The Kansas Museum of History: Addresses at the Dedication

by Gerald George and Gordon Jump

When the Kansas Museum of History was dedicated in late June 1984, two noted former Kansans, Gerald George and Gordon Jump, returned to Topeka to participate in the activities. At the ribbon-cutting ceremony on Sunday, June 24, Gerald George, director of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), drew on memories of his childhood in Caldwell and Salina and his later experiences in the history profession in his keynote address. A 1960 graduate of the University of Wichita, George has a master's degree from Yale University, where he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow. Before joining the AASLH in 1973 he was a writer for the National Observer, an editorial associate for the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation in Princeton, New Jersey, and a special assistant at the National Endowment for the Humanities in Washington, D.C.

Address by Gerald George

When I was growing up in Kansas, we had a museum in our town. It was kept by the elderly woman who ran our local historical society. “Kept” is too mild a word, really. Most of the documents and artifacts were her personal property. They had come down to her as a direct descendant of one of the town’s founders. And she had badgered other people for old papers and objects that she felt belonged rightly with them, or so I was told. Once she got them, the papers went into an old iron safe, and the artifacts got placed in locked glass cases sitting around the upstairs of a library building, where fifth-grade classes from the town’s schools were trooped every year in a kind of holiday spirit to find out something about their own history.

I was in one of those classes, and I can still see her in my mind—a short, wiry woman, as I recall, with sharp eyes and an incredible lot of names and dates and tales of pioneer trials and tribulations in her head, some of it learned at the knee of her own forebears. It seemed to me when she spoke that History itself was speaking, and that hearing her was to know what the phrase “possessing knowledge” really meant. She would share it. But she was its custodian, and its oracle.

The museum pieces, however, did occasionally acknowledge another owner or donor. I remember one exotic example in particular—a small statue, maybe three feet tall, like the cigar-store Indian in the new museum here, only it was a Japanese warrior from some feudal age, a fierce-looking fellow and so wonderfully lifelike that sixth-graders, wanting to see if he could move, found it irresistible to give him a poke. Around his neck she had put two large signs or labels. One said something—I can’t recall exactly—like this: “Gift of Mrs. J. Jones, who brought it back from Tokyo, in 1925, by boat.” The other said: “Japanese warrior—do not poke.”

I remember well how quickly she could interrupt her history lecture to stop some kid from picking up an artifact to fiddle with. I was to observe much later, in the course of some research of my own, how quick she had been, as a staunch Republican and temperance woman, to write in the margins of old history books that references to the consumption of whiskey in the
town's early days were errors attributable to "Democrat Opinion."

But history was not to her an abstract or inconsequential study. It was part of what made a community out of a mere place, gave it character and identity, and generated appreciation of its development. In history work, she herself was a kind of pioneer, without whose saving and collecting much less would remain to tell that town, now a city, that it had any history at all.

Still, we are a long way from that museum today. Not in miles, but in the quality, the sophistication, and the sheer educational power of the institution we have come together to dedicate.

Every one of you has contributed in some way to this creation. Some of you dreamed of it and schemed for it beginning years ago. Others of you led the way in the legislature and fought for the funds to carry the museum through. Among you are those who did the detailed planning and the physical construction of the building and the exhibits it contains. Nearly all of you contributed gifts or tax dollars to see that your state—our state—has an appropriate showcase for the surviving physical evidence of its struggles and its achievements.

Nonetheless, I argue to you that only an outsider can fully appreciate it.

I do not mean the kind of outsider I am, a native son who has been away and now returns in astonishment. I mean the kind of outsider a historian is, all of whose work amounts to standing back, seeking the broad outside perspective, the distance from day-to-day events, that human beings cannot do without if we hope to see ourselves fully and accurately. For that is why we study history, and why we make museums in which to contemplate it.

Consider the history of this new grand, Kansan treasure house. In a sense it began in a single bookcase in one corner of the office of a state auditor named Daniel Webster Wilder. It was he who in 1875 proposed creation of a historical society for the state. And oh, what strange things happened afterward. The society was to be a collection of newspapers and a library of manuscripts, books, maps, and pamphlets. But almost from the first it also was envisioned as a collection of pictures and historical relics or artifacts.

