What can we learn from the history of our museums? Comments on Sten Rentzhog's *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea*. Jämtli and Carlssons Bok-förläg, Kristianstad, 2007. Published in cooperation with The Association for Living History Farms and Agricultural Museums and The Association of European Open Air Museums. ISBN 978-91-208-4. (English version translated by Skans Victoria Airey).

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Acknowledgements¹

I first visited Skansen during 1991 as an invited guest at the Association of European Open-Air Museums (AEOM) conference. I am delighted to return sixteen years later to participate in the conference convened to discuss Dr. Sten Rentzhog's new book, *Open Air Museums: The History and Future of a Visionary Idea*. It is wonderful to see things I recognize, including warm smiles from colleagues and happy visitors at Skansen.

In 1991 the AEOM began at Frilandsmuseet in Lyngby, Denmark, and then traveled to Stockholm. In Sweden attendees heard papers and visited Skansen, Kulturen in Lund and Gamla Linköping among other sites. At the time I managed The Farmers' Museum, Inc., in Cooperstown, New York. The conference allowed me direct experiences with Scandinavian institutions that I had only read about, and only dreamed of visiting. In the years after AEOM I traveled back and forth to Denmark and saw many of that nation's open air museums and historic sites, I lived for a while in the staff apartments at Brede, near Frilandsmuseet in Lyngby. My commitment to the Association for Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM) allowed me to

travel to several conferences in Canada, and I currently serve as the U.S. delegate to the presidium of the International Association of Agricultural Museums (AIMA) which has allowed me to visit open air and agricultural museums in Poland, Germany and the Czech Republic.

These experiences make me aware of the diversity and vibrancy of the international open air museum community. It is my pleasure to have this opportunity to comment on the only comprehensive history of this important museum genre. I thank Sten Rentzhog for all the questions he has asked over the years we have corresponded, for thinking of me as a commentator on his book, and for the wonderful opportunity to return to Skansen. I thank the organizers of "The Future of Open-Air Museums – a Scandinavian model for the 21st Century" for the invitation to participate. It is a pleasure to offer these comments.

The more I read about the history of open air museums the more I marvel at the vigor of the genre's founders, and the clarity of purpose they exhibited as they created national institutions. They had to be workaholics to generate the financial support, negotiate with bureaucrats, identify buildings and collections, placate donors, appeal to visitors and create full-size dioramas of their nations' pasts. Dr. Sten Rentzhog has gathered dozens of examples from around the world into his massive *Open Air Museums: The History of a Visionary Idea*. This comprehensive history of open air museums should become the indispensable encyclopedia for understanding the history of the museum genre, including the ways that open air museums have appealed to visitors, and the ways that they can continue to be relevant in a changing world.

Rentzhog starts the introduction with high praise: "Open air museums – or outdoor museums – are marvelous. They are versatile cultural institutions, educational centres and tourist attractions, with a potential far greater than most people imagine" (p. 1). His enthusiasm for his subject never waivers through 532 pages that explore the genre as developed in Scandinavia, Europe, the United States and Canada over more than one hundred years. Seventeen chapters take the reader from the founding days of the movement, including Arthur Hazelius' efforts to create Skansen in Stockholm, but it also considers contemporaneous efforts by founders of other museums in other European countries. He then crosses the Atlantic and explores the origins of open air museums and other museums that may not meet his strict definition of the genre, but that influenced North American development due to their emphasis on living history. Rentzhog addresses the various goals that founders pursued. He explores their reasons for collecting buildings, folk trades and crafts, and rural and shop traditions of people during an era of intense nation building. The book moves chronologically and addresses the ways that war, politics and capitalism affected museum development. It concludes with several chapters devoted to current issues affecting open air museums, particularly the ways that institutions can position themselves to remain relevant in a changing world. The general public values authenticity and family and multi-generational experiences, and Rentzhog argues that open air museums are best positioned to deliver these experiences.

"Skansen in Stockholm – it is there we have to begin" (p. 4). The first critique I pose – Why start with Arthur Hazelius and Skansen? Rentzhog justifies doing so, arguing that the

methods Hazelius developed at Skansen so influenced later open air museums that the term "skansen" became synonymous in some parts of the world for open air museum. Yet, others had ideas to develop open air museums in Scandinavia and Europe without the influence of Hazelius. Some contemporaries considered Hazelius the founder, others did not. Certainly Hazelius had vision. He combined nature and culture by creating museums in the open air complete with structures, landscapes, flora, fauna, folk and festivals. But more analysis of founders and their motives could have yielded a theory of open air museum founding. Perhaps nationalism wielded the most influence. Rentzhog indicates that "clearly [Hazelius'] aim was to arouse love of his country and increased national consciousness. . . fellowship, pride and self esteem. . . a common cultural heritage" (p. 18). Rentzhog considers this goal as benign – "the idea of nationalism did not necessarily imply aggression against anyone else" (p. 18) – but Hazelius felt strongly enough about the need to create a national Swedish identity, that he expended his life's energy on the project. What happened during the late 1890s that made nationalism such an all-consuming goal? What happened to those who did not fit the national identity created at Skansen, or at other "skansens" around the world?

