

Local History Report Gavin Schmitt

On October 13-14, 2022, I attended the Wisconsin Historical Society's 16th Annual Local History and Historic Preservation Conference (virtually) and took part in six sessions. A summary of things covered:

Becoming a Wisconsin History Advocate

This session was essentially a mini version of the History Advocacy Day conference, the next of which is on March 22, 2023 and is a chance for local historians to interact with state legislators. In this abbreviated version, we were told how to approach legislators and make a connection. Making the connection personal was stressed, as this increases the chance of future interactions.

The key reason to interact with legislators and other political figures is, of course, funding. We were told ways that funds can and cannot be used. A delegate from the Douglas County Historical Society, for example, asked if it was possible to get funding from property taxes in a similar way to schools. No, it is not, because the law dictates which tax dollars can be used where – so know what you're asking for and if it's realistic.

A big takeaway for me was increased visibility. Any organization will not be allocated resources if people forget they exist. I would be open to increasing the local history room's visibility. Some ideas may include more board reports like this, more coverage in the library newsletter, or perhaps even its own Facebook page distinct from the Library. We recently had a local history open house ("What's in the Drawer LIVE") and multiple people told me they were not aware of the room and had no idea someone was on hand to answer questions. Clearly visibility still needs improvement.

Creating a Regional History Event

In this session, organizers of Door County History Days (June 2022) went over their event, what worked and what could improve. Key things they did were involve the media and the tourism bureau, and kept a broad vision in mind to include other cultural stops (e.g. art galleries). The event included a kayak tour and even a live taxidermy demonstration. They also purposely created an indoor/outdoor slate of activities so if something was rained out an alternative was available.

One big dream of mine is to create a Fox Cities version of Doors Open Milwaukee, where residents can tour buildings (or rooms in buildings) they don't usually see, including churches, museums, factories and more. From this session I took away two things. One, to pull such a thing off, we would need a significant advertising budget. Door County spent \$500 on Facebook *alone*, and that reached 75,975 people – not enough. They also had full page newspaper ad and a newspaper insert.

Second, Door County has the Heritage Alliance of Door County, an umbrella group of cultural places, to facilitate organizing. Kaukauna's history room is not a member of anything comparable. Therefore, I will be making every effort to better network with surrounding libraries and historical societies for the purpose of exchanging research and perhaps something more collaborative.

History Speaks

A delegate from Marathon County spoke about their History Speaks and History Chats programs. I found them to be similar to what we've been doing here. History Speaks is their bigger ongoing series and generally has a community member talking of their own experience. This is similar to our Focus on Local History, although we have had fewer guest speakers than I would prefer.

History Chats is an online history series in a shorter format (20 minutes), comparable to our What's in the Drawer videos but longer. Their program was born during Covid and has continued, often having monthly themes (March MAPness, ghost towns) for the weekly program. We previously had an afternoon history series more like this that was discontinued because of poor attendance.

Two takeaways: One, we may need more digital content to complement the in-person events. Marathon County's in-person attendance has not rebounded. Although this is bad news, it's a relief to hear that the attendance issue is not just us. Two, the importance of videos is less on the number of views and more on the availability of information. A YouTube program on Dr. HB Tanner (for example) may only get 1,000 views in its lifetime, but it can bring information to people any time, anywhere in a way in-person can't. For the curious, they know where to go for more information.

Involving Youth in Local History

Langlade County spoke on their work with the local 4-H club, getting those kids involved. Their partnership started out by having 4-H scoop ice cream at events and grew from there.

I think a closer link with fourth grade students would be beneficial, as this is the grade that covers Wisconsin history. Kaukauna does have a 4-H (Buchanan Badgers), as well as other groups: scouts, National Honor Society, YMCA, media production classes in high school, etc. I'll reach out to these groups and see how we can help each other out.

Documenting Latinx History

If no one wrote down your story, did you exist? This quote means a lot to me, someone who writes hidden history. My general impression prior to the program was that Latinx/Hispanic history was not a big part of Wisconsin, but they proved me wrong. The Latinx population in Wisconsin is 7% and is the fastest-growing ethnic group in the state. One of the more concentrated population centers is Brown County. And as dairy farms need more labor but have fewer children, Latinx people have become the backbone of the dairy state.

An online collection of photos, documents and oral histories of this Wisconsin history is launching in 2024 in partnership with the National Archives. As a major blind spot in my local history knowledge I will be delving in as material becomes available.

Researching Black History

Sabrina Robins and Nick Hoffman of Appleton presented the research that grew out of the Stone of Hope exhibit at the History Castle, where they discovered the Fox Cities had a thriving Black community from the 1880s-1920s before local sentiment changed. Wisconsin as a whole had African-American authors, musicians, scientists, Olympic medal winners, fur traders, a circus owner, a presidential candidate... all before 1910. The presentation covered how they did their research and how they've been bringing it to other communities.

Of all the seminars, this one was the most explanatory on how to replicate past work. I've done some preliminary research on this in the past when answering patron inquiries, but now have more tools to explore the history deeper. Yes, Kaukauna had a Black community up through the 1940s. I've already reached out to Sabrina Robins. My intent was simply to thank her and Hoffman for the presentation, but she would like to meet and explore this further. While too early to say what could come of this, I am excited to potentially find more important members of Kaukauna's early years that have thus far been overlooked or completely forgotten.

