

Note from the Editor

The New History of the Progressive Era stressed contemporary relevance and the need to address current circumstances as these unfolded. This issue's forum on Robert M. La Follette and his Wisconsin illustrates the hazards of relevant history on an academic publishing timetable. The forum began as a conference session proposed in the weeks after the 2008 election. As one might recall, the United States was then on the verge of a new Progressive Era. What about the old one was applicable? Depending on how one measures it, the original Progressive Era lasted between fifteen and twenty-five years. As this is written in March 2011, twenty-first-century conservatives had won, at least provisionally, a dramatic confrontation with a variety of legacies of progressivism in the former bastion of La Follettes. The progressives' Wisconsin Idea became a national model in the first decade of the twentieth century. Governor Scott Walker's supporters intend that this conservative Wisconsin Idea will spread to other states during the 2010s. Fortunately for most historians, the past is a slower-moving target than the present.

Brent Ruswick's article on client interactions with the Indianapolis Charity Organization Society has public policy implications, though at a speed probably better suited to how historians think, work, and write. Much of what Ruswick finds confirms familiar interpretations of the private social work mechanisms of Gilded Age cities. Charity Organization Society investigators certainly did engage with clients in an uncomprehending, unimaginative, and condescending way that invited in return manipulative and deceptive behavior on the part of applicants, which the system was supposedly designed to avoid. Ruswick's article stands out for its use of detailed local records to document in a living way patterns that social welfare historians have identified on an aggregate level, often using professional publications and similar printed primary sources. Historians need to engage in broad analysis, but Ruswick's stories make real some truisms that can slip away as one steps back from the particular to the general. The poor are often troubled people, their situations are difficult, and badly run social welfare programs can make things harder. Then again, this might be easier for present-day observers to discern about the poor in 1880s Indianapolis than in the present. Perhaps one has as much difficulty perceiving the struggles of the present as one has grasping the political currents in which one is immersed.

David Monod's extended article on the Polish French performer Anna Held draws on media and psychological theory to examine the history of perception itself. To be sure, we do not really understand how the person standing next to us sees and apprehends what we are looking at right now. How does one then trace the history of perception? Scholars in a variety of disciplines nonetheless affirm contemporary observations a century ago that modern forms of life and communications were making perception more provisional and ambiguous. Modernist art and literature, of course, made this sensibility into their agenda. Monod argues that Anna Held, perhaps only half-deliberately, applied this principle to her performances. Through glances, gestures, lyrics, media imagery, and other blatant or subtle cues, she could attract audiences with eroticism without coming across as obscene. Monod's positing of a trajectory from empiricism to subjectivity will initially strike some readers of this journal as counterintuitive. This is because the familiar model historians use—going back to Morton White in the 1940s—is a revolt against formalism in the name of empiricism. Both William and Henry James, however, might have responded that these are different ways of describing the same set of trends. Both Jameses became identified with the early modernist notion that perception is provisional, dependent on the situation of the observer as much as on the inherent qualities of the thing or person observed.

Held's story, which Monod weaves into his analysis of her performance, was tragically real. Even though she somehow managed to refute the allegation that she was only a sex symbol, her allure nonetheless hinged upon youth. As she aged, her husband and promoter, Florenz Ziegfeld, lost interest. Then so did her audiences. Still in her forties when she died in 1918, she had already become a caricature and bystander at her own performances. As Monod recounts, her loss of ability to manipulate her allure was a heavy burden upon her. In "An Electric Sign Goes Dark" (1920), Carl Sandburg resorted one of the oldest forms of expression, a poem, to convey the loneliness of the story: ". . . stock ranchers in the middle west, mayors of southern cities/Say to their pals and wives now: I see by the papers Anna Held is dead."

Alan Lessoff

P.S. A number of members wrote in response to the January 2011 issue that, although they appreciated the aesthetics of the new design, they had trouble reading it comfortably. On account of production schedules, it took until this issue, but we've implemented a number of changes that should offset such concerns. Please let us know what you think.