Visitor numbers indicate that Skansen appealed to Swedes. Within two years of opening, 200,000 visitors came per year; then over 500,000 even before 1900 (p. 6), and though visitation dwindled during the 1920s, expansion in structures and programming during the 1930s increased attendance to two million per year (pp. 117–118). A second critique – Why did visitors come in such great numbers? Was the public motivated by nationalism, or

did the public flock to Skansen because the museum was about them? Rentzhog explains clearly how Hazelius kept public appeal central to his plan, allowing for a range of literacy levels when writing labels, creating appealing programming and extending open hours to increase opportunities for the public to visit. I would like more critique, however, of the ways this made Skansen politically useful as a site to build collective memory. Eugene Weber argued, in *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914* (1976), that standardized education, industrialization and compulsory military service helped create Frenchmen. Did Lapplanders and Dalarna folk really believe that Skansen helped make them into Swedes? The idea warrants further study.

Hazelius was not alone in his quest to involve everyone in the national museum; in fact, the real vision of the open air museum genre, as implemented across the globe, centered on the involvement of THE folk in documenting, collecting, and preserving THEIR history. But after World War I, Rentzhog indicates that open air museums lost “contact with the public” (p. 100). Did this happen because staff adopted less passionate, more academic approaches to collecting and exhibiting folk culture as Rentzhog implies, or did nation builders just adopt other means to secure their objectives? Did members of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party influence German open air museums during the 1920s and 1930s or did they pursue other means to build a sense of national identity? Changing tastes may also have reduced public interest in open air museums. During the 1920s modern aesthetics became *de rigueur* while pre-industrial folk culture and history declined in appeal. Increased competition from the proliferation

of open air museums as well as economic depression likewise negatively affected visitation. Yet, another director with vigor, Andreas Lindblom, revitalized Skansen during the 1920s and 1930s, and the expansion of the genre in Eastern and Central Europe and the United States accelerated during this time.

A third critique – the emphasis on larger institutions, though important to understand the trend setters, neglects the masses. Future students of open air museums could delve more fully into earlier and smaller models of open air museums. This particularly relates to museum development in the United States, but also applies to all other countries. Collecting in the United States involved the quest for relics. Locks of George Washington’s hair, for example, were in great demand after his death. Relic collecting may appear to have little direct relevance to open air museums, but relics sometimes included buildings, and local initiative drove the efforts. Charles Hosmer explores this history in *Presence of the Past: the History of the Preservation Movement in the United States before Williamsburg* (1965) and *Preservation Comes of Age: from Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926–1949* (1981). In the years since Hosmer published his studies, other researchers have documented earlier collecting and preservation efforts. By the early 1800s residents of Deerfield, Massachusetts, began collecting parts of homes destroyed during the series of colonial wars that raged between the French and their Native allies versus the English and their Native and colonial allies. Certainly perceptions of colonial culture, if not folk culture, drove the material accumulation, as did recognition of the value of the material to solidifying the collective memory.

A fourth critique – I believe that more discussion of the role of the folk in creating mu-

142 seums should be incorporated. Locals defined the stories of their own communities that they wished to tell, and right or wrong, complete or incomplete, the museums that they created convey their ideas about the past. The stories do not necessarily fit into a national narrative, but they have local meaning, and that furthers the founders' goals. The Dakota City Heritage Village, Inc. located at the Dakota County Fairgrounds in Farmington, Minnesota, provides an example of a small open air museum that exists because of local initiative and that reflects the spirit of folk museum building in the United States. Dakota City began in 1960 as a project of the Dakota County Agricultural Society. The agricultural society, founded in 1858, still operates one of the largest county fairs in Minnesota. The society collected buildings for thirty-four years before incorporating the heritage village as a separate 501(c)(3) organization (a.k.a. private non-profit corporation) in 1994. It has adopted an ambitious mission statement with an emphasis on interpreting a way of life nearly obliterated by change. According to the museum website: "As urban sprawl obliterates America's agricultural past, Dakota City connects families to the agricultural and immigrant past of Dakota County communities where they now live. Dakota City focuses on how rural communities functioned 100 years ago and how residents met their need for food, shelter, clothing and social interaction" [www.dakota-city.org].

