is a little tough to go up, towel in hand, and make it believable when we say, “But we really love you for what good works you have done!”

Criticisms also have some odd turns; it has a duality much like the perspective problem we noted earlier. Most criticism stems from two sources. The first is that changes have been made in “the way things were.” The second source is that there have been no changes in the way things are. You will recall what happened last year when Gerry Gilmore, from his position of clear rationality inside the Utah State Prison said, “Do it!” Many Americans said that even though Mr. Gilmore wanted it done to him, they knew far better what was right, and good, and urged that it not be done. Many of the critics of the Kansas State Historical Society put us in the same position. If we want to change things, we are criticized; and if we don’t change things we are criticized.

It reminds me of the story of the politician who was facing a hostile audience, trying to get them to accept his line of reasoning. At one point in his speech he declared, “And all of the problems which you people have stem from just two sources: ignorance and apathy.” Then, shaking a finger at a man who was dozing in the front row he said, “Isn’t that right, Mister?” The citizen shook himself awake and said, “I DON’T KNOW, AND I don’t care either!”

Let me return to the earlier question: What should the Kansas State Historical Society be 100 years from now? There are those in this audience who will say, in honesty and with fervor, that it should be what it has always been: a small, closed corporation whose membership represents only a fraction of the total population of the state. It is to be highly funded, widely respected, and the guardian of a secret treasure whose rich extent is known to only the research scholar; the school child propelled into this fantastic storehouse by his harassed teachers, on that great American institution THE ANNUAL FIELD TRIP to the state’s capitol; or to the ardent history buff who has traveled hundreds of miles to gaze lovingly on the right thigh bone of the last cavalry horse shot at the Battle of Mine Creek!

In this same audience I expect there is another group. For them the Society should be an organization that keeps growing, expanding, and constantly renewing its membership. That group wants what has become one of the new
buzz words, "outreach." These people are concerned by the fact that so few of our state's citizens are members of the Society. They look at what some other Midwest and Western states have done, namely, Indiana, Illinois, Idaho, Utah, Wisconsin, and Minnesota (for a half dozen examples that I am personally acquainted with) to reach the younger generations and they find the comparisons with Kansas to be a considerable embarrassment. They see the history of our Society as basically one of preservation, and collecting. They are proud of our past. But, they are not happy with our momentary present. Some espouse a new museum for increasing communication with, and the education of, our younger constituents. Possibly, that will help. More probably it will simply be an extension of the same attitudes that have brought us to our present situation.

At this point in our confrontation someone will jump up and assure me that Kansas has just as rewarding a history as the aforementioned states. That certainly is true. It is also true that they are light years ahead of us in just about everything of a program nature except the extent and quality of our holdings, be they manuscripts, newspapers, or artifacts. At this point let me also make a short aside before I come back to my main theme.

My criticisms and evaluations are not directed at any one person, or even at a group of persons in the history of the Society. Some of you may know that I toyed with the idea of titling this address, "The Legacy of our Foundering Fathers." That was really rumored just to keep some past and present officers on their toes, and to make sure they would attend today's meeting! If I have learned anything as an administrator, it is to be suspicious of anyone who blames anyone else for a corporate problem. Life, unfortunately, is not that simple, and the life of any organization of more than two people is not that simple. If we are going to engage in a corporate life, we will have to work with and through corporate responsibility. One of the disadvantages I alluded to earlier is that by working in this field I have a sense of what is possible, and an impatience to see our Society move rapidly to solve current problems.

A quotation from one of the late Loren Eiseley's works is appropriate. You will recall that Eiseley once taught at the University of Kansas, and I found his thoughts particularly germane to a discussion of the future of this Society.

In The Night Country, Eiseley quotes from Shakespeare:

"It hath been taught us from primal state
That he which is, was wished, until he were."

He then comments, "This is not the voice of the witches. It is the clear voice of a great poet almost four centuries gone, who saw at the dawn of the scientific age what to be the darkest problem of man: his conception of himself."

So it is with our Society. What we wish we will become. The choice may be noble, or ignoble, but the choice must be made. We must wish, then will, but our wishes must be corporate ones. We cannot continue to serve ourselves, in a pleasant but declining manner. Every historical agency, at whatever level of government, must serve to the future, the feast of the past. In preparing that rich intellectual meal, we are going to have to include some things we may not necessarily enjoy ourselves.

