



Jody Blankenship: Bringing History to Life

By Tom Schuman

Jody Blankenship has a Midwest background and a love for history. The 190-year-old Indiana Historical Society (IHS) is among the most highly regarded institutions in its field. The two came together in early 2019 when Blankenship succeeded John A. Herbst as president and CEO.

What has Blankenship learned about his new Indiana home and what are his thoughts on the role of history in dealing with present and future challenges? He shares his insights in this discussion, edited for length.

BizVoice®: What attracted you to this field?

Jody Blankenship: “I’ve always had this affinity for history. I got into college and started doing my own research – and fell in love with it. I got really attracted to antebellum history, pre-Civil War history, as we were adding new states, trying to become a new nation.

“I thought I would teach. I come from a family of teachers. I got into the classroom and it just wasn’t for me.” (He was encouraged to go to graduate school and embark on a career in the museum field and worked at historical societies in Ohio, Kentucky and Connecticut before coming back to the Midwest).

How familiar were you with Indiana before accepting this role?

JB: “The IHS is known nationally. It’s hard not to know about it. Being a Midwesterner (from Toledo, Ohio), it was my goal, my aspiration to run one of these Midwestern historical societies. I’d gone off to Connecticut to learn how with the intention of always wanting to coming back to the Midwest. And the IHS was just a perfect situation.

“Knowing John and what he did here, knowing the reputation of

this place nationally, this just seemed like a perfect fit from my perspective; thankfully, the board agreed.”

When you think of Indiana history from a business standpoint, what are some of your takeaways?

JB: “The thing I have been struck with is you don’t see the boom and bust cycles you see in a lot of other states. Here in Indiana, it seems to be pretty stable and lasting. It has to do with that Hoosier character. People are thoughtful. We plan, we execute, then we get ready for the next iteration. People here think big thoughts, but it’s grounded in practical application of how we’re going to get things done.”

What has surprised you, if anything, about Indiana?

JB: “When we were talking to stakeholders for our strategic plan, somebody pointed out one of the issues central Indiana has is people come here kicking and screaming. Then when they get here, they never want to leave. In order to show them this is such a great place, IHS and our peers have a role to play.

“Having worked on the East Coast, worked on the West Coast, this is probably one of the more robust cultural scenes in the country, and we don’t give ourselves enough credit for that.”

What are a few of the hidden gems among those eight million items in the IHS collection?

JB: “This one is a little topical, but we have the largest collection of Madam C.J. Walker materials in the country. Historians always hate to say the first or the largest, because as soon as you say that it changes. But I was corrected by A’Lelia Bundles (Walker’s great-great-granddaughter and biographer; see story on Page 52).

“We have a grant to digitize that. Over 15,000 people have gone to the collection (year to date) and done in-depth research online.

Personally, I love seeing the family Bibles. It's not just the faith element, but that's where they keep their family trees, death records, family history.

"We have a long business history in our state. There are those enduring values that we keep. Our goal here is to identify those values and make sure those stay in the forefront of our thinking. We carry that banner for what is a Hoosier, who are we, what are our values – and make sure we stay true to that."

What are your views on the role and importance of historical societies?

JB: "Reasonable people can disagree on any issue and that's fine. The role for places like the IHS is to help inform people within the factual material we have. We're not a political animal. We want to be on the side of helping people be informed. Every issue we're dealing with has a history and to effectively understand that issue, you've got to know the history of it.

"Mark Twain said, 'History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.' If you give us an issue today, we can probably find a couple of instances in the past in which we have dealt with something very similar. That doesn't mean we will repeat that exact same thing, but what we can learn from it is what questions did we ask, what didn't we consider, what were the unintentional consequence of our decisions. Then, when dealing with contemporary issues, we do so in a thoughtful and informed way."

With the divisiveness and hectic pace of today, is the role of IHS more difficult or do you adjust how you approach it?

JB: "Yes and yes. When you're dealing with eight million items and a long history, a lot of it isn't digital. A lot of it is in handwriting. You have to decipher it. It's difficult to often react as quickly as people might want you to. It takes time to look through that evidence and understand it in a full way. I think we're moving at a pace (in society) right now that is so quick that we don't often appreciate how complex things really are.

"We want our world to be really simple and binary – there is a right and wrong – but that's almost never the case. Understanding that complexity helps us deal with an issue in a way that is more thoughtful and informed.

"In my opinion, we do need a recommitment to history. It seems like so often we look at issues today, and we act like they are brand new. And they're just not. ... I think history has been somewhat marginalized over the years.



Indiana's Storyteller™ since 1830, the Indiana Historical Society (IHS) provides a variety of visitor experiences throughout the year. Kathy Lechuga, IHS book conservator, uses a piece of polyester film to lift clippings off a ledger from a merchandising business (circa 1853-54). Once complete, one will be able to see the original writing underneath the clippings.



One of the ways we want to try and deal with that is take a look at more contemporary issues. Not to tell people what to think about it, but to help inform them as fully as possible. Then they can take it from there."

What makes you most proud of your organization?

JB: "There's nothing better than to be on the floor when school kids come in, to see them connect. I had my 11-year-old niece here for the opening of Madam C.J. Walker. For the next month, I'm getting text messages from her as she is looking up Madam Walker and what she did. I think that's pretty inspirational.

"Another is the commitment by the staff and board. The people who work here, it's not just a job; it's like a calling for them. The same is true of our board and volunteers. Most of our members are members not because they get a discount on admission or

at the museum store, but because they believe what we do is so important.

"The other thing I find heartening is the philanthropy and commitment in the community. In other places, there was always 'somebody else would pay the bill.' Here, our leaders invest in organizations like IHS."

What are some of your favorite places to go in Indiana to experience history?

JB: "My wife and I have made efforts most weekends to go to different parts of the state. New Harmony is an incredible community with a great story. My wife is a historian also and she studies utopian communities, so there is some fondness there.

"The other place is Auburn. My dad is a mechanic, and I grew up in an auto repair shop. Every year we would go to Auburn for the big swap meet and car show. The automobile history in this state is something I can connect to."