A fifth critique – Rentzhog is clear that not all of the museums he analyzes follow his definition of open air museums, but does this mean that his definition – "sites mainly comprising translocated buildings" (p. 2) – is too narrow? He incorporates institutions that do not fit the criteria such as Plimoth Plantation,

which consists totally of recreated structures, and the Washburn-Norlands Living History Center which consists of in situ and recreated structures because each have pioneered living history techniques. He includes Colonial Williamsburg which consists of buildings preserved *in situ* or recreated on-site, because it is widely studied and resulted from major philanthropic commitment. He justifies including these because they influenced the movement in North America, and then, in a backward migration, institutions throughout Europe. Including them begs the question of why not include other museums with historic structures, integrated landscapes and engaging living history programming. These, likewise, provide evidence of museum excellence that could ensure a future for the visionary open air museum. Historic Deerfield, Inc. comes to mind as a site with a remarkable collection of historic structures preserved *in situ* along a small town street in the picturesque Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts. It sits within a cultural and natural landscape that is vital to the site interpretation, and it serves as a model of intellectual engagement in research, collecting and interpretation.

Back to the origins of traditional open air museums in the United States. Rentzhog identifies Vesterheim as the oldest (p. 123), founded in 1913 by Norwegian Americans to document Norwegian immigrant history. A sixth critique – One author must practice discipline when exploring a topic as broad as the international history of open air museums. Yet, moving from the folk product, Vesterheim, to Henry Ford's Greenfield Village, a collection of folk culture by the person who changed that culture, leaves much unstudied. Specifically, progressive era museum building coincided with the era of nation building that

occurred in the United States between the Spanish American War of 1898 and entrance into World War I. During the same decade that Vesterheim began, local boosters, progressives and special interest groups in 1917 founded Lincoln's New Salem. It recreated the 1830s village where future President Abraham Lincoln spent his early adulthood. In this regard, folk built a museum documenting the interrelationships of ordinary folk with one particularly extraordinary person, Lincoln, the president who turned a union of states into a nation. The first five log buildings were recreated during 1918, and the Civil Conservation Corp, a relief program instituted by the United States government during the 1930s, built the rest of the site. Barbara Burlison Mooney, in an article in *Perspectives of Vernacular Architecture* [11 (2004)] argued that the folk involved created a "convenient discursive site on which to graft theories of Lincoln's personality, the American character, and historical simulacra" (Mooney, p. 19).

A seventh critique – women seem strangely absent in Rentzhog's study, but women played major roles in historic preservation in the United States. During the 1850s, Ann Pamela Cunningham launched a grassroots effort to save Mount Vernon, the home of the United States' first president, George Washington. To do so, she had to mitigate sectional division, secure funds from competing special interest groups and devise a system where women as well as men held authority. Granted, Cunningham did not create an open air museum of folk culture at Mount Vernon; she helped found a historic house museum, one of the first in the nation. And preserving Mount Vernon did not succeed because of any recognition of folk culture. Folk across the United States may have supported the effort, but the

focus revolved around a great man and his role in building a mighty union of states. It could not be called an effort in creating a national identity because the federal system of government, with each state government sharing authority with the national government, defied formation of a nation state in the European model. Yet, Cunningham certainly appealed to a sense of common identity when she tried to raise the funds to preserve the house of the first president of the United States. This took on significance given the sectional tension that drove the North and the South apart before the Civil War erupted in 1861. Documenting the folk of Mount Vernon, that is, the enslaved African Americans as well as the poor whites on the plantation, never inspired Cunningham or her peers. Technically Mount Vernon does not fit Rentzhog's definition of an open air museum (p. 2). It is preserved in situ, but this history is important for two reasons: women drove the effort, and the folk supported it. The ways that women, or specifically, the ways gender affected the open air museum movement, deserves attention.

Another open air museum in the United States conveys the influence of direct transplantation of the open air ideal from Finland to Arizona as well as the influence of women on museum founding. Leonora Scott Muse Curtin, a woman committed to cultural preservation, and her daughter, Leanora T. Curtin, purchased the historic El Rancho de las Golondrinas near Santa Fe in 1932. They realized the significance of the location as a stopping point on the El Camino Real from Mexico City to Old Santa Fe. Leonora T. Curtin married Yryo (George) A. Paloheimo, Consul of Finland for Southern California, Arizona and New Mexico, after World War II, and they preserved existing structures, erected replicas,

144 and relocated other appropriate structures in their efforts to preserve the history and culture of Spanish New Mexico. Paloheimo had worked with exhibitions before, having organized the Finland Pavilion at the New York World's Fair in 1939. He also advocated for cultural preservation given his work with Help Finland, a U.S. organization that rallied Finnish emigrants to lend financial aid to their native land during the 1940s. That effort evolved into the Finlandia Foundation, co-founded by Paloheimo in 1953. When El Rancho de las Golondrinas opened in 1972, it became the first in New Mexico. Today the open air museum interprets three centuries of Spanish culture. The Rancho de las Golondrinas Charitable Trust operates the site.

