

A Note from  
CHS President Gary T. Johnson

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**October 7 , 2005**  
***The Meaning of History***

History, for me, is a cause. I have a personal background in [civil rights](#), so when I use that word, it is full of meaning for me and evokes emotions.

Why do I believe that history is a cause? Three reasons: with history, we are all in it together, it has the power to change lives, and there is a call to action.

**We are all in it together.** History is not confined to the splendid halls of universities and the temples we build for our national archives. When you ask a family member to recall a memory from childhood, that's history. When you help a community group to tell the story of your people, that's history. When you volunteer for your local museum, that's history. When you write a term paper, that's history. When you lead a field trip to the Chicago Historical Society, that's history. In a world of snap judgments, those of us who wonder how we got here and where we are going have a tie that binds us together. We all can help each other out. We are all in it together for the cause of history.

**History has the power to change lives.** The need to know where you came from is a fundamental human need. Learning where you came from gives you an identity. The need to tell your story is one of the most basic human needs. Knowing that you will be heard gives you a voice. The need to know where you are going is a defining characteristic of human consciousness. Deciding where you are bound gives you a mission in life. These are the three transforming tasks of history that help to give you an identity, a voice, and a mission.



**Family watches a Mexican Independence Day Parade, 1987**

Photograph by and gift of Antonio Perez  
ICHI-36600

Finally, with history there is a **call to action**. If you think that history is a spectator sport, you've got it wrong! Without meticulous care in preservation, an artifact will deteriorate. Without setting a document aside, it will be lost or destroyed. Without recording a story, it will be lost forever. Without dedication from staff, help from volunteers, and financial support

from generous donors, a history museum will die. There is no way to recover from the loss of evidence and stories, if we fail to do our part in our own time and place.

The [Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary](#) defines a cause as "a principle or movement militantly defended or supported." At the Chicago Historical Society, we are working for the cause of history and we thank you for being allies in this effort.



Gary T. Johnson  
CHS President

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