

The Wisconsin Historical Society

The Year in Review — 2008

:: Posted January 2, 2009

A Message from Ellsworth Brown,
The Ruth and Hartley Barker
Director of the Wisconsin Historical
Society

While 2008 was a challenging climate for any organization, I am particularly proud of the major events, programs, exhibits and activities our staff and volunteers accomplished this past year. Here are the highlights.



A New Brand

This year we unveiled a new brand identity for the Wisconsin Historical Society as part of a larger effort to increase visibility and to ensure that we continue to be relevant and accessible to you, our audience. Our new logo and look was introduced in multiple places, from our printed material and website to the signs and banners on our headquarters building (as pictured above). We also launched newly designed websites for our 10 historic sites. In addition to these visual updates, we'll continue to make changes that reflect how we express ourselves, how we welcome you as our visitor, and how we can engage you with our products and services.

New Fourth-Grade Textbook — Wisconsin: Our State, Our Story

The Wisconsin Historical Society Press published the definitive fourth-grade textbook, *Wisconsin: Our State, Our Story*. After years of hearing teachers express a desire for an authoritative history text, the Society's Office of School Services developed this full-color, inquiry-driven book for Wisconsin fourth-graders that functions like a textbook but doesn't look like one. Using a groundbreaking new model for history education that teaches kids to "think like a historian," this book engages students in history through critical thinking rather than memorizing dates and events. Schools across the state have adopted the book, including the Milwaukee Public School District.

Odd Wisconsin

The Wisconsin Historical Museum opened its new and, perhaps, most unique exhibit called Odd Wisconsin in October. Featuring an exclusive collection of curious and authentic artifacts, Odd Wisconsin shares the unexpected stories of the people, places and things that make our state uniquely "Wisconsin." The entire exhibit project, from conception to production, represents a different approach to exhibition development at the museum. For the first time, the Society asked nearly 900 people to provide feedback on exhibit ideas. Their responses shaped the development of the exhibit to better meet visitor expectations and interests. If you haven't already, come and see a side of Wisconsin you probably never learned at school.

Major Steps Taken Toward a Much-Needed Off-site Collection Storage Facility

The year saw continued progress toward construction of an off-site collection storage facility in Madison. In the past four years, two state budget bills provided \$25 million for construction of a facility that would house collections held by both the Society and the Wisconsin Veterans Museum and \$3.25 million for shelving in the facility for use by the Society. The facility would allow the Society to move its vast museum artifact collections from cramped quarters in the Society's headquarters building to a new, modern facility, and possibly as much as half of its library and archival collections. Additional dollars for construction and Society shelving have been requested to cover final estimated costs developed in 2008 and, hopefully, will be approved in 2009.

Wisconsin Historical Foundation 2007-2008 Fundraising Results

The Wisconsin Historical Foundation is pleased to announce results from its most successful year ever since hiring its first staff member in July 1998. Between July 1, 2007, and June 30, 2008, the Foundation raised \$12,633,886 in support of the Wisconsin Historical Society, up from \$9,198,230 the year before.

Renovation of the Society's Grand Library Reading Room

Significant progress has been made this year in preparing for the restoration of the Society's grand Library Reading Room. Working closely with Society staff, Isthmus Architecture has developed plans for stained-glass skylights and a paint scheme for the walls and recessed ceiling coffers in an effort to restore the elegant room to its former glory. The project will protect the room's original design while meeting the needs of modern library users. The project is scheduled for completion in 2009.

Library and Archives Extend Digital Reach

The Society's library and archives pursued several initiatives during the year to make their collections more accessible to a broader public in this digital age. They joined a handful of other states in a project intended to devise an automated, rules-based system for collecting and preserving rapidly proliferating electronic records of government agencies. Another project is permitting photo archivists to preserve formerly unusable historical images by digitally reassembling shattered glass-plate negatives. In May 2008 the photo archives put together a digital image gallery documenting its collection of compelling images of Wisconsin Holocaust survivors, and in March librarians digitized a number of 19th-century rare books and manuscripts written in or about Native American languages to support tribal language revitalization programs in Wisconsin.

