

Presidential Address

Working in the Vineyards of Prohibition

K. Austin Kerr

My work as a scholar and teacher has included a long-standing interest in the history of organizations. The Anti-Saloon League was an organization that fascinated me, as was the BFGoodrich Corporation. When I “worked in the vineyards of prohibition” many years ago I learned how reformers came together and formed a new kind of political organization that was able to put their reform in the U.S. Constitution. And I learned how that organization failed in a remarkably short period of time, and saw its enemies successfully repeal the prohibition amendment, the only such example in our history.

So my purpose this afternoon in “working in the vineyards of prohibition” is to talk about this organization, the Ohio Academy of History, and suggest a direction I think we should take during my presidency and over the coming years.

Let me startle you with a question: why, in the early 21st century, do we have this state-based professional society, the Ohio Academy of History? The founders began the Academy in the 1930s when communication was relatively more difficult than it is today, and electronic communication much more expensive, as a means of fostering scholarly interchange. Travel then was also more difficult and more expensive than it is today. Scholars were more isolated from one another, and it made sense to have a state-based organization with two annual meetings, one mostly social and the other mostly scholarly. Moreover, there was also a unity to history in the way folks thought in the 1930s, still the old progressive notion that wholes were larger than the parts and that the whole was knowable. We had not yet undergone the intellectual and cultural transformation of the mid-century when wholes disappeared in thinking, leaving only parts. That was an age less fragmented intellectually than is our own time.

Today we celebrate this fragmentation with numerous specialized historical agencies. I belong to some of them myself. There seems to be little room for the umbrella historical societies. Even the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians rely on fragmented, specialized societies to fill much of their program. Otherwise they would

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hear: "oh, there is no reason for me to attend, because there is nothing in my field on the program." This sort of statement, which I hear frequently, is indicative that we have little in common as historians. Even our textbooks do not change: they simply seem to grow bigger and bigger as more and more parts, or fragments, are added.

Maybe you are sitting now in horror of what I am going to say next. No, I am not suggesting that we disband the Ohio Academy of History. We cannot change the fragmentation of our general American culture and we cannot change the fragmentation of history, much. But we can still offer programs that have some appeal, and that provide relatively low cost means of scholars assembling for exchanges. We will not in the foreseeable future, however, be successful in somehow unifying history and therefore making every historian in the state want to come and listen to some fragments in which they have little interest.

There is something, however, that unifies all of us, whatever our "field" of history, or whether we are college teachers, high school professionals, or public historians. And that something unites us as a state-based organization. The Ohio Academy of History has a terribly important reason in the 21st century to function as a state based organization. That something, quite simply, is a common professional concern about what happens in the schools. Education in the schools is organized on a state basis. We have a state board of education that functions under state law and sets state standards for history instruction and that writes a state mandated "graduation test." We, as scholars and teachers with a professional interest in history therefore need to maintain a state-based organization. We need the Ohio Academy of History. We need the Academy no matter what is our field of history, and no matter whether or not our field is represented on the program of the annual spring meeting.

As an organization, we do three things. We provide for scholarly exchange. (And I want to thank Ann Heiss and the program committee for putting together this year's program. And I want to thank Scott Martin for agreeing to serve as Chair for the 2004 spring meeting.) We give one another recognitions in the form of awards. As the recipient of one of those awards, I recognize their importance. And third, we have a Standards Committee that traditionally has been concerned with what occurs in our state-based system of education. I am pleased to report that Carol Lasser of Oberlin College has agreed to serve as Chair of that important committee. Carol will bring to the position professional experience as a historian working with

schools and teachers.

So this afternoon I am proposing something bold, a challenge for the Ohio Academy of History. It is a challenge to act more forthrightly on what I believe unites us as historians living and working in Ohio: a common professional concern for the quality of history instruction in the state's schools. In this regard, we should focus mainly on what transpires in the high schools, and we should include in our concern the preparation of teachers for those high school history classrooms.

Recently we have witnessed another political intervention into high school instruction. New state standards have been promulgated. Some of our members were involved in their preparation. The Ohio Department of Education prepared those new standards in response to the legislation requiring the administration of an Ohio Graduation Test in the 10th grade (actually, it will occur in March.) Students are expected to know something in order to graduate, and if the schools have not taught "it" to them by the 10th grade, then they have two years' opportunity for remedial work to allow the student to pass the Graduation Test. That Graduation Test is a new test with new timing. History is to be part of the Graduation Test. The new State Standards provide the basis for the Graduation Test. The State Standards, once claimed as guidelines for local school boards, are in fact edicts from the State Board of Education. We have centralized the state's curriculum in those areas where testing is to occur. Instruction in United States history prior to 1877 will occur in the 8th grade, "global studies" (which in reality are the history of western civilization with a bit of world context) will occur in the 9th grade, and U.S. History 1877-1970 will occur before March of the 10th grade.