So, before long it included a little bottle of water that someone had taken from the Dead Sea in 1872. Lo and behold it also had the "Kickapoo," a famed brass six-pounder Mexican-War cannon, and a theater program with a drop of blood shed by President Abraham Lincoln on the night of his assassination. There also was a costume of the kind typically worn by young girls in Siam, not to mention a collection of stones and petrified wood and shells from Carthage, New Mexico, and a piece of flagstaff that once stood within Fort Putnam, and a flint arrowhead from some battlefield in Pennsylvania. The Society did turn down the offer for the museum of an eighteen-inch alligator. But it kept bones alleged to be those of William Quantrill, the Civil War guerrilla leader.

Such a miscellany, however, was typical of museums developing in America. Consider the one that is commonly regarded as having been our first. It was opened in 1784 in Philadelphia by an ill-educated, itinerant portrait painter named Charles Willson Peale. In it he offered an Allegheny River paddlefish, the skeleton of a mastodon, portraits of heroes of the American Revolution, and a wax statue of himself.

Yes, with your grand new institution we are a long way from my home-town museum. But we are also a long way in the development of museums in general.

What has transpired to bring us to this level of museum achievement? One could talk in technical terms of the growth over the past century or so of museum training and professionalization. One could speak of scientific labor to improve understanding of artifact conservation. One could talk of new technology for museum exhibits and broadened concepts of museum education. One can see the results of all that in the museum that we are now dedicating. I am so glad, in fact, that you are getting a chance here to see all the backstage things that make a museum work. But to trace the techniques of it would not adequately elucidate its significance.

Indeed, let's talk about the greatest innovation of Charles Willson Peale's museum in eighteenth-century Philadelphia. It aggressively sought visitors. Museums before had usually been cabinets of curiosities assembled by wealthy collectors for the amusement and edification of themselves, selected scientists, and intimate friends. Peale enticed fifty thousand people a year into his exhibits. Similar things happened in museums in Europe. In fact, in England the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray wrote a verse poking a little fun at an exhibit viewer he called Mr. Molony:

Amazed I pass, from glass to glass,
Delaughted I survey 'em,
Fresh wonderers grow, before me nose,
In this sublime Muscum!"

But the world's Mr. Molonys were getting a real education!

When George Brown Goode was masterminding the development of museum collections in America's Smithsonian Institution later in the last century, he too was dreaming of what he called "A people's Museum." And he said of it: "The museum of the future must stand side by side with the library and the laboratory, as part of the teaching equipment of the college and the university, and in the great cities co-operate with the public library as one of the principal agencies for the enlightenment of the people." The Smithsonian today has hundreds of thousands of visitors. And museums everywhere have become major cultural resources like schools, colleges, and libraries.

The subsequent history of museums shows them not only reaching out to people but spreading out to reach them. When we Americans celebrated the centennial of the American Revolution back in Goode's time, there were some 78 historical societies, state and local, and about half of them had museums. Today there are more than 5,600 historical organizations, and 5,000 to 6,000 museums. You are planning new ones in Colby and Salina right now. By any historian's standards, this represents a phenomenal cultural movement. And part of its meaning is obviously this: The evolution of museums, their development as institutions for public education, and their spread throughout nations of the West, has been part and parcel of the broad democratization of culture that characterizes so much of western history. Museums have been and are a response to the historically growing sense that the masses, as you and I once were called, both can and must be educated, enlightened, given opportunities to understand and to appreciate.

Where do I get all this? From historians, of course—from Edward P. Alexander, who wrote a book of historical biographies that my association just published entitled Museum Masters. And from your own Edgar Langsdorf, for many years a staff member of the Kansas State Historical Society, and author of a fascinating study of its history.

But there is something more to learn from Mr. Langsdorf that maybe we better not forget on this occasion. You may think this great glorious building here represents a culmination, that the State Historical Society is set now, forever and ever. But what emerges so clearly in Mr. Langsdorf's pages is that the Kansas State Historical Society never had enough space and probably never will. It no more got into the Memorial Building downtown in 1914 than its staff and officers began trying to rearrange things in the building to accommodate all their collections.

