

Historians, like other writers, do cultural work. They ground a culture, a society, a nation, a civilization, in the past with a history, a story of who we are. Which depends of course on who we have been. I was reminded of this recently when I read an essay by Wallace Stegner. He represented this work, this task of linking the present to the past, like this: "In the old days, in blizzardy weather, we used to tie a string of lariats from house to barn so as to make it from shelter to responsibility and back again. With personal, family, and cultural chores to do, I think we had better rig up such a line between past and present."

It is quite a task Stegner sets out for us. For historians have responsibilities--perhaps even grave ones--for we must not just tell stories but tell *true* stories and sometimes true stories do not just hang about waiting to be plucked like a ripe plum. They must be unearthed, coaxed from hidden and sometimes painful places.

This is why, in part, Alvin Josephy's work resonated so deeply, I think. With thorough research and sparkling prose, Josephy found Native voices and restored and highlighted them, made them available at a time when this nation reckoned--at least partly--with its many troubled pasts. His books and articles appeared in a way and at a time when an audience was willing to follow the links from the present to the past and see how it bound us all together to the world--the unsettled world of the 1960s.

It was me reading Josephy, in fact, that led me to the Stegner essay when, in his presidential address to the Western History Association, Josephy urged historians to help westerners all develop what Stegner called "a sense of a personal and *possessed* past." Or as Josephy put it, "The historian can, I think, join with the poet and the novelist in inspiring among the westerners of today and tomorrow a feeling for this wondrous region of the United States and for their place within it so strong as to border on the sacred." I say, "Amen."

Today, communities can easily fall into the nostalgia trap, an ahistorical understanding that guides us poorly in navigating our world. We historians, we storytellers all of us, then have a responsibility to our western communities to tell our true stories. All of them, especially the hidden ones. So that's why we're here today, at Summer Fishtrap with the theme "Hidden from History: Stories We Haven't Heard, Stories We Haven't Told" on a panel about "How Historians Unearth Hidden Stories."