Harry Miller’s Vision of Arkansas, 1900–1910: A Case Study in Sponsored Projects

JO BLATTI

This essay discusses one museum’s experience with its first donor-supported exhibit and catalog project. The author explores the roles of donor relations, communications, institutional policies, and issues of “shared authority” in developing the Harry Miller photographic project. The author questions whether a distinctive ethical dimension distinguishes public history. She locates the truly distinctive element as “negotiations of personal and professional ethics in highly public arenas.”

IN THE FALL OF 2000, two strangers walked into my office wanting to share information and possibly a collection of interest to our museum. The brief account of our deepening acquaintance, negotiations, and collaboration that follows illustrates some of the ethical dimensions of everyday decisionmaking that routinely occurs in history museums.

I saw my first Harry Miller photograph in the spring of 2000 in the archives of the University of Arkansas—Little Rock. It was a marvelous blown-up view of the steamboat *Ozark Queen*, around 1900, docked on the White River and servicing what looked like some sort of work camp at the top of a bluff. At the time, I didn’t know who the photographer was, the story behind the picture, or that I would spend the next several years following the trail established by the image. I was simply surveying other institutions to determine what was
out here photographically concerning north central Arkansas and the White River country, which is the focus of Old Independence Regional Museum, a relatively new institution in a previously unserved area of the state.

Several months later, Marilyn and Ward Brewer arrived in Batesville with two albums full of Harry Miller originals—including the Ozark Queen photograph. Mrs. Brewer is a descendant of Harry Miller. She and her family wanted to reconnect the pictures with the community in which they had been taken. After several months of wide-ranging discussion with the Brewers, a project was born. With their intellectual and financial support, Old Independence undertook two years of research and planning to produce a twenty-nine-piece traveling exhibit and a seventy-two-page catalog showcasing Miller’s considerable skills as a photographer and his prescient eye for subjects of interest to posterity.1

We worked very closely with the donors in this project. In addition to underwriting the costs of the exhibit and the catalog, they were the museum’s liaison to other family members who actually owned the Miller albums eventually donated to Old Independence. Marilyn Brewer was a fellow researcher who undertook the family side of the story while co-curator Rita Henry and I tackled the artistic and social history aspects.

The potential for misunderstanding at many different junctures—practical, ethical, interpersonal relationships—is self-evident. Everyone involved in the Miller project approached these challenges very straightforwardly. The project partners went to great lengths early on to ask numerous questions. For instance, the donors, who came out of engineering and contracting backgrounds, genuinely respected staff expertise on the museum side, but had little knowledge of how museums work. We spent a lot of time explaining the terms of art, policies, and folkways of the museum field. Also, the Old Independence staff planned and budgeted every aspect of the project: curatorial fees, exhibit costs, catalog production. On the basis of our conversations, we fashioned a multi-part memorandum of understanding with the donors. This included a scope of work giving production specifications for each activity, a budget, a project calendar, the museum mission statement, and interpretation policies. The memorandum-roadmap provided a shared point of reference for all major activities. On our side of the agreement, the museum was careful to stick to the overall plan and budget.

As is so often the case with special projects in museums, the Harry Miller opportunity was serendipitous. It just fell into our laps. Intellectually and programmatically, we recognized the potential and knew we wanted to explore the possibilities. On a practical level, the museum had barely been open for

two years. The board and the director had lots of fundraising experience under their collective belts. However, the Miller project was an institutional first. The museum had not yet undertaken this variety of highly focused, donor-underwritten project. We had no internal model and needed to develop one to meet the situation.

The model Old Independence developed speaks to its own history. This is a museum that had fully articulated policies based on American Association of Museum models in place before it planned a single exhibit, let alone opened its doors. In the process of raising hundreds of thousands of dollars and working with donors and the community to build the museum, trustees received a full education on the value of focusing money, personalities, and preferences on agreed-upon goals.