The moment that need for space stops you will know your historical society is dead. History moves on, generating new records and artifacts of significance for understanding it, and your society must keep moving with it to keep the record of Kansas always current. Moreover, this museum houses but one kind of record, and is but one part of the work that your historical society does for you. Let us rejoice in the excellence of this new museum phase of the Society's operations. But let us dedicate ourselves as well to maintaining excellence in the Society's archival and library collections, in its publications and archeological programs, in its attention to historic sites and structures, and in its efforts to extend history programs to schools and the public throughout this state as well as drawing you here.

For that's the definition of a great historical society: It cares for all parts of the historical record—artifacts, documents, sites, and structures—and uses them for many kinds of research and education. Throughout the directorships of Nyle Miller and Joe Snell, your multifaceted historical society here in Kansas has enjoyed a national reputation as one of the broadest and best. It is no accident that one of its staff members, Bob Richmond, is currently on the national governing council of the American Association for State and Local History and in September will become the association's national president.

But can the historical society be all this great, you say, when it is dedicated after all not to national history, like the Smithsonian, but just to the history of a state, of Kansas. Well, let me conclude then with just a word about state and local history.

If such things of national significance as, say, President Millard Fillmore's administration or the War of Jenkins' Ear have something to do with Salina or Topeka or Kansas, fine. If Salina or Topeka or Kansas have something to do with the War of Jenkins' Ear, fine. But nobody lives in the War of Jenkins' Ear. People live in Salina and Topeka and Kansas. And it is important to know about the states and localities in which we live as well as about our nation.

One of the first jobs I had out of college was as a newspaper reporter in Kansas. And one of the first things I did was write an editorial in praise of the Kansas State Historical Society. Now, so many years later, I have the privilege of doing it again. As a pro-

2. Quoted in ibid., 296.
3. Edgar Langsdorf, The First Hundred Years of the Kansas State Historical Society (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1975). Besides this and Alexander's Museum Masters, two other works were especially useful in the preparation of this paper: Edward P. Alexander, Museum in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977) and Walter Muir Whitehill, Independent Historical Societies (Boston: Athenaeum, 1962).
professional whose job takes him to museums throughout the country, I can tell you that here you now have one of the finest. As a Kansan, who has his life-membership certificate in the Kansas State Historical Society on his office wall, near his painting of a Kansas landscape by Lindsborg artist Carl Peterson. I thank you for this new expression of the Kansas spirit. Yes, Carl Becker—returning to behold something such as this, one truly is inspired to repeat: "Dear Old Kansas!"

Thank you very much.

In the evening before the formal museum dedication, Gordon Jump delighted those attending the banquet with anecdotes from his days as a Kansas State University student and observations about the value of history. An Ohio native, Jump earned his bachelor's degree in journalism in 1957 at K-State in Manhattan, where he worked at KMAN radio. He then enrolled at Washburn University in Topeka and obtained his first job in television with WIBW. After returning briefly to Ohio, he left broadcasting to pursue an acting career in Hollywood, where he appeared in several television series and motion pictures before he was cast as station manager Arthur Carlson in "WKRP in Cincinnati."

Address by Gordon Jump

I WOULD like to greet you all: Lieutenant Governor Docking and a friend of mine, Past Governor William Avery; Senator Ross Doyen; and President June Windscheffel. Did I get that right, June? Good! Well, you see for an actor, that's not bad. Officers and members of the executive committee of the Kansas State Historical Society and friends. It is a pleasure to be in your midst tonight and share this marvelous moment.

You probably have all wondered what has happened to Arthur Carlson since he was wiped out of the radio business by television programming executives. I just want you to know that things are fine. Arthur is now in the ratings game. You have all heard of the A. C. Nielsen Company and the ratings they come up with. Arthur has now opened up his own company called the A. C. Carlson Company. He figures if one A. C. can do it, so can another. We don't have little black boxes; we have color-coordinated boxes to be attached to your television sets. They are beautiful little suckers. You'd love to have them in your homes. Tell your friends about them—we do have more of them out in the marketplace then Nielsen ever thought of putting out there. In fact, we have three hundred of them in homes that don't even have television sets. We've got them wired up to cheap pulp magazines sending an impulse back east just to give a few facts to the Big Boys in New York as to what those people would like to see if they did have television.

