DAVID Demarest and Eugene Levy present us with an interesting challenge in their article, “Touring the Coke Region,” in this issue of Pittsburgh History. During their trips to the former coke sites in Western Pennsylvania, the authors viewed and participated in an aspect of the coke-making process. Two people who had worked in the industry ran the program, which included the hot oven, the raw materials, and experienced workers with life involvement in the industry — all of which seem to convey a real sense of industrial work. Demarest and Levy pose the question of whether a “modern coal and coke museum will/can recreate the actual coke yard,” and question whether any historical exhibit can present the past as well as “the one-woman, one-man show, the on-site living theater we had just been a part of.”

The effectiveness and accuracy of museum presentations has occupied our field for many years, especially in its relationship to the “living history movement” — a teaching approach using costumed interpreters to enact historical activities in restored or recreated settings. The technique has been gaining acceptance for several decades now, with Colonial Williamsburg, Old Sturbridge Village, Plimouth Plantation, and Mystic Seaport among the pre-eminent museums which rely on this method of presenting history in a lively way. These mega-museums have inspired countless other living history villages, farms and historic house museums in locales across the nation.

Historians Warren Leon and Margaret Piatt (in the book Demarest and Levy cite in their article) have noted that the majority of living history museums have focused their interpretation on a simpler agrarian past, as opposed to the industrial period. There could be many reasons for this, having to do with the history of museums themselves and their sponsorship by industrialists, patriotic societies and antiquarians, who sought to stress certain values and encourage national pride.

A main subject in living history interpretations has been traditional craft work. Leon and Piatt note that “at a time when modern technology had made production processes incomprehensible and invisible to most Americans there was something comforting and appealing in seeing a broom, chair, blanket, or andirons created by the skilled hands of the patient craftsperson. To many visitors, such demonstrations symbolized what was lost in the transition to the modern urban-industrial world and infused living history museums with a nostalgic atmosphere.”

To be sure, the craft work of a generally agrarian society forms a valuable and interesting element in our region’s history. But for those of us museum professionals intent on presenting a more complete picture of local history, it is a difficult feat to explain how coal is mined, coke is manufactured and steel is produced. These processes, unlike a broom, a chair or a blanket, involve hundreds, if not thousands, of people in a complex rendering of raw materials at various locations. Explaining the operation of a cokering shop is far different than successfully interpreting the industrial history of the last 100 years.

Let’s consider, however, what was lacking in the authors’ experience which would, in fact, make the coke-making process more real for visitors. To do that, I go back to their description of the coke yard at Allegheny, Pa., in the early 1980s, when they viewed “a half-dozen beehive ovens at one or another stage of the coking process; the smell of acrid smoke in the air; a coal-laden truck being weighed on the scales; piles of coal ready for loading into the ovens; workers leveling the coal inside the beehive...; railroad cars being filled with coke from the ovens and moving out.” The busload of people visiting the site years later for the demonstration, after actual coke production had stopped, missed most of the industrial context the authors describe. A good museum would provide visitors, to some degree, with what the demonstration lacked: a sense of the coke yard environment — of the workforce including its management, the transportation linkages with other parts of the process, and the range of products produced and how other industries used them. What the demonstration did superbly was convey the essence of the process, which is what I’ve witnessed a number of times in good history museums. It is an absolute necessity to convey an understanding of the basic process, whether you are dealing with textiles, iron or glass.

These concerns are an important underpinning for our institution’s recent activities. In 1986 the Historical Society issued its Preliminary Plan for the Pittsburgh Regional History Center. This plan resulted from more than a year of work by Society staff, museum consultants and the Committee for Pittsburgh Archaeology and History. We identified the needs of local history in this region and set out a plan to create a central museum and research center, to be operated by the Society, and a network of historic
sites which would evolve over time. This network would tell certain chapters of area history *in situ* for the very reasons that professors Demarest and Levy found a visit to Aliquippa so satisfying.

In 1988 the Society was commissioned by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission to evaluate the museum potential of four local steel mill sites. In recommending the Homestead Works/Carrie Furnaces site, the Society urged the saving of buildings at Homestead which housed important aspects of steel-making, as well as the monolithic Carrie Furnaces across the Monongahela River. Great strides have been made by the consortium of interests known as the Steel Industry Heritage Task Force to retain elements which would make an outstanding steel museum, in its original environment.

The complexity, scale and interconnections of industrial society make interpreting it a fairly awe-some task, and as the Society builds the Pittsburgh Regional History Center and takes part in Task Force projects, the task is one we have to face head on. The obstacles are many, but how exciting it is to have the chance to help people better understand our region’s post-agrarian past, when a network of industrialists and entrepreneurs, immigrants and laborers, and community builders and leaders made an international impact. Stay with us as we present some exciting “living history.”

“Living history” techniques have proved highly successful for interpreting the agrarian-age past — Colonial Williamsburg’s wheelwright shop is among its most popular attractions. But adapting the approach to explain far more complicated industrial processes places a heavy burden on museums intent on providing a more complete picture of American history. The Historical Society has been among those organizations working to locate an industrial history museum at U.S. Steel’s former iron furnaces, above, the Carrie Furnaces in Rankin, Pa.