Historic Sites See New Events and Increase in Summer Attendance

Highlights from an eventful 2008 season included the opening of the Greenbush Cupboard café at Wade House, Madeline Island Museum's 50th anniversary celebration in June, and the expansion of two of the most popular events at Old World Wisconsin: Laura Ingalls Wilder Days (combined with Farm Power) and Autumn on the Farms (two weekends instead of one). After struggling through much of June due to record flooding throughout the southern half of the state, the 10 historic sites saw a collective attendance increase of 3.4 percent from July 15 through August 31 versus the same period in 2007. While overall attendance saw an industry-consistent attendance drop of 10 percent in 2008, a few of our sites managed to break through a difficult economic environment and had strong seasons. These include: Wade House with an attendance increase of 2.6 percent and revenue increase of 14.5 percent; Stonefield with an attendance increase of 7.7 percent and revenue increase of 2.5 percent; and Old World Wisconsin with an admission revenue increase of 8.3 percent.

Circus of Chefs ... The Gala 2008 Raises Record-breaking Revenues

The 2008 event attracted a crowd of 440 circus enthusiasts and raised an estimated \$191,000 — an all-time high. Funds were raised through ticket and table sales, donations of goods and services, a unique "cork sale" (matched with donated wine), and the proceeds from silent and live auctions. All proceeds from the event benefit Circus World's museum and performance venue.

National History Day

From more than 7,500 participants statewide, 48 Wisconsin students were chosen at the state finals of National History Day to represent the Badger state at the national event. Students worked for months to create historical research projects related to the program's 2008 theme, "Conflict and Compromise in History." Students from 90 schools participated this year and many state finalists came from towns and schools that have not had finalists in the past. The Society congratulates all of the Wisconsin students who were involved in National History Day projects this year — and our thanks goes out to Sarah Clement, our state coordinator, and to all the teachers and parents who make this program a success.

Third Annual Wisconsin History Makers Gala

On Wednesday, May 14, I was thrilled to join approximately 350 supporters who were entertained and inspired at our Third Annual Wisconsin History Makers Gala. We saluted the lifetime achievements of five extraordinary individuals at The Pfister Hotel in Milwaukee. EAA founder Paul H. Poberezny, business leaders and philanthropists Drs. Robert D. and Patricia E. Kern, surgeon Dr. Alfred (Cy) J. Tector, and recently retired CEO and President of the Green Bay Packers, Bob Harlan, were recognized for their historic and continued contributions to society. The 2009 Wisconsin History Makers Gala will take place May 27, once again at The Pfister. Save the date and join us for another history-making event!

Wisconsin Public Television Partnership

Telling the history of Wisconsin one town at a time, *Wisconsin Hometown Stories: La Crosse* premiered on Wisconsin Public Television on May 12. This is the third in a series of *Wisconsin Hometown Stories* (Janesville and Green Bay are the first two), on which the Society collaborates as a Wisconsin Public Television partner. We also began work on our next project, *Wisconsin Vietnam War Stories*, which will look at the experiences and impact of the Vietnam War on Wisconsin soldiers and civilians through the voices and stories of those who lived through it. Stories are being collected now for airing in 2010.

2008 Local History and Historic Preservation Conference

More than 200 people representing 52 counties (as well as some out-of-state attendees) came to Madison for Building on the Basics, the 2008 Local History and Historic Preservation Conference. The largest local history and preservation conference ever put on by the Society, the two-day event featured 27 sessions, a dozen roundtables, two luncheon speakers and a tour of the revitalized community of Mazomanie, all designed to help local historical organizations and preservation advocates with some of their most pressing issues. If you missed this year's conference, be sure to mark down the dates of next year's conference in Wausau, October 9-10, 2009.

In Conclusion

These are just a few of the ways that we tried to serve you over the last year. I only wish we had the space to recount the thousands of discoveries, some large and many small, that visitors and researchers have made during the year. I would like to recognize the thousands of hours of work and the loyalty, mutual respect, and customer-focused service of our staff — despite a challenging economic climate, our organization remains vibrant thanks to them. We would like to acknowledge as well the volunteer leadership of the Society's governing Board of Curators, the Wisconsin Historical Foundation's Board of Directors, and the long list of volunteers and site-specific support groups who help to make our organization a success.

Mostly, though, I want you to know how much we enjoy sharing stories about the people, events, and places that comprise our common Wisconsin heritage. Thank you for your participation and your support!

This article was originally published in our online Highlights feature and is available at: <http://webdev.wisconsinhistory.org/highlights/archives/2009/01/2008remembered.asp>