

Back Matters

New Eyes and Old

The beginning of a new year is as much a time for looking back as it is a time for looking forward. It's January as I write these lines for this spring issue. The students aren't back on campus yet; a new governor has just been inaugurated; and the pace of work at the Society is at full steam after the brief respite of the holidays. For some, time off in December offered an opportunity to catch up on their reading, and for the Society's director, Bob Thomasgard, the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* was the catch-up reading of choice.

Bob sent us his comments, and in this he was not alone. Many readers comment on each issue of the magazine. Despite its age of eighty-six, the magazine is in the midst of growing pains. The transition to a more accessible format that began two years ago with a new design continues to be realized in terms of content as the editors search for the right balance of scholarship and general interest. We know we are on the right track because membership in the Society has grown dramatically during that time, but we also know that we must always seek to find ways to satisfy the interests of new readers without ignoring the interests of our old friends.

Bob Thomasgard's reading of last year's articles offered a useful gauge for measuring the magazine's purpose and progress. From his standpoint as the institutional leader of the Society, Bob was interested in the extent to which the articles dealt not only with the state's but also with the nation's history, offering opportunities to showcase the depth and range of the Society's vast collections, many of which are national in scope. Our most successful articles are those that make history "come alive," he wrote. "The constant challenge we have, is to make what we do relevant to decision makers—donors, legislators, etc.—as well to the general public. The magazine is an important means of putting a face on who we are and

what we do, and illustrating what role our collections play in explaining why things happened or didn't happen."

Of course, one person's relevance can be another's superficiality. Sometimes it may not be as clear to our newest readers why the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* would do a story on famed Hollywood costume designer Edith Head or on photographs of the construction of the World Trade Center or on a Michigan man who served during the Russian intervention following World War I. We publish these stories because they are a direct reflection of, and thus relevant to, the Society's collections. If the Society's collections have

national relevance, so then should this magazine.

On the other hand, we know that Wisconsin history will always be our primary pursuit. We know because that is what you have told us, not only with your letters but also in your choice of your favorite articles. Last year we instituted a new means for determining the articles that our readers liked best by asking them to vote on the recipient of the Hesselstine Award for best article in a volume by sending us letters or e-

mails or by accessing the Society's Web site. The vote ended in a tie, and the articles that you chose for volume 85 were "The 'Oleo Wars': Wisconsin's Fight over the Demon Spread" by Gerry Strey and "Postal Perfect: My Pursuit of Mail-Order Homes in Wisconsin" by Jim Draeger. These are good examples of the direction we want to take the magazine, and the editors were glad to know that you agree.

We value the eyes of all our readers, old and new, and we will use your comments to navigate the magazine's course in the future. We want to thank all who helped the magazine to be successful in 2002, and we look forward to receiving your support and advice in the coming year as well.

—J. Kent Calder

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—Philip Larkin,
"New Eyes Each Year"*