Among the most deeply held beliefs of western civilization is the belief in the worth of the individual. Whereas some of the world’s most widely held philosophical and religious views regard life as cyclical, with reincarnation following death as surely as death follows birth and life, thus collective identity being far more significant than individuality, the dominant Judeo-Christian-Islamic beliefs of the west regard each individual life as distinct and unique. The more secular thought of recent centuries has advanced the case for individuality through natural science, free will and existential philosophy, and political doctrines of democracy, civil rights and liberties. From William Shakespeare’s declaration that “There is a history in all men’s lives,” to Thomas Jefferson’s ringing assertion that all men are created equal and endowed with life and liberty, the individuality of human experience has been as the heart of western thought.

Individuality in turn is rooted in time and place. Each life gains its distinctiveness by virtue of the unique circumstances of when and where it occurs. That is to say the notion of individuality rests on the firm foundation of a historical view of the world. Time is linear, not cyclical. Evolving conditions over time inevitably make the experience of one generation different from any previous or succeeding generation. The combination of conditions in one location will differ from those in any other location. Some distinctions of time and place may be enormous, others may be slight and subtle. In any case they define individuality. The experience of growing up in Mentor is not interchangeable with the experience of growing up in Manhattan, be that Manhattan in Kansas or in New York. Nor is the experience of growing up in the 1880s interchangeable with growing up in the 1980s. Thus it is an individual’s history which defines his or her distinctive identity.

This leads to two related questions: First, why does our society not taken its past more seriously. Second why do we not pay more attention to locale when we consider the past?

Evidence that our society does not take its past seriously overwhelms us. Nostalgic glorification substitutes for serious reflection. Think of how much of the effort to commemorate the bicentennial of the American
Declaration of Independence in 1976 was devoted to parades, fireworks, and painting fire hydrants as colonial soldiers as opposed to serious efforts to understand which Americans in 1776 wanted independence from Britain and why their ideas of human freedom did not extend to blacks, women, or poor people? Or consider how, two years ago, there was so much talk of the genius of the Founding Fathers and so little mention of their distrust of democracy.

Whenever convenient, the past is ignored as a guide to current decision making. The President of the United States seeks immediate political advantage by calling for a constitutional amendment to ban flag burning, a proposal resting squarely on the confident assumption that Americans do not remember or care about the history of efforts to protect and enlarge freedom of speech. This president's predecessor could argue for a sharp reduction of federal government responsibility for domestic social welfare confident that Americans would not remember or be concerned about the history of the Great Depression. Is it any wonder that these anti-historical presidential acts were widely popular? Not if one considers our society's indifference to history.

The deplorable state of historical knowledge in our society has been the subject of several recent reports. Chester Finn and Diane Ravitch's survey of 17 year olds reports that 2/3s of a national sample didn't know which half-century the Civil War occurred in, and 3/4s did not know the meaning of the term "Reconstruction." NEH chair Lynn Cheney's report: on Humanities in America points out that while the number of collegiate B.A.s increased 88% from 1966 to 1986, the number of history majors fell by 43%. More than four out of five U.S. colleges and universities allow students to graduate without taking a course in American history. Therefore, it appears that whatever historical information or mis-information Americans do acquire does not come from formal education.

Professor Michael Frisch in the March 1989 Journal of American History shows that students do acquire a set of cultural symbols of American history, but what they learn seems to be picked up independent of schooling and uninfluenced by it. They learn myths about George Washington and Betsy Ross before they get to the classroom, and ignore teaching that goes on within it. Is it because, as some have suggested, they consider history as taught distant from and irrelevant to their lives?

A lighter, but nevertheless disquieting insight into grassroots views of history was captured by Jeff MacNelly, the Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist, in his comic strip Shoe about a community of birds. One of Shoe's young birds asks another, "What's the name of that game where you try to answer a bunch of trivia questions for points?" The other responds, "Oh yeah... We play that in school. We call it American history."
Is there a connection between our society's indifference to history as commonly conceived and what I have argued about individuality being at the core of our culture? Such a connection clearly exists, I contend. Correctly or incorrectly, in the eyes of the general public too much of what is currently being presented as history has no connection to the lives of ordinary people. To be taken seriously, history needs to demonstrate its connection to individual human experience. To be judged a useful means of coming to terms with current problems, history must demonstrate an involvement with the everyday lives of ordinary people. A history whose sole preoccupation is with the national and international impact of "Great White Men" seems irrelevant to those who are neither great, white, or male, in other words, to most of us. When they fail to take seriously the history of the nearby world, purveyors of history miss the opportunity to demonstrate to masses of people the personal connections that can be made to that close-at-hand past, not to mention the opportunity to show how the nearby past connects with a larger national and international past. Only by paying more attention to those intimate connections when we consider the past is our society likely to appreciate the value, indeed the vital importance, of taking history seriously.

In his novel *The Home Place*, Novelist Wright Morris reflected on the idea of making connections with the past.

