WHAT GOOD IS HISTORY!

GILBERT LOVE

WHAT Good Is History!” is the subject I have chosen—with some coaching—to bore you with tonight. Having chosen, I almost immediately got into a problem of semantics—definitions. History is, by one definition, events that occurred in the past. What's the value of past events? That's not debatable. The past is there, like the Atlantic Ocean or the dead at Gettysburg . . . and as Lincoln said of the latter, there isn't anything we can do or say to alter their status.

As for the influence of the past on the present, whether or not we pay a bit of attention to history, the past is as essential to the present as the roots are to a tree, or tributaries to a stream, or ancestors to people.

So what we're going to talk about, with your permission, will be our subject with the subtitle, “What’s the Good of Studying, Savoring, Knowing About the Past.”

One reason is to plan the future with more chance of success. In almost any field of endeavor you're more likely to guess what's going to happen if you know what has happened. Doctors can make much more accurate diagnoses if they know the medical history of the patient. Economists do better if their graphs start 'way back in the past. Court decisions are almost entirely governed by legal history.

We understand the present much better if we know something of the past. How can we properly appreciate—and preserve—such blessings as freedom, education, prosperity if we know nothing about past oppression, ignorance, destitution. The past tells us that neither people nor basic situations have changed very much. We're all familiar with speeches and writings many years old that sound as though they were uttered or written yesterday.

Mr. Love is one of our best known columnists. His articles appear almost daily in the Pittsburgh Press. Many take the form of travelogues for which he has covered more than 100,000 miles since World War II. He has published a recreational guide and has spear-headed many successful campaigns of which the anti-smoke law is perhaps best known.—Ed.
We understand ourselves a little better for knowing how people acted and thought in the past. When I was in my 20's I saw, for the first time, a diary that my father had kept on a trip to Europe at about the same age. I was surprised to find that this man, whom I had known only as an older person, had had about the same reactions and thoughts that I would have had. That's personal history, of course, but who says it isn't history, and important at that, to the individual. Visiting my mother's home town, New Haven, last summer, I went with Jimmy Totman, a history enthusiast from Pittsburgh, to an old library. There, through city directories going back more than a century, we traced the residences and business activities of my grandfather and great-grandfather, then went out to find the addresses. Most of the places are now parking lots, but no matter. I could feel my roots going a little deeper into this American soil.

If we get into detailed history, recording the everyday lives of our ancestors, they cease to be skeletons, ghosts...begin to fill out and take shape as real people who just happened to live at an earlier period. Reading a detailed history of events at Fort Duquesne, I was surprised to find that several English officers detained there were worried about their promotions. That certainly makes 'em human!

We're less inclined to worry about juvenile delinquency if we know something about the "flaming youth" of the 1920's and the youthful rebels of earlier periods. Anyone who thinks sin is on a rampage today should read about the goings-on around the courts of some of the French Louis'.

Then, knowing the past gives us a yardstick to measure our progress. Pittsburgh's Bicentennial would mean nothing if everything we have now had just appeared, like a rabbit out of a magician's hat. We're proud because our modern city was built, step by step, from a wilderness.

The past also is a rich source of fascinating true stories covering virtually all facets of human existence. After all, the actions and interactions of people through the centuries, and their reactions to their environment, are bound to result in some strange combinations. Historical novels have merely scratched the surface of this
fund of material. History itself, when well written, can be as absorbing as the novels that stem from it.

Everything that has been said up to this point probably is well known by everyone in this room. It has been a sort of a review, an underscoring, of an important fact of life.

What everyone may not realize, however—if he hasn't had a chance to crisscross the country the way I have, or to sit constantly beside the river of everyday life—is that the appreciation of history is in its golden age in America.

There's the great popularity of historical novels, led, at present, by books on the Civil War period.

There are community centennial, sesquicentennial, bicentennial and even some tricentennial celebrations. They seem to become more elaborate each year, with their beard-growing contests in the smaller communities and pageants by the Messrs. Kermit Hunter, Paul Green, etc., in the larger places.

It's the automobile, however, that has made history Big Business in this country. Every year some fifty, sixty, seventy million Americans—the statistic is a little vague, but it's huge—pile into their autos and go somewhere for pleasure. Some just tour. Others have definite destinations, like the seashore or the mountains or Grandmother's home in the country. Even so, they all want to see the sights—and, except for some natural wonders like Niagara Falls and the Delaware Water Gap and Walt Disney—the sights are largely historic.

States have been busy marking their historic sites—a big job in itself. Pennsylvania has approximately a thousand big aluminum plaques along its highways and city streets. Virginia has at least as many. Both states get out booklets giving the wording on each plaque, so that he who runs may read . . . or, more accurately, so that he who is driving 50 miles an hour need not slow up, run the risk of being struck from the rear, and then discover that the plaque marks the birthplace of some county commissioner or no-longer-existing pioneer dwelling.