Like Nielsen, we don't put any of them out in the Rocky Mountain states for two reasons: the line fees are just exorbitant, and in addition to that, those people live at such a high altitude and get so little oxygen that they don't think the way the rest of us do, anyway.

I'm not a novice to research. Being called in here to get involved with people who spend their lives in research is kind of exciting. I had a chance to head up a research project while at Kansas State University. It was a marvelous research project which the university received from the U.S. government. The government wanted to know if there were status symbols in lower forms of animal life. I laughed, too, until I found out those suckers were spending my tax money for the project. While I was there researching, I decided I would get involved in looking at the reptile kingdom, and sure enough, there are status symbols in lower forms of animal life. Most people don't realize it when they step into a snake colony (usually their minds are on other things), but if you're a snake and you don't have your own hissing pit, boy you're just out of luck, a real nobody. The snakes that I was examining were hissing in their hissing pit, and apparently the mother had a bad day shedding her
skin, or something, so she sent those little suckers across the way to Mrs. Potts' pit to hiss. Well, they were doing their pit hissing in Mrs. Potts' hissing pit, but apparently she had been having a bad day, too, so she sent them back to hiss in their own pit. They got back there and started pit hissing in their hissing pit, and in no time the mother slithered out to say, "I thought I sent you over to Mrs. Potts' pit to hiss." Well, they said, "We were pit hissing in Mrs. Potts' hissing pit but frankly she told us to go hiss in our own pit." At which point the mother said, "Why that just shows you what kind of neighbors we've got in this colony. When she first moved in here she didn't have a pit to hiss in!"

I only relay this story because there may have been a few moments in the early days of the Kansas State Historical Society when they didn't have a pit to hiss in, either. However, you don't keep Kansans from accomplishing their goals once they have set them. I didn't really know this until I came to this state to live. I came from a small town somewhere in Ohio—that was the name of the town, Somewhere. It was a pretty small place—you could probably carpet the whole downtown for about a hundred bucks, and in quality carpet. That town just put it in its first one-way street last year. Folks were real excited about that. This year they're putting in a one-way street going the other way, which is going to make those folks trapped up north of town there real happy. They're putting in a junior college, which has everybody back home real excited—it kind of makes up for not having a high school. That shows you the background from which I came.

When I got to Kansas I was soon to learn what people were really all about. I came to this state, ironically enough, not too long after the flood—I believe that was about 1951 in the eastern half of Kansas. I had a chance while being stationed at Fort Riley to meet what I felt was a unique group of people. Coming in from the outside and not being part of the state of Kansas, I had a chance to see you as an outsider sees you and to observe a quality that charmed me. I was given an opportunity to meet, talk, and even work with individuals who through struggle, through hardship and their ability to pull together, had developed what I thought was one of the most unique communities that I have ever experienced. The backbreaking work of shoveling out of their homes and businesses the muddy residue of the Blue and Kaw rivers left something behind more precious than gold can buy. There was a tremendous amount of love, a tremendous amount of respect, a tremendous amount of pride that they had because they had whipped a situation that would have overwhelmed many people. As I felt that spirit, it started to become a part of my being. If I enjoy any success today, it is because of those things that are a part of the roots that are a part of my life which was spent in this state.

How exciting it is, this thing that you are doing, putting together a museum. A museum that not only is going to enhance the city of Topeka, Kansas, but also is going to be a benefit to a great state called Kansas. And through the continued research of the Kansas State Historical Society, through the magnificent facility that you have provided now for the preservation and display of the great background and heritage that are part of this state, it will not only be important to the city of Topeka and the state of Kansas, but it will also be a shining example to a nation that prides itself on its roots.

I am sure that God, being a God of law and order, is tremendously pleased with the miracle that you have performed here, because now you are taking all of those crafts, all of that history, all of the background and past that have made the great state of Kansas, and you are putting them in a position where they can and will enhance the knowledge of younger members of this state. How much more secure your future will be when its framework is built upon an understanding of, and a respect for, your past. Schools of all levels will have an opportunity now to visit that facility. And I don't care how well you teach in a classroom or how many words you spew out into a student's mind or computer, there is nothing that will take the place of that hands-on experience of being able to walk into a museum, seeing and touching and feeling the past. What great roots that will give young Kansans for their future.