There's a story in the family, on my mother's side, that my Grandmother Osborn started west with her man, her Bible, and her cane-seated rocking chair. As things got bad she had to give up both her man and the Bible, and to keep from freezing to death she had to burn the chair. But first she unraveled the cane-bottom seat. She wrapped it around her waist, and when she got to where she was going she unwrapped it, put it in a new chair. Her kids grew up with their bottoms on it. That cane seat was the connection with all of the things, for one reason or another, she had to leave behind.

For a great many people making the connection to the past of one's nearby world is like sitting in that cane-bottomed chair. Historians ought to take that desire for connections seriously, both in its own right and, if they are so inclined, because it represents the first step in connecting to a wider world. English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead pointed out: "We think in generalities, but we live in details. To make the past live, we must perceive it in detail in addition to thinking of it in generalities."

The English historian H. P. R. Finberg neatly summed up the possibilities inherit in the study of local history when he wrote:
We may picture the family, the local community, the national state, and the supra-national society as a series of concentric circles. Each requires to be studied with constant reference to the one outside it; but the inner rings are not the less perfect circles for being wholly surrounded and enclosed by the outer.

Finberg’s notion should fortify all who believe that it is important to understand the history of the nearby world, for he is saying is that we can better understand the wider world, we can make a better connection to it, through a study of history which begins at home.

It is comparatively easy to make an argument for doing nearby history, and considerably more difficult actually to do a good job of uncovering and understanding that close-at-hand past. One reason for this became obvious to my partner Mike Marty and I when we began to look seriously at the state of family and community history over a decade ago. We were struck immediately by the fact that there were two groups of people with something to offer to this field, but they weren’t communicating with each other. Local historians with a strong sense of place and scholars who had recently developed a new agenda of exciting questions and methods for looking at the history of families, communities, and grassroots society appeared to be like boys and girls standing uncomfortably on opposite sides of the gymnasium at the junior high school dance. Whether from unfamiliarity, anxiety, fear of rejection, or simply not being comfortable with the other’s dance steps, they were not getting together. So long as that continued, there was no way for them to enjoy the pleasure of each other’s company.

Mike Marty and I believed that there was more uniting historians than dividing them, though it might not appear so in light of long-standing professional-amateur, academic-non-scholarly, national-local divisions. We wanted to do what we could to help bring together local enthusiasm and professional method. We felt that it was important to unite the deep insights on a place by the former with the broad insights of pattern and process by the latter. We thought it essential to that historians of the particular and historians of the universal deal with each other.

Such a historical collaboration seemed feasible to us because we were convinced that the methods of historical inquiry, as varied as they might be, were fundamentally straight-forward, logical, and within the grasp of most reasonably intelligent persons. If academic and amateur historians got
together, shared information about methods and sources of information, it should be possible for each group to gain from the other.

On a technical level what was needed was to raise questions and suggest possible lines of inquiry to people who might not have had close contact with new developments in historical research beyond their locale. Further, methods of using historical resources needed to be clearly explained so that would-be historians would be encouraged to set their sights high. Students, out-of-school people of diverse backgrounds, and even academics needed to become aware that they could do worthwhile local history.

Our manifesto was simple:

Communities without an understanding of their past resemble people suffering from amnesia, unable to remember from where they came, how they responded to needs or challenges, from whence they drew affection and support, or opposition, and where they intended to go. History, the contemplation and evaluation of the past, serves society much as memory serves the individual in identifying circumstances, providing a guide to appropriate behavior, and offering a standard of comparison across time and situation. In this sense, history is far more than a remembrance of things past, though it certainly includes that. History represents a means of coming to terms with the past, of developing an awareness of previous influences, current conditions, and future possibilities. Just as memory helps the individual avoid repeating the same discoveries, behaviors, and mistakes, historical knowledge helps a community avoid starting at the beginning each time it addresses an issue.

History, in addition to being useful, is accessible. Any literate person can master and pursue most historical research techniques as well as understand and critically evaluate historical explanations. Furthermore, history is interesting. Whether reading others people’s mail, understanding how ordinary people lived their everyday lives at other times and in other places, or assessing how institutions rose or decayed, the individual studying history constantly finds exciting opportunities to learn about the human condition. All of these values of history hold as true for the nearby world as for the larger sphere.

In *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* where we worked out our ideas, and in a series of more specialized books which we
subsequently edited (in whose introductions this statement appears) on Local Schools, Houses and Homes, and Public Places, together with forthcoming volumes on Places of Worship and Local Businesses (all Nashville: American Association for State and Local History), we sought to focus attention on specific questions to be explored and particular materials and methods which could be used to pursue those questions. Likewise, this symposium gives some talented and experienced investigators of this community’s past, the history of the Western Reserve, the chance to demonstrate their approaches and results. These can in turn be models for other nearby history initiatives.

Doing good nearby history is far from easy. D. S. Carne-Ross observed:

To try now to achieve a real sense of the past is like looking out of a brilliantly lit room at dusk. There seems to be something out there in the garden, the uncertain forms of trees stirring in the breeze, the hint of a path, perhaps the glimmer of water. Or is there merely a picture painted on the window...? Is there nothing out there at all, and is the lit room the only reality?

I believe that there is a garden beyond that lighted room, and I am sure that you do too. That is why I am optimistic about the prospects for history in the Western Reserve.