Thousands of still-existing places of historic interest have been put back in working order for the benefit of the touring multitudes. Pennsylvania, for example, has at least a dozen major attractions that have been restored or re-created—among them Old Economy, Larry Thurman's beautifully-restored community in Ambridge; the
world's first oil well at Titusville; William Penn's Manor House on the Delaware River; Fort Augusta on the Susquehanna; Ephrata Cloister and Cornwall Furnace north of Lancaster; the Daniel Boone Homestead east of Reading, and so on.

In addition there's the Gettysburg Battlefield, the Independence Hall project in Philadelphia, the Hopewell Village restoration near Pottstown, the U.S.S. *Wolverine* and Perry's Flagship *Niagara* at Erie. There are few Pennsylvania counties that don't have at least one historic spot that attracts tourists from far and near.

And the end is not yet.

Back in 1926 an Episcopal clergyman serving Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, Virginia, had a dream. He noted that many of the buildings in his sleepy old tidewater town dated back to Colonial days, when the town had been capital of Virginia. Many other buildings, he felt sure, had colonial innards under such 20th Century "improvements" as stucco finishes and sheet metal fronts. He sold John D. Rockefeller, Jr., on restoring the center of Williamsburg to the state it was in before the Revolution.

The job was thoroughly done. The very ground under Williamsburg was sifted for fragments of stonework, furniture, utensils, that could be added to other indications of the appearance of buildings and their contents. Experts went all over the world to get drawings and materials of the period. Brick for the buildings were hand made from the same clay deposit as the original.

I don't think Mr. Rockefeller intended to get into the project as deeply as he did, but today well over thirty million dollars have been spent on the restoration. About 400 Colonial buildings—houses, craft shops, stores, taverns, public buildings; a windmill, a powder magazine, a jail—have been rebuilt or re-created. And Williamsburg is a marvel to behold. This is no decaying relic of the past, but a capital city of Colonial America almost exactly as it must have been in its heyday.

A great many other historic towns have been built in recent years, although few others have followed the Williamsburg pattern of building on a site exactly what was there in the first place.

Old Sturbridge Village, in Massachusetts, is a typical New England town of a century and a half ago, and its buildings are of that period, but they were moved to their present site from various points in New England.
Greenfield Village, near Dearborn, Michigan, is a collection of historic buildings and other structures, including the Ackley covered bridge from Western Pennsylvania, the house where the Heinz industry started, and the house that was once said to be the birthplace of Stephen C. Foster.

Mystic Seaport, in Connecticut, is a harbor town of old sailing ship days. It contains a number of original structures, but I think its re-creators are trying to make it a typical Nineteenth Century seaport rather than Mystic exactly as it was.

Saugus Iron Works, again in Massachusetts, is another Williamsburg. The American Iron and Steel Institute spent $1,500,000 on archeological explorations and other work needed to restore the buildings and “machinery” exactly as they were in 1646, when Saugus gave the world its first sustained production of cast and wrought iron.

Providing authentic history can be an expensive proposition. The present owner of the Edaville Railroad, a two-foot gauge line that takes tourists through cranberry bogs around South Carver, Massachusetts, has been buying up working standard-gauge steam locomotives to create a museum of these rapidly-vanishing engines. He indicated, when I was talking with him last summer, that he had sunk more than a million dollars in the Edaville Railroad and the museum combined.

Think of all the money that has been spent restoring the old Spanish missions of California and the Southwest ... on the restoration and maintenance of Civil War Battlefields in the South (and Pennsylvania) ... on places like the Wright Memorial, off the coast of North Carolina, and Jamestown, Virginia, where air-conditioned museum buildings rose out of a swamp ... on amphitheaters for outdoor pageants ... on war memorials and monuments in every hamlet ... on roadside markers ... on the preservation of the oldest buildings of thousands of communities ... 

Think of all that, and more—the books and pamphlets that have been written about the historic sites ... the hotels, motels and restaurants that have been built around some of the most important ones ... and so on ...

Then try to guess how much this has cost in, say, the past 50 years, since people have been moving around on their own magic carpets and can see more than the monuments in their own town
squares. I have never seen an estimate, but surely the money spent must run into the billions.

That's the good of history, as stated in very concrete terms.

Pittsburgh got on this historic bandwagon a little late. We were a practical people here, too busy with the present to pay much attention to the past. Also, before smoke control and some other reforms, we weren't real proud of the place.

However, a start was made toward correcting this situation during the depression years. The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, the Buhl Foundation and the University of Pittsburgh undertook the joint sponsorship of a series of books relating, in readable style, the colorful and important history of this region.

Eleven attractive books, bearing the imprint of the University of Pittsburgh Press, appeared between 1937 and 1941.

First came Leland D. Baldwin's lively and informative *Pittsburgh: The Story of a City*. Then, in rapid succession ———

*Early Western Pennsylvania Politics*, by Russell J. Ferguson.

*Pen Pictures of Early Western Pennsylvania*, compiled by John W. Harpster.

*Whiskey Rebels*, by Leland D. Baldwin.

*Planting of Civilization in Western Pennsylvania*, by Solon J. Buck and Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck.


*Pioneer Life in Western Pennsylvania*, by J. E. Wright and Doris S. Corbett.

*Council Fires on the Upper Ohio*, by Randolph C. Downes.