In a sense, what we did at the Old Independence was develop a sponsored project model that extended that history of focus and goals further into institutional process. By and large, it’s easy for museums to identify projects that fit with their missions. There are always more possibilities than time to pursue. The trick is getting those ideas on the table and integrating them with the short-term and long-term goals of the institution. That requires clarity, transparency, and a lot of front-end evaluative work—not only on the project at hand, but also on the fit with institutional planning. It may also require the ability to recognize that some promising opportunities are not timely.

All donor relationships in museums occur along a continuum in which the gift—whether it is a photograph or an oral history or a membership or a major sponsorship or perhaps a capital gift—is matched with the policies and plans of the institution. Whether that transaction occurs in the collections, or programming, or development areas, the human dynamics, the content of the paperwork, the recognition vehicles, and the overall outcome share basic characteristics, which are to identify the boundaries between the donor and the institution and to solidify a relationship between the two. It’s a delicate dance that recognizes and delimits elements of shared authority between the donor and the institution.

We’ve all become accustomed to Michael Frisch’s notion of “shared authority” between oral history narrators and interviewers and extended that idea in many directions in historical practice. However, we tend to shy away a bit from seeing or wanting to see how that principle might extend to financial backers of nonprofits, a symptom perhaps of an unease about recogniz-

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2. See Michael Frisch, A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History (Albany: State University of New York, 1990). The essays in section 3 of this volume focus on program presentation issues, specifically the relationship between content in museum exhibits and audience expectations. However, many concerned with these issues see connections between Frisch’s basic insight and the internal workings of the museum itself. See also the special section on shared authority in The Oral History Review (Winter/Spring 2003, vol. 30, no.1), particularly Linda Shopes’s perceptive commentary (pp. 103–10), for continuing discussion of this concept. Frisch’s own comment in this special section is more limited to the oral history dialogue (see pp. 111–13).
ing the power that money carries into the nonprofit arena. I would observe
that financial backers have as legitimate interests in deposition of their gifts
as oral history narrators or any other donors do. The same transactional sen-
sitivities and etiquette are very much at play. For reasons clearly located in
institutional policies, staff members and trustees must be prepared to say “yes”
and possibly “no” with equal measures of grace—and with the hope that the
transaction will still be successful in some long-term way. Those on-going con-
versations with all institutional supporters are the way the organization keeps
moving toward its goals—purposefully, but not usually in a straight line!

I have two points here. One is that you must have the courage to say “no”
in the nicest way possible for reasons of focus and budget. The second is that
folks will generally respect you for it. We didn’t have to say “no” with the Brewer
s and Harry Miller. It was a lovely fit and a rewarding outcome on multiple
levels. But Old Independence trustees and staff do have to say “no” on nu-
merous occasions. To do otherwise would be irresponsible to our policies and
budget. I was amused to realize that one of the peer reviewers for this essay
appeared to believe that Old Independence is particularly “well-financed.” We
are doing well in many respects, for which I am suitably grateful. But we’re
out there hustling our annual operating budget with the rest of the nonprofit
community. Precisely because it is such a challenge to raise basic operating
funds—much harder than capital or funding for special projects—we have to
weigh every opportunity and figure out how it will integrate with the basic
budget as well as the strategic plan.

Because so much of the educational and cultural conservation work of mu-
seums occurs through instrumental transfer of others’ money, possessions, and
memories, we see the ethical dimensions of donor relations and routine pol-
icy pretty easily. I could go on about how a graduate education focusing on
historical methodologies, issues of subjectivity, and the practice of oral his-
tory has influenced my work as a scholar and an administrator. I can point to
the importance of well-articulated community standards such as the Oral His-
tory Evaluation Guidelines, the AAM and AASLH ethical statements, and the
Excellent Judges exhibit guidelines as measures for our work. All of that is
true. Yet, those are essentially recipes. As we all know, it is entirely possible
to follow a recipe to the letter without obtaining the desired result. One of
my pleasures is working with a really fine group of trustees, who have built
an excellent board culture. That’s where a good, deep recipe file counts—when
you’ve got a group that really knows how to cook.

