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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: The Living History Anthology, Perspectives from ALHFAM by Martha B. Katz-Hyman et al. (eds)

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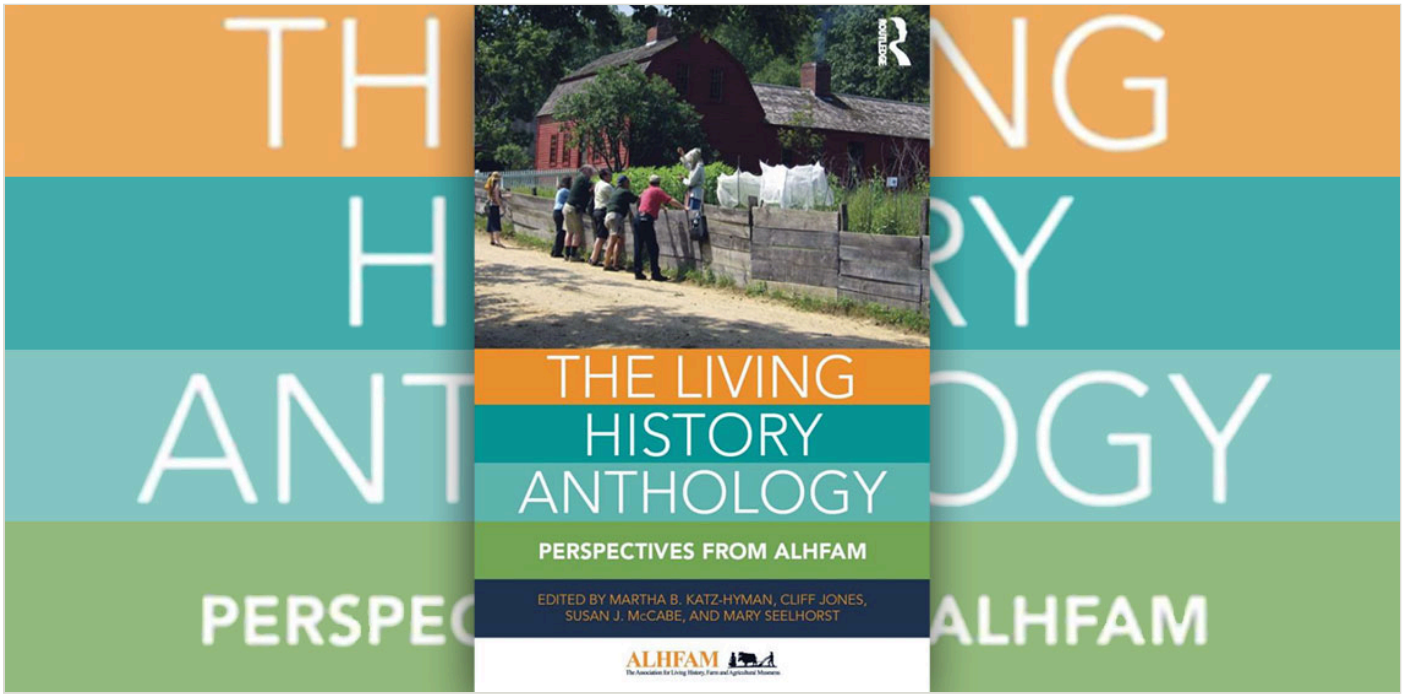

Many open-air museums in the United States are members of the Association of Living History, Farm and Agricultural Museums (ALHFAM). Only a small portion of the ALHFAM members are agricultural museums, however living history in a museum context is what unites the members.

Where Living History and Open-Air Museums meet

> Compared to other museums where an artifact pinpoints to a specific time and place, in living history museums we see the processes behind these, how they were made and used, and what role these artifacts played in people's lives. In the end, our museums are about people and actions, and these museums help us preserve the understanding of these.

In 2019, ALHFAM published *The Living History Anthology*, consisting of 26 practical essays on living history in open-air museums. The articles originate from ALHFAM members, some of which date to the 1970s, whilst others are far more recent. Published in ALHFAM circles before, they now receive a much wider audience. The book touches on both living history practice and living history museum work and therefore does not cover either of these subjects fully. The anthology is divided into eight parts, as described below, with an Introduction (Part 1) describing how to bring history to life followed by six other parts described below and a final Part 8, listing further reading materials.

