by Roy C. Turnbaugh
Oregon State Archivist

This program session [at the 1998 annual meeting of the American Association for State and Local History (AASLH) in Sacramento] was proposed by [Teena Stern, President of the California Council for the Promotion of History, and] Guy Rocha, assistant administrator for library and archives at the Nevada Department of Museums, Library and Arts [renamed Department of Cultural Affairs in 2001]. Rocha has long been active in debunking local history myths, as evinced in his "Myth a Month" column for the Sierra Sage. Other presenters were Phil Brigante, the Ramona Pageant; Paul Starrs, University of Nevada Reno, Department of Geography; and Lorraine Dong, San Francisco State University Department of Asian-American Studies.

Rocha began the session with a quick sketch of some of the myths that he has addressed ranging from a non-existent John F. Kennedy-Marilyn Monroe tryst at Lake Tahoe to the fiction of workers buried in Hoover Dam to the controversy between Dayton and Genoa, Nevada, about which was the first permanent settlement in Nevada. Although he repudiated the notion that he is a "history cop", Rocha asked where someone could go to find out whether a commonly repeated story is true, given the absence of a Better History Bureau. His work on local history myths lends strength to Rocha's argument that people are adrift in a sea of historical misinformation. His efforts to inform people of the truth have met with some resistance and have led to some people viewing him as a killjoy. Rocha's work in Nevada (coupled with a weekly talk radio program and an active speaking schedule) has resulted in greater visibility for these issues statewide.

Phil Brigante, historian of the Ramona Pageant, which is near Hemet, California, in the San Jacinto Valley, used Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 novel, Ramona, to illustrate how myths originate in popular culture and Brigante pointed out that Jackson wrote Ramona with the intention that it would become the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the American Indian. Publication of Ramona coincided with the coming of the railroad to southern California and a consequent surge in tourism in the 1880's. Brigante pointed out that the Ramona story was quickly seen as good for promoting tourism in the region. Moreover, Brigante demonstrated that promoting tourism depends upon having tourist attractions, and cultural tourism brings money to the areas. To a great extent, attractions draw visitors because they are colorful, not because they are factual, and the story of Ramona lent itself to this type of exploitation. Proof of its vitality is the fact that the pageant was first presented in 1922 and remains a powerful attraction today.

Paul Starrs, associate professor of Geography at the University of Nevada Reno, stressed that myths have a purpose, that they fill needs, and that professionals have a duty to discover what those needs are. Starrs enumerated some possibilities, ranging from greed and ignorance to a desire to glorify the past or improve a good story. One of Starrs' insights was that maps too, can embody myths. He noted the widespread misconception that rain would follow the plow that was a hallmark of the settlement of the plains. He concluded by presenting several myths; the myth that the West is rural; that the West is homogenized; that change moves from the center out; that everything is being 'Californicated;' and that the West isn't California.

The final speaker, Lorraine Dong, examined the transfer and evolution of myths from Chinese to American cultures. Fong noted that as a child in San Francisco's Chinatown, she was expected to learn the Ballad of Mulan, which was grounded in the elements of filiopiety, patriotism, and feminism. Mulan is a legendary Chinese heroine who went to war as a man and became a general. When she returned home, she became a woman again. Dong then used Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* to demonstrate how several versions from Chinese legend evolved into a new Mulan and then discussed Disney's recent animated feature, Mulan

The four speakers were, to say the least, wide-ranging in the ways they addressed the topic of historical myth. Brigante's presentation was closest to being an analysis of why a myth--in this case, the Ramona story--gained currency and has proven to be so durable. In Brigante's study, the motivation was economic and *Ramona* became the focus because it possessed the necessary elements to feed the nascent southern California tourism industry. Paul Starrs' examinations of several geographic myths about the American West, like Rocha's survey of Nevada myth, showed how pervasive and stubbornly rooted these myths can be. Rocha, in fact, was quite direct about the resentment that debunking a cherished myth can cause. Dong's use of the Mulan legend in a bicultural context--Chinese and American--led one to the conclusion that much of the power of myths is their malleability. This is, different people and different cultures can exploit myths for different purposes.

The large question raised by this program session was articulated by Rocha when he attempted to explain why he makes the effort to debunk these myths. It is difficult, working within the context of an American culture which regards itself as fundamentally benign, to develop a convincing answer to the question What's the harm? If people want to believe that the dome of the Nevada state capitol was covered with silver or that workers are entombed in Hoover Dam, what's the harm? One could argue that these myths add a little color to otherwise barren lives, that it is more fun to believe in a silver dome rather than a tin one. One could argue that the myth of the West as a rural area has had long term, subtle, and pernicious effects on the country as a whole, but it can be difficult to show cause and effect with regard to such a misconception.

Is the concern to set the record straight in these instances merely pedantic? Noel Malcolm's recent book, *Kosovo: A Short History* (NYU Press, 1998) addresses historical myths in the context of one of Europe's current explosive trouble spots. Malcolm shows how contemporary behavior is driven by the myth of the battle of Kosovo, which occured in 1389 when the Turks defeated the Serbs. In fact, Malcolm points out, so little is known about the battle of Kosovo that it's not even entirely clear who won and who lost, who made up the forces that were engaged there, or what happened during the course of the day of battle. This battle, however, became the foundation myth of Serb nationalism, and has been incorporated into the consciousness of Serbs in a near-visceral manner. The Serb myth has in turn been exploited by unscrupulous politicians and used as a default justification for violence, brutality, and repression. The Balkans in 1389 may seem a stretch for the American Association for State and Local History, but the combination of toxic historical myths with the power of late century mass communication lends both urgency and value to the task of keeping the record straight.

It would seem that all four speakers are really addressing the issue of making respect for the truth, so far as the truth can be determined, habitual. What qualities are necessary to accomplish this, in an era when relativism has become so pervasive that it is almost a cultural hallmark? All four speakers exhibit an interest in detail. All four have developed the ability to work with a variety of sources and resources to determine which details are true and significant. All four have the ability to place their investigations in a broader context, whether that is economic development or growing up bicultural. These qualities could serve as generic descriptions of the members of AASLH.

One of the most interesting aspects of "Myths and Realities: the Uses and Misuses of History", was the way in which the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. Having four speakers from such varied topics, might have produced a dissonant effect. Instead, each presentation reinforced the others almost seamlessly. One was reminded that making a living in the business of history need not mean abandonment of a scrupulous respect for the truth.

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