

## Natural History and the Mind of Theodore Roosevelt

Excerpts from an Address by Gary T. Johnson<sup>1</sup>  
to the Theodore Roosevelt Association, Chicago Chapter,  
March 3, 2011

I welcome you to the Chicago History Museum and hope that you have enjoyed seeing the Theodore Roosevelt artifacts that our Chief Historian Russell Lewis has shared with us.

On grounds of endless fascination alone, Roosevelt deserves his place on Mount Rushmore along with Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln. You and I share this fascination, but I believe there is an underlying irony that I would like us to consider today.

The irony is this. Roosevelt was a founder of the Progressive Movement, one of whose hallmarks was an increased reliance on specialization and professionalization. (Historian Robert Wiebe tells this story in his important work, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*.) Today, when an amateur makes a discovery – such as occasionally happens in astronomy – that’s news. Since the Progressive Era, the emphasis has been on credentialed, single-subject experts.

Nevertheless, the founder of the Progressive Movement was himself the epitome of the accomplished amateur in both science and history. Natural history was his first love. His father had helped to found the American Museum of Natural History, and Teddy, as a boy, gathered his curios into what he called “The Roosevelt Museum of Natural History.” He remained a committed naturalist who donated material to museums throughout his lifetime. He also was one of the leading ornithologists of his day.

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Roosevelt was the kind of amateur who turned his attention to one subject after another, which would be a baffling oddity in today's world. Consider this: His naval history of the War of 1812 was widely read for decades as a textbook of naval tactics. He also wrote a four-volume history of the "winning" of his beloved West. He always found ways to translate his interests into action. Through his Boone and Crockett Club, Roosevelt installed a frontier log cabin, complete with Davy Crockett artifacts, at Chicago's World Columbian Exposition of 1893 because he believed that the classical pavilions of that grand exposition did not represent the authentic America.

It might surprise you that Roosevelt was not alone in his day as a polymath. Consider Francis Parkman, who was known best for his historical works, such as *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life*. He also was a Professor of Horticulture at Harvard and the first director of that university's Arnold Arboretum. Parkman ranged all over the continent pursuing these passions. He was Roosevelt's hero.

What happened between Roosevelt and Parkman's times and our own? What I believe is that the Progressive Era dropped a scrim. We are on one side, and Roosevelt is on the other. It is hard for us to perceive that the naturalist and the soldier, the birder and the President, the cowboy and the historian, are one.

How can we begin to understand such a man? Let me give you an assignment: visit a natural history museum, such as Chicago's great Field Museum of Natural History. As you walk from gallery to gallery, it will be like wandering through the chambers of Roosevelt's mind. Don't forget all those birds and insects that are in storage behind the scenes. Sign up for the Field's expeditions; Roosevelt, himself, went on many expeditions.

Those galleries, those chambers of Roosevelt's mind, are based on of the most expansive project of human knowledge ever devised for a single institution. *Naturalis historia* included anything to do with nature, such as biology and zoology, ornithology and entomology. It also came to include the experience of

human communities, past and present, here and everywhere. Animal, vegetable and mineral, anything that can be dug up or discovered, on the earth or in space – that’s natural history.

But even a visit to a natural history museum will not encompass Roosevelt’s life. He also was a military hero, a political leader, and a Nobel Peace Prize-winning statesman. Pay a visit to an American history museum, too, and your awe for Roosevelt’s mind and your admiration for his life will continue to grow.

As you make these museum explorations, museums as institutions may begin to puzzle you, for the same reasons that Roosevelt himself puzzles you. James Smithsonian’s original mission for the Smithsonian Institution was: “The increase and diffusion of knowledge.” In our age of branding (which, after all, is another version of specialization), we struggle to know what kind of an animal a large multi-subject museum really is.<sup>2</sup>

Museums leaders struggle too. At the Chicago History Museum, we have tremendous American history resources, but in 2006, we chose Chicago as our primary mission. Chicago is becoming our brand, and – so far, so good – the plan seems to be working.

You also might ask, “But what about the changes wrought by cyberspace and social networking? Do the twin Progressive Era principles of specialization and professionalization still reign supreme at museums?”

Yes and no.

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<sup>2</sup> Any museum director today, alas, would need to put it this way: “The increase, diffusion *and monetization* of knowledge.” Museums all have to find new ways to make ends meet in an era when public support covers a declining percentage of our costs. I, for one, believe that unlocking the intellectual property value of the great collecting museums, for example by selling digitized images from photo collections, is a promising source of revenue.

Having a clear identity becomes an even more urgent need in the cacophony of the on-line world. In that sense, the specialization mandated by the Progressive Era is here to stay, but we need to accept that we share control of our brand. Consider this example. The Chicago History Museum has uploaded approximately 30 films to YouTube, but members of the public have uploaded more than 300 films mentioning the Chicago History Museum. Based on this sample of one, I call this the “ten-to-one rule” for the branding of nonprofits in cyberspace: ***Your brand is alive if the public magnifies your own branding efforts ten-to-one.*** But always remember that public interest in your museum begins with your own clear sense of your own identity. Branding is identity and branding is mission focus. Fuzz it all up, and a complicated museum passes out of view and the unforgiving cyber world moves on to other sources of content.

But what about that other pillar of the Progressive Era – professionalization? Much to the discomfort of many, cyberspace is re-empowering the amateur. We see this most clearly in journalism, where some bloggers manage to dance circles around some professional reporters.

I recently discovered that without any effort on our part, one of the Chicago History Museum’s key artifacts, the Pioneer Locomotive, now has its own Wikipedia page. The page was created, apparently, by railroad enthusiasts using wikis to enter and update information. Our museum can jump in and make corrections, but that has not been necessary. The Wikipedia page ultimately traces back to our locomotive, but these amateurs did the work. This page is good for us, good for them, and terrific for the diffusion of knowledge.

What’s going on here? Two things: ***cognitive surplus*** and ***passion groups***.

Professor Clay Shirky has coined the term “cognitive surplus” to describe how the Internet and social media are beginning to tap some trillion potential hours of waking time that could be deployed to on-line and social networking activities. Train aficionados that coalesce around a certain locomotive are a “passion group.” History-lovers that share an interest in a certain remarkable

American president are another. I think the president in question would smile at these developments, because they represent a return to his own way of operating as an enthusiastic amateur – but now more powerful tools are available.

The reengagement of amateurs is a true opportunity for museums. Thanks to our irreplaceable collections and our professional staff we will remain essential leaders in the increase and diffusion of knowledge, but, if we play our cards right, we will be joined by many others who share our passion.

The museum's new role will be that of the ***trusted guide***, no longer the sole authority. We no longer will speak of the public as our audience – that's too patronizing – but as travelers along with us on a journey.

And if one of the school children who visits our museum, or someone who explores our collection online, turns out to be another Teddy Roosevelt – wouldn't that be bully?

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Note: You can learn more about the concept of cognitive surplus in Clay Shirky's book, ***Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age*** (available in various print and electronic formats). GTJ