

Why Do We Like Old Things? Some Ruminations on History and Memory

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Somewhere in my four year old daughter's room is a cardboard box filled with the 'treasure' she accumulated during our vacation at Gull Lake. The treasure consists of a pine cone, a feather, some small twigs, some cracked shells she took out of the wet sand, and a picture of the lake that she drew on the porch of the cabin. Every so often, she pulls this box out from under a pile of toys and clothes, carefully examines its contents, and asks me: 'can we go there again.' Then she packs these keepsakes away, to be used again as the 'sacred relics' in a ritual of memory.

Most people have sacred relics. Many such treasures are written records of some kind or another. A diary, one's own or that of a relative, is often such a record. A diploma is another example, as is a yearbook or an old newspaper. All of these are fairly common keepsakes. Materials that are much more unique and esoteric, from handbills to posters to heaven-knows-what, are carefully hoarded in attics and closets and dresser drawers. Although they are indeed written records, we do not normally preserve them as information.

Other keepsakes contain no writing at all. These are objects, artifacts. They vary enormously from one person to another - from old, broken watches and eyeglasses to pressed flowers and crumbling cake; from an old postcard to a few foreign coins. Such things have had little value to most scholars, including the majority of professional historians. I remember hearing one well-known historian refer to most diaries as 'worthless, mundane testimonies to mundane lives.' But in excluding such keepsakes from the realm of serious study, this historian and his colleagues missed an important point: all of these things serve a similar function of reminding us of a particular time and place. As such, they can help the ordinary person encompass a sense of the past.

We use keepsakes to stimulate memory, especially to trigger fond memories (after all, how many of us save the worst test scores we received?) Some psychologists feel that memory is not really a 'storage cabinet of the mind,' so much as it is a process by which we, as individuals, make sense of our lives through time. Thus, according to this theory, when we look at something that stimulates our memory, we are setting up a link between past and present. David Thelen, an historian who recently asked how memory and history interact (and sometimes conflict), explained the process this way:

Memory begins when something in the present stimulates an association... In trying to remember a high school friend's name, for example, we often

begin with associations: What did she look like? Who were her friends? How did I feel when I met her?... Each association then triggers another in the chain until the person concludes that he or she has 'remembered' enough for the situation.

Keepsakes can be crucial to this process, by serving as 'triggers' to stimulate memory. Thelen's last comment is especially important, for it implies that, in remembering, in establishing a link between past and present, we are not necessarily preserving what really happened. Instead, we provide a semblance of continuity to our ever-changing lives by adjusting our memories according to our needs of the moment. This is not a deliberate, sinister act of 'rewriting history.' Those persons we sometimes disagree with on matters of what happened and what was said may believe that is what we are doing, but usually we are just being human.

A good way to illustrate this point is to recall the old grade school game in which we sent a message down a long line of people. Remember how different the message was when it got to the last person in line? In another instance, when we are arguing over some matter, who can avoid selecting the memories that best support our side of the issue? If distortion and bias occurs here, how much greater must it be in long term memory? This very question is what has led many historians to distrust memoirs, oral interviews, or other 'after the fact' evidence.

But even if memory cannot be relied upon to faithfully reproduce a record of the past, it remains vital to our understanding of the past. Paradoxical as that may seem, it is still true. Most people derive their values, their sense of justice (or perhaps injustice), even their sense of identity in this world, from memories of past events, education, or people, in question. One example of this could be the controversial Runestone and its meaning in Minnesota history.

Whether the Runestone is authentic evidence of Viking exploration in pre-Columbian Minnesota or an elaborate hoax is a continuing question. But in some ways it's an unimportant issue. Even if decisive proof were found to show that the Runestone was a fake, it would still attract visitors each year, both because it has become a symbol of Scandinavian ethnicity and because the legend of Viking exploration has become part of Minnesota's heritage. It is a sacred relic because it triggers memories that evoke a sense of history. It also provides a link between a memory of the past, or heritage, and the present.

Advertisers use emblems of past events to stimu-

late our feelings of nostalgia. They employ everything from Coca-Cola bottles to re-runs of thirty year old commercials in this manner, and hardly concern themselves with matters like accuracy. Our susceptibility to this type of nostalgia shows not only in product sales but in our approach to local history as well. Take, for example, the Steam Threshers Reunion, which annually draws thousands of people to Rollag to see the old tractors, harvestors, and other implements. Many of those visitors are too young to have used a single one of those machines, but sound of the chugging engine will weave its spell over them just as easily.

These too are artifacts that call forth images of the past; and rosy images they are too. For, while we fondly look at these machines and think on the times that they represent, we really have no wish to bring those times back. An old farmer I interviewed put it succinctly while reminiscing about his first gasoline tractor: "I harvested a lot of sugarbeets with that thing, but would I want to go out and run that thing again, over 200 acres, on a cold night with no enclosed cab, no heat and no radio? Hell, no!"

This man understood how we can distort the past by 'smoothing' the rough edges of our experiences. It is very human to forget unpleasantness, so that when we reminisce about the past we can truly make those the 'good old days' in our memory. When we fight to save the old courthouse from the wreckers ball, when we work to get old implements for a museum, we are more often than not trying to preserve the 'good times' as we either remember them or at least want to remember them.

This can even work with the memories of hard times. Old military veterans have a tendency to remember the good times in uniform when they ruminate, a tendency that Studs Terkel chronicled in his book The Good War. But there can be limits to this process. Among those who saw actual com-

bat, there may also be an air of sadness, an unspoken sense that they know 'what it was really about.' These men and women often refuse to talk or even think about wartime; yet more often than not they still have their dogtags, preserved as symbols of the experience. Similarly, people who remember the Great Depression might save something that symbolizes the triumph over those cruel years. Even here, the sacred relics have their place.

But to return to our question, what is so important about the keepsakes we value so highly? As evidence of history, they are clearly of limited value, since the memories they invoke can be subject to all kinds of error. Yet we still treasure them because they help us ink the then and the now, and it seems likely that the now is normally the more important consideration. That photograph of grandma standing next to the summer cabin helps us preserve our memories of her, memories softened by time and the desire to remember the best of the past. While it may or may not be true that "Grandma always loved it there," is is certainly true that we need to feel that way when we think of her.

Memory can have a valuable place in local history, where so much written evidence may have disappeared long ago. Sometimes, the local historian has no source but people's memories. In such a case it would be foolish to ignore completely the information that 'old timers' can provide, but still it should be used with care.

And what of the relics that play such a crucial role in preserving those memories? It's safe to say that we, as individuals and as communities, will still continue to save what we feel are the best emblems of where we've come from and what we've become.

