

The Interpretation of Prison History

By Laura Phillippi, Lansing Historical Museum Site Supervisor

Prison history can bring out many emotions for people from all walks of life. Some people have relatives who were victims of crime. The inmate's family often suffers because of the crime his or her relative committed. The issue of capital punishment raises passionate arguments from individuals and groups who are for or against it.

One may ask, "Why should the Kansas Regional Prisons Museum be built?" Museums are the guardians of history. Museums exist to educate the public so they may better understand the world around them. The artifacts aid in bringing history to life. To read about a subject often does not do the subject justice. To be able to experience an object puts the subject in context for the viewer.

The presentation of history in a museum to the public is not something historians take lightly. Museum staffs spend months if not years researching the selection of text, images, and artifacts of the exhibits. The same cannot be said for the mass media. It is not ethical for us to glorify the crimes committed by inmates. When the Lansing Historical Museum interprets prison history, we take great pains to make sure we do not glorify the inmates. When we created the documentary *The Kansas State Penitentiary: An Institution and a Neighbor*, we sought advice from the Lansing Correctional Facility administration. We did not show the faces of inmates who did not have media clearance. We did not focus on individual inmates. We discussed the prison and its programs as a whole.

We have respect for the victims of crimes and the family members of inmates. We also have an obligation to educate the public about the history of the correctional facilities in Leavenworth County. With so many misinterpretations of the penal systems in the media, we believe there is a need for the Kansas Regional Prisons Museum to accurately interpret the history in order to educate the public.

We are dedicated to interpreting this history with care and concern for the public. No matter how hard we try, there will always be people who object to some of the content of our history. Perhaps the history brings up painful memories or they just do not agree with it for whatever reason they may have. If this is the case, these people should not visit the Museum. That is the individual's choice.

There are many instances in American history that are painful for people. The examples are numerous including wars, slavery, the Holocaust, and killings. If we ignore or gloss over these painful stories how does that, make us a stronger person and a stronger country? We would not know the suffering our ancestors went through so their descendents would have a better life than they had. We would not appreciate what we have today if we did not know what sacrifices they made.

While the exhibits for the future Kansas Regional Prisons Museum have not been designed, the Lansing Historical Museum has been collecting information on numerous aspects of prison history. We are doing this so when we have researchers come in they have access to the information they need to make informed decisions about the history they are studying. We are doing this so we will be able to create balanced and educational exhibits for the public to learn from.

Laura Phillippi has a Bachelor of Science in History and a minor in Ethnic and Gender Studies from Emporia State University and a Master of Arts in History from Fort Hays State University. Since 2006, she has served as the Lansing Historical Museum Site Supervisor and is the author of the book *Lansing*.