Such diversity in open air museums, including different interpretive goals, different types of founders, different types of operating and governance structures and different sources of support indicate both the broad interest in the United States in founding such museums, but also the freedom to do so. Yet, open air museums have been subject to criticism for the "lite" history they convey, for moving buildings out of context and for ignoring critical history in favor of living history demonstration of daily chores such as butter making. Rentzhog addresses these controversies, particularly the tension between academic accuracy and public appeal (p. 165).

The American public (a.k.a. folk) creates museums to reflect their communal selves, and through their museums, they present consensus history. Yet, controversy reeks from the pores of their creations. Those not represented have no voice, and they have no voice because creators excluded them from the process. This is unconscionable, but a predictable consequence of public history making. Recently, his-

torians, historic architects, historic archaeologists, preservationists and other public historians have embraced state-of-the-art methods and cutting edge technology to reach the general public. Rentzhog calls for open air museums to capitalize on the general public's interest in history and to help visitors become more informed generally. This can include multi-sensory stimuli, a hallmark of open air museums. By engaging the public intellectually in researching, collecting, preserving and interpreting the past using living history methods, the public learns about new ways of finding out about the past; of viewing it and of coming to terms with it. I am left wondering, what would Hazelius do with the Internet?

Rentzhog's book is most useful because it humbles readers to realize that our ideas are not necessarily new ideas. "Even if museums only succeed in giving more and more people the simple understanding that we are not the only generation, that there have been generations before us, and generations will come after, they will be making an invaluable contribution" (p. 377). He continued that "if they also manage to get people to respect earlier generations instead of looking down on them, they will be helping to counteract the present day hubris, the arrogance, which is one of the greatest threats to the future of mankind" (p. 377). My eighth critique – produce a more comprehensive index for the English version. For example, the debate about interpreting ethnicity in open air museums does not appear in the index (that I can find). No entries for "ethnicity" or "immigrant" appear, yet, color plates 102 and 106 indicate that the national open air museums in Norway and the Netherlands have incorporated such interpretation. It is impossible to create a totally comprehensive index, but an expanded English version

could be useful. It could be posted on-line for ease of access.

Obviously Dr. Rentzhog establishes lofty goals for open air museums, but given his positive interpretation of them, he believes the institutions are generally capable of accomplishing the goals they pursue. But he understands the gravity of currents trends in declining visitation and inadequate operating finances. Open air museums must stabilize themselves so they can take full advantage of their unique resources. They must make the most of intellectual engagement with the public. They must move beyond the role of collective memory maker and embrace the responsibility of history scrutinizer. Recently forensics have captivated the television viewing public, and open air museums are already staging "who done it" events. This affords another opportunity in the world of opportunities that Rentzhog describes, to engage the public in history scene investigation. *Open Air Museums* can leave readers exhausted at the task before them, but inspired to undertake it.

1. This article is based on comments that I prepared on Sten Rentzhog's book for the 26-28 April 2007 international conference on "The Future of Open-Air Museums" at Skansen in Sweden.

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Museum Studies. An Anthology of Contexts. Edited by Bettina Messias Carbonell. Blackwell Publishing 2004. ISBN 0-631-22825-X. 640 sider.

Med mastodontværket *Museum Studies – an anthology of contexts* fra 2004 blev endnu en udgivelse føjet til rækken af de museologiske antologier, som udkom fra 1980'erne og løbende frem imod årtusindskiftet, blandt disse Lumley 1988, Karp & Lavine 1991, Karp, Kreamer & Lavine 1992, Greenberg, Ferguson & Nairne 1996, og senest, i skandinavisk regi, Ingemann/Hejlskov Larsens (red.) *Ny dansk Museologi* fra 2006, anmeldt i Nordisk Museologi 2006/1. Denne anmelder bekendt er der ikke kommet noget andet værk siden Blackwell-udgivelsen, som præsterer en tilsvarende tekstmængde og faglig spændvidde, og der er god grund til at tro, at det vil vare et stykke tid, inden værket bliver overgået af endnu en museologisk antologi.

Som udgangspunkt giver strømmen af antologier imidlertid grund til at spørge, hvorfor museologisk litteratur så ofte præsenteres i denne genres sammenstykkede form? Ud over de pragmatiske fordele, som byder sig til, hvilke faglige begrundelser kunne ligge bag dette genremæssige valg i relation til den museologiske disciplin? Betegnelsen 'antologi' kommer af det græske *anthología*, som egentlig betyder 'blomstersamling', læren om noget, samling af udvalgte digte eller litteraturprøver.¹ Forestillingen om antologien som en samling eller et museum bliver da også en bærende idé i Carbonells fremstilling og et oplagt parameter for at vurdere bogens indhold. Ikke mindst fordi der i herværende tilfælde er tale om en samling af allerede publicerede tekster til forskel fra den type antologier, hvor en række forfat-