They will have a chance to see those doors that were broken down by angry Republicans at an exciting point in Kansas history. It is hard to believe that in Kansas they tried to keep Republicans out of politics! But sure enough, those kids will have a chance to see those doors, to study the political wars of early Kansas, to have some background and appreciation for the many things that are a part of their museum and the history of their state.

Kids will take a look at the Cyrus K. Holliday. They'll look at all that magnificent metal—and we're talking heavy metal here, folks. And they'll probably notice that one of the railroad cars is leaning a little bit to the north. People who've examined that train say the reason for that is because there used to be a cookstove on one side that was counterbalanced on the other side with heavy ingots of lead so the car would ride level on the tracks. When the cookstove
was removed, the lead was not. Well, we’ve all honored Joe Snell here tonight for his accomplishments in helping this great dream become a reality, but before you become too comfortable, Joe, we’d like to remind you that now it’s time for you to get the lead out. Should be no trouble—Kansans have always been good at getting the lead out!

I probably have not contributed much to the history of the state, unless you look at the logbooks of the Kansas Power and Light Company and note the fact that they are missing one rowboat. It’s somewhere downstream. Seems it was used to cross the Big Blue one night after my buddy and I were dropped somewhere on the plains east of the plant on a fraternity walk-in. To save walking many additional miles back, we borrowed a dilapidated wooden boat from the banks of the Blue (apparently the property of KP&L) to make our crossing. It was so old and rickety that the only reason we made it across without sinking was the fact that I was able to row faster than the boat could take on water. We tied it up well on the other side, as I recall, but apparently the rain that came later in the early morning hours and the increased flow of the river undid what we had done. The fact that we were observed and later called into the dean’s office at K-State is now part of the insignificant history of the state of Kansas.

Well, this is a marvelous state, with marvelous people. My father used to say to me, “Son, you’ll be judged by the company that you keep.” I only wish my father were alive to be in this room tonight, because in this room is a group of dedicated, unselfish men and women with a tremendous vision for the future of this state. I’m in a room with a group of men and women that knows the meaning of sacrifice. I am in a group that knows and understands the meaning of roots, tradition, foundation, family, and the importance of being an American. And I am very proud to be able to stand in this room with you tonight. I would ask you to continue being unselfish, because the times ahead are going to demand unselfishness. There is a lot more work yet to be done.

I would love to have a chance to come back in four years and see the planning that will be going on. You’re going to be busting out the seams of this magnificent building, as it stands now, with all of that which you have to show the people of Kansas about their heritage, background, and tradition. I would like to be here as you renovate your building downtown and see it play an active part in the research and history of what has made this part of our country so important to the rest of the world. These things are most important! I would like to have the chance twenty years down the road to see the young people who come out of your academic institutions here who will have been the benefactors of that which your historical society has prepared for them to experience in school. Merely in the taking around of trunks from school to school, your Historical Society has done a great job, giving youngsters of different grade levels an opportunity to experience moments in history that they would not otherwise have had an opportunity to pursue, all the way from minor things of studying history itself to actually setting up an archaeological dig. How exciting this is, and it is going to take what I think is a great amount of stamina on your part to keep it all rolling.

Which reminds me of another story. Not too long ago on a trip to Ireland I had a chance to visit one of those marvelous brewing plants where they make Irish whiskey. I got in there the day after they had just had a tragic accident. I talked to a man, the head bottler, and he said to me, “We really shouldn’t have visitors here today.” I said, “Why is that?” He said, “We had a terrible thing happen last night. Shana O’Toole fell into a vat of whiskey that was to go to the bottler today.” I said, “Well, it must have killed him straight away.” He said, “Oh, no, as a matter of fact he got out four times to go to the bathroom. And gallantly fought off six of his friends who jumped in there trying to save him.” I tell that story because that is the type of dedication that you’re going to have to continue to exercise. And you’re either going to die very happy for what you have done or you are going to be very sick along the way for a halfhearted effort. Rather you die happy. Exercise that dedication and make of this foundation that you have built for yourself an exciting example for the rest of the nation. Every state should do as well as the state of Kansas.

Thank you for the invitation to be in your midst and to share the moments of this evening with you. God bless you all in all that you do.