I’m pleased that our museum developed a strong model/precedent for its
first major sponsored project and that the model resulted in good donor re-

3. See the following websites for oral history, museum, public history, and exhibit standards:
Oral History Association: www.dickinson.edu/oha; American Association of Museums: www.aam-
us.org; American Association of State and Local History: www.aaslh.org; National Council on
Public History: www.ncph.org; the Excellent Judges: www.excellentjudges.org. (All current as
of 15 July 2004.)
lations and an award-winning project. And I’m equally pleased to know that others find the model of interest to their operations. At the same time, I’m wary of any major ethical claims here. I don’t believe that the practice of history (public or otherwise) or work in museums is distinguished by an ethical dimension that is peculiarly distinctive.

Each of us carries our own ethical talismans. One of mine dates to long ago and far away; when I was fresh out of graduate school. I was part of a group of young people for whom historian Herb Gutman was a generous mentor. A group of us dissected historical issues and current events over lunch at the CUNY Graduate Center cafeteria on a regular basis. One noon the topic was the seemingly incomprehensible criminal behavior of a hitherto well-respected New Yorker—embezzlement or something similarly scandalous. Herb’s comment was: “Here’s a guy who got up every morning and made the right decision. Then one morning he made the wrong one.”

Perhaps the public trust aspect of the work makes it a little easier to see ethics in general at museums. But these are the same ethical dimensions that face every adult in society: to get up in the morning and make the right decisions. I don’t believe that my work as a historian/museum director is any different than that of an auto mechanic or an investment advisor or a human resources manager in that respect. And I’m not sure that society in general is well served by imagining that some individuals or professions or institutions carry particular ethical obligations (on behalf of the rest of us?). If any of us is making decisions that fail to respect others or that bend the rules for self-gratification, we’re in the soup.

**Postscript**

I enjoyed reading the papers of other panelists in this roundtable. All raise intriguing questions and several advance the discussion of professional standards with detailed case studies that will be of use to many readers. Yet, when I look at the themes the writers identify—negotiating insider/outside perspectives, multiple narratives, the need for explicit standards, historic sites as forums not shrines, the problem of analyzing the past in the present—none of these is distinctive to public history. Historians of all stripes face these central issues, no matter where or how they work. In terms of practice, these are methodological issues, often with profound ethical dimensions.

The essay in this roundtable that resonates most deeply for me is Alan Newell’s “Personal and Professional Issues in Private Consulting.” In his discussion of a research commission at HRA that raised concerns within the firm, Alan succeeds in distinguishing between a “personal ethical base [and . . . ] ethical standard[s] imposed by a profession, academic community, or the exigencies of a business.” While assuming the need for both, in his view, the personal standard is the fundamental one out of which individuals act.

If anything at all distinguishes the practice of public history, it is, in my view, the fact that these negotiations of personal and professional ethics occur
in highly public arenas. Our primary audience is everyday people, ultimately the primary audience for all historical endeavors in society. We are rightfully subject to judgment concerning our abilities to articulate and stick to our own standards—personal and professional—while also respectfully recognizing, though not necessarily sharing, the full range of community standards. If public history has anything to teach historians who work in other settings, it is this transactional, relational lesson about ourselves, our pasts, and our presents.4

JO BLATTI is director of the Old Independence Regional Museum in Batesville, Arkansas. She currently serves as exhibit review editor of The Public Historian, vice president of the Arkansas Women's History Institute, and member of the board of the Arkansas Historical Association. Along with many others, she is working on the museum expansion project at Old Independence, bringing new program, gallery, and collection storage spaces into use and developing new exhibits.

4. Museum colleagues interested in the Harry Miller contract can contact Jo Blatti or Teresa Russell at Old Independence Regional Museum, oirm@oirm.org, for additional information.