I was reminded of just where we stand in relation to the next 100 years, as I read the profile of Kansas 2000, prepared by the Division of State Planning and Research in 1975. This profile, prepared under the direction of Dr. Herman D. Lujan of the University of Kansas, caused a good deal of discussion when it was released. I was most struck with the projection of a relatively stable population for the next 25 years, with more emphasis on the urban areas of the state as the places which would gain in population by shifting, at the expense of the rural areas.

The impact of that fact of shifting population is that with a stable population, instead of a rapidly rising one, the competition for the available tax dollar will increase between rural and urban areas. If our Society is going to obtain our share of those tax dollars (and you will remember, please, that the state of Kansas supports the work of this Society in greater proportion than does the corporate body of the Society) we are going to have to keep our work important and relevant to the native Kansans of the future. As the next 100 years unfold, most of those Kansans, numerically speaking, will not come from rural backgrounds, and their...
interests will swing to the Kansas of their grandparents, namely, the 1940's, 1950's, and 1960's. The urban child of today, in Wichita, Kansas City, Topeka, and Johnson county, will be a voter who can ultimately control whether this Society continues to grow, or is stalemated because it does not gather and present some information beyond pioneer beginnings.

In order to obtain what we want for the growth and betterment of our Society we are going to have to reach out to youth, and we are going to have to bring in more people than we have ever brought into membership in this Society. Only in that way can we broaden our political base of power. In dealing with the future legislatures and the elected officials of the state, it will be a broad base of power that will win or lose the promise of the future, during these next 100 years.

Now, this is the point at which many of you are going to start to fidget. You don't believe that the newest way to do something is possibly the best way. I agree with you. It is true, however, that the institutions which fail to respond to new challenges and new demands are very soon denominated as useless by the society in which they exist. The only way to beat the race against the clock of time is by adaptation, and this is as true of people as it is of historical societies.

In the final analysis no person can beat the clock of life, but by using their enormous creative potential and abilities, the people who are involved in institutions can help those institutions beat that clock, from generation to generation.

So much for setting the stage, and the problem. Let us take a look at how we get from here to there; that very far away there, stretching out over years that most of us will never see. The recommendations which follow have been based on a year-long study of where our present historical society is, and any conclusions are only suggestive. The underlying assumption is that no solution from any one person is as good or as effective, as the flooding of suggestions from intelligent, dedicated people, drawn from all of the Society's constituencies.

By making these recommendations I am aware that some of the things I am suggesting are already on the priority lists of our executive director. He and I have spent quite a bit of time this past year discussing many of these areas.

One of my purposes here is to assist him by giving these items wide circulation, in a format that is different from what he might use:

- My first recommendation is that we more precisely define where the Kansas State Historical Society as a corporate entity stops and the state agency begins. To do this will take a review of the existing state legislation and regulations governing the appointment and conduct in office of the executive secretary of the Historical Society as a state officer, and distinct from any function he may perform for or with the corporate entity. It may seem to be a minor point to many in this room today, but it is far from minor when viewed from the position that the Historical Society is run on a day to day basis by a person who is selected, and in effect elected, to his state post by a private corporation. In Kansas, only the agricultural board has a similar situation. Some of the tensions I have observed between the staff of the Society and other parts of the state government may be traced to just so simple and elementary an arrangement.

- In order to give our membership the greatest possible opportunity for participating in the life of the Society, I believe that the bylaws should be amended so that the board of directors is elected by the membership, and preferably by a mail ballot. Attendance figures over at least the last dozen years bear out the fact that many members of the board of directors do not attend the annual directors' meetings, and their first appointment is virtually for life. The overall effect of that situation is to discourage the younger members from aspiring to places on the board.

- Similarly, I believe that the executive committee should be elected by the board of directors, instead of being appointed by the Society's presidents. The work of the executive committee is in the name of the board of the corporate body, and there should be a means for change, with full participation by the board of directors.

- The Society needs to take a long look at both its membership program, and its educational programs. The two touch very directly on the question of how we get our young people, those who will be carrying this organization forward, interested in our work. Student memberships may be an answer; more and better materials provided for school curricu-
lums may be another part of the answer. Solicitation for membership in the Society should be continuous. Both a full-time membership secretary, who is charged with promoting memberships in the Kansas State Historical Society, and a full-time educational programs officer, may be part of the ultimate answer to these needs.