Defining living history, or, how living history came to be

A good example of how hands-on the authors of this anthology present their knowledge is the listing of advantages and disadvantages of living history (Boardman, 16); a similar listing pops up elsewhere in the book (Corson, 68-70), showing different perspectives within ALHFAM. Briscoe gives a clear description of nine influences on the living history movement and the importance of living historical farms to contemporary society. Even though this article was written in the 1970s her points are still very relevant today.

As yet, there is no clear definition of such places but living history museums in the United States are different from what in Europe may be called archaeological open-air museums: they are not necessarily about the archaeological past, but about history. Also, in such museums you may find more historical houses and other original buildings than in archaeological open-air museums. There is a lot of overlap with historic (Skansen type) open-air museums because living history museums are often about the recent 300 years, whereas archaeological open-air museums cover the full period from the early Stone Age to present. However, a lot of methods and challenges are similar.

Planning & managing, or, the business end of the bull

This part of the book is maybe best suited for museum staff but should be understood by living history practitioners as well. Articles in this chapter discuss visitor comfort, safety and access, how to get the best living history person for the job and creating a successful museum volunteer program in ten lessons. The articles cover very specific parts of planning and managing, however, some aspects are not elaborated upon. For example, the book does not delve into the administrative and financial aspects of managing these museum, neither the Public Relations and communication facets.

Again, authors take a very practical approach, like: “we typically have only an hour or two to interact with the visitor” (Rickey & Spains, 34) but here, one should acknowledge that texts are unfortunately not updated to the current status quo.

Teaching & learning, or, interpretation is a many-splendored thing

Together with the Part VI (researching & collecting), this section covers half of the contents of this anthology. Kelleher discusses authenticity, using anecdotes from Old Sturbridge Village, whilst Dierking debates on the use of first versus third person. Unfortunately, the latter discussion is too short to get the full picture if you are unfamiliar with the subject. Yellis’ article on the eleven commandments of public programs is directed towards museum staff and not so much for the living history practitioners, explaining messages like ‘keep thy program simple’ and ‘thou shalt not schedule unnecessary meetings’. And what are the issues when you do not work with your own staff, but with non-staff interpreters? Shaw explains that coaching for example is vital.

Living collections, or, putting the life in living history

This part is about historic living plants and livestock in agricultural museums. Archaeological open-air museums in Europe could learn a lot from ALHFAMs approach by simply referring to the three papers written in this Part V. Why not setting up an historic breeds and seeds program? We could take an example on their policies for living collections (Baker) or how to begin a livestock program in your museum (Engler). These articles are full of good ideas, even though they are too limited to use as single source.

Researching & collecting, or, the right stuff

In the reality of running a living history site, difficult issues cannot be avoided. Leone questions the value of history and whose history is more important. A more down to earth article is about how to obtain materials for reproductions which are both fitting and not too expensive (Katz-Hyman & Woodcock). Accurate costuming (Fellows & Campbell-Shoaf) too, is a good example of a very useful article for many smaller museums.

Rewards & challenges, or, growing and evolving

In 1974, Welsch spoke about the living history museums as a process repository, housebuilding, agriculture, and foodways, to name just a few. Compared to other museums where an artifact pinpoints to a specific time and place, in living history museums we see the processes behind these, how they were made and used, and what role these artifacts played in people’s lives. In the end, our museums are about people and actions, and these museums help us preserve the understanding of these. Welsch’ words are still relevant today.

Describing the use of living history museum, the relevance to our society is not a struggle for survival. Our museums, including archaeological open-air museums, have some unique selling points, some strengths we can lean on. We should step back from defending the museums and sell ourselves better, all around the world.

The book is a large pocket format which reads well. Unfortunately, pictures are grouped together per chapter and the number of images is rather limited. A subject like this would benefit from detailed colour images between the text, to highlight certain aspects. The texts are well written and well edited, albeit in some cases too outdated; where the contents are valid and not contradicted, much happened since. None of the authors speak from an ivory tower, on the contrary, the book is full of practical advice without using too much jargon. The articles, many presented as manuscripts of lectures, are long enough to give readers a taste; there is a wealth of knowledge and experience available beyond this book, both in ALHFAM and worldwide.

This anthology offers a great insight and a treasure of very practical advice on how to do living history in a museum. Practitioners, both in museums and freelancers will find this book very useful.

Book information:

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