I do not think I need to comment much about this situation. The cynic in me says that this situation will mean all the more need for history instruction in the colleges, for students coming to us in the future will know even less than they know today. This situation occurred even as we, in the Ohio Academy of History, through our Standards Committee and our Executive Committee, were protesting and supporting high school teachers who were protesting and trying to provide an alternative within the law that would bring a more sophisticated study of history to a more mature group of students in the 11th and 12th grades.

We were ineffective. We need to be more effective in the future than

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we have been in the recent past. We need to figure out how to become more effective. We need to learn how to be more like the Anti-Saloon League, or the National Rifle Association, and other agencies that effectively have influenced public policy. We need to become more effective, that is, if we are to live up to our professional responsibility to have the state use its limited educational resources for the study of history more effectively.

I think there are some opportunities for us to become more effective. The situation I have just outlined is part of a national educational reform movement that decries the lack of “standards” in education and the apparent ignorance of high school graduates. The situation I have outlined was well intentioned however misguided. Students may be successfully “coached” for passing an examination, but we all know that the politicians cannot defy a principle of human behavior, that the learning-retention curve is bell shaped. (In plain English, I have simply said that in a short period of time after the test the kids will have forgotten most of what they “learned.”)

Maybe thus as time passes and as scientists like Sam Wineburg learn more about the learning of history, wisdom can prevail and we can take a more realistic approach to the timing of history instruction in the state. The Academy, through its Standards Committee, should be a part of the process of correcting whatever mistakes have occurred in the recent reforms of education. We must remember, however, that we cannot expect to have much influence over the content of history instruction. As President George W. Bush has made clear, and as Ohio law has confirmed many times over my years in the state, the purpose of high school history instruction is to teach particular patriotic values. We can safely forget whatever aspirations we might have for the current academic fashions of the time, whether they are “postmodernism,” “postcolonialism,” or some other “ism.” Those sorts of things are simply highly unlikely to be part of the content of history instruction in our schools.

We can, however, be influential in the *preparation* of the teachers who teach in the state’s classrooms. They are, after all, for the most part our alumni. Here we can join the national educational reform movement, which calls for high school teachers to have had an undergraduate major in the subject they are teaching. The reform movement even calls upon the schools, in their “report cards” to parents and the community, to indicate whether or not teachers are qualified by virtue of their own subject matter training to teach particular subjects. Diane Ravitch and others have reported that nationally only half of the high school history teachers are qualified by

virtue of their undergraduate major to teach history in the schools. (This is a complicated subject, and I do not know what the figure is for Ohio. I do know from my own students, however, that about half of the teachers they have had are really called “coach.”)

As historians, however, we have a particular problem in this state. Ohio law uses the term “social studies” while, at the same time, it mandates the teaching of American history in the schools. Now, over the many years during which I have attended Academy meetings, I have never heard a kind word about “social studies.” Historians of education tell us that “social studies” was part of the progressive vision of education, a vision of integration where the whole was larger than the sum of the parts. As I mentioned earlier, we no longer have this underlying belief in our culture, so the concept of “social studies” is an anachronism embedded in Ohio law.

I propose that we work with the other part of Ohio law that uses the word “history.” I propose that the Ohio Academy of History stand squarely behind the proposition that teachers of history in public high schools in the state should have had a history major or its equivalent in their undergraduate training.

There are practical and positive ways we can promote this standard.

- We should make this standard clear on our web site and in our publications.
- We should have our members report systematically what is occurring on their campus with regard to this standard.
- We can praise those colleges, such as Capital and Wittenberg Universities, and Otterbein College, which are abiding by this standard when they license teachers for the state’s schools. We can praise them on our web site. We can praise them by sending letters to their senior administrators praising them, and suggesting that they can inform prospective students interested in becoming teachers that their college has met our standard.
- We can offer support to members, such as those of us at Ohio State University, who must deal with education programs that do not meet this standard.

There may also be other practical ways in which the Academy can work to improve history instruction in the schools. The national movement

to improve historical learning has included the appropriation of special funds. Several colleges and school districts across the state have received funding. I have asked Scott Martin, on behalf of next year's program committee, and Carol Lasser, on behalf of the Standards Committee to think of way we might use the Spring meeting to bolster this effort, and to bring us together, no matter our specialty, in a common effort to learn from one another about furthering better standards for history in our state's schools.

Finally, I think that we can enjoy real accomplishments in this important matter. They will not happen over night, but they can happen if we strengthen the Academy in the ways I have suggested. I intend to use the year of my leadership to launch that agenda.

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