- In our bylaws we invite county and local historical societies to affiliate with us by taking out individual memberships. I believe that a committee of the board of directors, in concert with the executive secretary, should investigate joint memberships with county historical societies, as has been done in some other midwestern states. Ways should also be found to increase the amount of technical assistance which can be available from this Society to county historical societies and their museums.

The success of the pilot project a few years ago which saw a full-time technical advisor going out and helping our county museums, demonstrated the need and worth of such a program.

- A study needs to be made, by the executive secretary and his staff, and possibly with a committee of the board of directors assisting, to ascertain how to best utilize current personnel in the Society’s headquarters, and where more personnel are needed. If more personnel are indeed needed in order to maintain adequate levels of service to our many constituencies, then backing by such a study group would be most helpful as the executive secretary works with the budget division and legislature. I would like to see the techniques of creative problem solving and innovation brought to bear on some of the tasks the staff of the Society is faced with accomplishing. Both techniques will save money, and can increase the involvement and satisfaction staff members get by participating in their use.

- We should experiment with at least one membership meeting each year outside of Topeka. Ours is, geographically, a big state, and one of our best advertisements could be direct involvement for people who are unable to journey to Topeka for our single annual meeting.

- We need to establish an active and permanent oral history program as part of the work of the Society. The value of such programs has long been demonstrated by the success other states have had with them. Oral history also provides an excellent means for interesting young people in one phase of the Society’s activities. In connection with the museum and audio-visual programs, an active oral history program has continued utility. In other museums some of the most interesting audio presentations have come about because the recorded voice resource was originally obtained from an oral history program.

- For many years the museum function of the Kansas State Historical Society has been one of the most visible parts of the organization. If present trends continue, before too many years pass, we may be relocating our museum into more adequate quarters. Such action is an important step for this Society. To ensure that the end result will be the product of the best thinking available, I would suggest that the executive secretary seriously consider forming two committees, one from the staff of the Society, and one made up of leading museum professionals to assist in designing the new facility. We have a good resource in the Kansas Museum Association, and it should be fully utilized so that the new museum is not merely an architectural statement filled with old problems.

Good museum work is more than preservation, and it is even more than exhibit preparation. The educational benefits of any museum are best realized when its displays present the range and richness of the holdings, whether they be artifacts, pictures, manuscripts, maps, or whatever. To do this means the close involvement of people who are expert in these areas of the Society’s holdings. Drawing ideas and innovations from all possible human resources outside the Society’s staff will go a long way toward ensuring that the finished museum will truly be a showcase for the best of Kansas’ historical heritage.

On a related matter, our Society needs to take a long and realistic look at our historic sites development. Cost effectiveness studies by the state budget division have shown that many are very infrequently visited. The cost of maintaining these properties grows with each year. In order to prevent this chronically worsening situation from continuing, it is time the Society, and the state government, evaluate how best to deal with the situation. It might well be, as has been so in some other states,
that maintaining historic sites can be done more economically by other agencies than by the historical society. The Society would retain oversight in areas of interpretation and preservation, with maintenance becoming the responsibility of another agency.

- I would like to see an active awards program become a part of the annual meeting of this Society. Throughout our state there are people who each year make extensive personal contributions to promoting the study, preservation, and dissemination of Kansas history. Such awards would publicize our activities and possibly encourage still more citizen participation in historical activities.

- One of the great strengths that our Society has is in its fine publications program. That program needs to be strengthened and expanded. A simple way of saying this, is that one of our most successful publications, *Kansas: The 34th Star*, should never be allowed to go out of print again! With regular updates it can have a long life as an excellent teaching aid.

I realize that what I have suggested here may cost money. I believe that such funding can be obtained, if a logical program is explained to the legislature and budget division. It will be increasingly important that we document and justify our needs; possibly in ways we have never done before. We have, however, important work to do, and we need to be about it.

I would like to close by sharing with you a Brazilian proverb that has only recently come to my attention. It has considerable import for any corporate activity: "If I dream alone, it is only a dream. If we dream together, it becomes reality." A lot of us have been dreaming alone, and it is time to join in a corporate dream that will move our Society forward in ever widening circles of participation in the study of the history of our state.