

# The President's Page

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## REFLECTIONS ABOUT THE MUSEUM

Quite often former students of mine visit the museum they ask “How do you like volunteering here?” I typically respond with “This is like a large classroom to me.” The reason why I have that answer is that the main functions of the museum are like the reasons why history is offered in our school systems. Both the history teacher in the schools of this county and the docents at the Effingham County museum want to make sure the visitors remember and do not forget the wonderful heritage which is theirs.

I quite often think about my classroom experiences. At the front of my classroom I tried to begin each year with a bulletin board declaring “Those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it.” That saying, of course, is one that many people all across America know. Some students thought the statement meant that if did not learn history they would have to come back to the class the next school year. The intent of the statement, of course, is to remind people there are lessons which we can learn from the events of the past.

When beginning a new school year, I often used an article by President Kennedy in which he stated “There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country. Without such knowledge he stands uncertain and defenseless before the world, knowing neither where he has come from nor where he is going. With such knowledge, he is no longer alone but draws strength far greater than his own from the cumulative experience of the past and a cumulative vision of the future.”

The president went on to state that “knowledge of history is a pleasure for its own sake.” I certainly agree with that; in fact, that is a main reason for my interest in local history. At the Museum, we uncover “hidden history” which is so very fascinating. Stories which show that fellow residents, relatives, and friends have taken part in the major events of this country’s past.

History is also “a means of judgment,” JFK emphasized. Many of our exhibits allow visitors to see that human beings from one generation to the next have many experiences in common politically, economically, and socially. That commonality allows us to look at the world of yesteryear and see what can be learned and applied to today’s circumstances.

Kennedy wrote: “History tests governmental policies.” Then he expressed the idea that our past judges our present, a thought which expands the earlier idea. We can look at the past and know what policies have worked, then judge the wisdom of trying the same patterns today. When politicians offer us solutions to the country’s problems, we can use history to judge the wisdom of the thoughts being set forth.

He also said that a knowledge of history is “a means of sympathy” by which we relate our own experience with the experience of other peoples who have gone before us. The Effingham County Museum tells the stories of many area heroes. Whenever I lead visitors from gallery to gallery, I frequently see tears when I tell about the tragedy and triumph of those whose lives are the focus of many of the exhibits within the historic Effingham Courthouse.

The President also wrote that knowledge of history provides a means of strength. That thought reflects the fact that the Museum visitor can learn from the role models whose lives provide the often inspiring stories which the docents tell. I see this as particularly important for area young people because the Museum can help them understand that people living in this part of Illinois in times past have overcome many hardships, and that knowledge of their victories can provide strength to the citizens of today's world.

All of this leads to JFK's final conclusion about history. It is "a means of responsibility," above everything else responsibility to those who came before us and struggled and sacrificed to pass on our present precious inheritance of freedom, responsibility to those who will come after us and to whom we pass on that inheritance. The members of the Effingham County Cultural Center and Museum Association, Inc. take that responsibility very seriously.

Perhaps Abraham Lincoln said it best when, in his Second Inaugural, he said "We cannot escape history. . . .The fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in all honor or dishonor, to the latest generation." When you come to the Effingham county museum and look at all of the exhibits which we have there I hope that you reflect upon the things mentioned in this article and grow from that, realizing that "There is little that is more important for an American citizen to know than the history and traditions of his country."