*Keelboat Age on Western Waters*, by Leland D. Baldwin.

*Two Centuries of Industry*, by Arthur Pound.

Those books set the stage, and after World War II the great work of giving this region a thoroughly written history—a literary base for its Renaissance—continued and was augmented.

We've had Lois Mulkearn's *George Mercer Papers* . . . Dwight Raymond Guthrie's *John McMillan* . . . Ella Chalfant's *A Goodly Heritage*, dealing with Pittsburgh wills . . . and, for the motorized history-seeker that we've been discussing, the very useful *A Traveler's Guide to Historic Western Pennsylvania*, by Lois Mulkearn and Edwin V. Pugh.
One of the latest of the University of Pittsburgh Press volumes, *George Washington in the Ohio Valley*, by Hugh Cleland, attracted national attention. Others, like Charles Stotz's *Early Architecture of Western Pennsylvania* and the beautiful two-volume *Wild Flowers of Western Pennsylvania and the Upper Ohio Basin*, with text by Dr. Otto E. Jennings and illustrations by Dr. Andrey Avinoff, have attracted national interest in their fields.

Now we're in our Bicentennial year and the stream of local historic literature has swelled. Rose Demorest, of Carnegie Library, wrote a neat little pamphlet history of Pittsburgh that was published by the Library. George Swetnam, *The Pittsburgh Press* capable historian, wrote an entertaining book called *Where else but Pittsburgh!* One understands that Stefan Lorant's monumental picture story of the city will be out in the fall.

And this Historical Society has just published, or caused to be published, a most interesting and instructive book called *Drums in the Forest*. As I believe I said in the newspaper, it's a double-header. The first part of the book, called "Decision at the Forks," is a thoroughgoing discussion, by Dr. Alfred Procter James, professor emeritus of history, University of Pittsburgh, of events leading up to the occupation of the site of Pittsburgh by the British. The second section, called "Defense in the Wilderness," is a discussion of pioneer forts and military tactics in this region by Charles M. Stotz, an architect who has made this subject an avocation for the past ten years.

If you're looking for a single volume that will give you an excellent start on the history of this city and region, I can heartily recommend *Drums in the Forest*.

These are no mere re-writes of other histories. These men are authorities on the segments of history that they are discussing.

Dr. James spent a year in the early 1930's doing research for the Historical Survey that formed the basis for the University of Pittsburgh Press books. He found a mother lode of documents bearing on Western Pennsylvania in the Pennsylvania Historical Society in Philadelphia. There were 225,000 classified documents, and tons of unclassified material. Many of the documents were letters from early settlers in these parts to friends and relatives in Eastern Pennsylvania.

Later Dr. James spent a summer in London and Paris, looking
for and finding documents on Pittsburgh's earliest days.

His experience lets him look at events at the "Forks of the Ohio" with the eyes of a world citizen as well as with those of a Pittsburgher. This makes his contribution more significant.

Charles Morse Stotz comes to us equally well recommended.

He's a leading architect, and has headed all sorts of architecture and art societies and commissions in these and other parts.

Somewhere along the way he got interested in the early buildings of Western Pennsylvania, became an authority on them, and wrote the aforementioned book on them.

When he became particularly interested in the early forts I don't know. He reports that they have been an avocation for the past ten years, but our clippings show that he was working on plans for Point Park in the middle 1940's.

He went to England to get plans for the reconstruction of Fort Ligonier, which he designed and supervised.

In addition to being an expert on old forts, he's an interesting writer. He has written some real fancy prose in Architectural Forum and other publications on places that he loves in Europe.

So,—we're acquiring roots in this community. More accurately, we're studying and cultivating the roots that already exist.

This will improve the character and appearance of today's Pittsburgh. It is doing so now.

We're getting institutions like the Harp and Crown, a refreshment room in the Penn-Sheraton Hotel, which harks back to pioneer days in its decor—like the Lillian Russell Room at the Playhouse, memorializing one of Pittsburgh's most prominent citizens of a later date. We have gas lights on Lower Oliver Avenue—and what city is more entitled to them? The State is putting up small "city-type" historical markers on our busiest streets, to tell what went on there in earlier times.

All that may be called "froth" by the ultra-practical mind—but such a mind sometimes forgets that a city is composed of people, and its reputation is made by people, and people are often more influenced by small and simple things than by large and important ones.

The fact that Lillian Russell once lived in Pittsburgh will make a more favorable impression on the average person than figures on the district's carloadings or output of electrical energy.
In the past we have paid far too little attention to the Lillian Russells, the Stephen Fosters, the Victor Herberts, the Mary Roberts Rineharts, the Andrew Carnegies and the many other world-famous figures who have lived here. Most of us have taken little notice of a colorful and vital past that has included such events as the breaking of the French hold on the interior of America, the first victory of white troops over Indians in a pitched battle, the Whisky Rebellion, the first all-movie theater and the first radio station.

I think we're remedying that now. While doing so, we'll all be more proud of our city. Consciously or not, we all realize that the past is prologue to the present.

So, being more proud of the community, we'll work to make it an even better place. People don't serve a place they don't care for.

That, again, is the good of history.