

Interview with Dave Blanchette

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Interviewer: Julie Dirksen – ALPL Oral History Program

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Dirksen: I am sitting here with Dave Blanchette. Dave, I’m going to ask you several background questions before we start in to the formal interview process. What is your title?

Blanchette: I am Communications Manager for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

Dirksen: Wow.

Blanchette: I said that all in one breath.

Dirksen: You did. Say that again.

Blanchette: Communications manager for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.



Dirksen: Thank you. Today, which is Monday, November 2, we are meeting at my house. My name is Julie Dirksen, at 2123 South Park. This interview is going to be a part of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library's IHPA legacy in the oral history project.

We're also going to talk, Dave, not only about IHPA, but with you, because of your broad background, we're going to talk about the bicentennial and definitely, of course, the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum project.

First of all, let's talk a little bit about you. David, where do you come from? Where did you grow up, and give me a little bit of background.

Blanchette: I was born in Kankakee, Illinois in 1960 and lived the first twelve years of my life there. Then, my father relocated with his job to Jacksonville, Illinois, and I have lived there ever since. Although I do work in Springfield, I do commute every day from Jacksonville. I really consider Jacksonville to be my home town, even though I was born in, you know, and lived for twelve years in Kankakee.

Dirksen: Oh. So, you have been there quite a while.

Blanchette: Yes.

Dirksen: Tell me a little bit about your family. So, I know your father was just recently interviewed with the oral history program.

Blanchette: My father, Paul Blanchette, when I was born, was a Kankakee city policeman. Then he took a succession of sales jobs, one of which got him transferred to Jacksonville. He ended his career as an employee of the Department of Central Management Services, in their computer section.

My mother, Marilyn Jean Potts—that was her maiden name, also from Kankakee—she went to college one year to train in pharmacy so she could help out my grandfather at his drug store. She never completed college, but she did work a number of jobs in Kankakee. When we moved to Jacksonville, she became an executive secretary with the Chamber of Commerce in Jacksonville—a position she held for more than thirty years—just recently retiring from that job.

My brother, Daniel, currently is between jobs. [He and] his wife, Belyne, have a son, Joshua. My sister, Paula, has two sons, Matthew and Shawn. They all live in Glen Ellen, Illinois. My brother lives in Jacksonville, by the way.

My wife, Kathy, and I—Kathy has two girls, which are my stepdaughters, Belinda and Rhiannon. Belinda is married to Ryan Meis and

lives in Ames, Iowa. They've given us a wonderful, one year old grandson, Jackson. Rhiannon married Kevin Kustak. They live in Tinley Park, Illinois and they have given us two wonderful grandsons, four year old Jacob, year and a half old Andrew, and soon to be born, Abigail.

Dirksen: And, I know—knowing you—that you have won the prize as grandpa, because you like to play with them, just as they like to play with you.

Blanchette: Well, of the three grandchildren, I think I'm the most immature.

Dirksen: (laughs) Okay, we talked about your family and all your hometown and everything else. Now, give me a little bit of background on your education.

Blanchette: I went to Jacksonville High School, graduated in 1978. I went to MacMurray College and graduated in 1982 with a Bachelor's Degree in journalism. As I was pursuing that degree, I got the chance to take a job at a local radio station in 1979, and I became the news director of the radio station before I had earned a degree in journalism from college. So, I was actually working at the career for which I was training, but it worked out pretty well.

I worked at the radio station from 1979 through 1987, just general assignment. I covered just about everything you can imagine, from traffic accidents to murder trials to elections to school boards. You know, just about everything you can imagine. It was the lowest paying, but the funnest job I've ever had.

Dirksen: Really?

Blanchette: Yes.

Dirksen: Lowest paying and most fun, because you got to stir all the pots.

Blanchette: Well, not stir the pot, but cover the news, which is what I wanted to do. I did win a Silver Dome Award from the Illinois Broadcasters Association for a daily commentary program that I did at that radio station. It was WJIL-WJVO radio, where I was employed for those years.

Dirksen: And what was the name of the award that you won?

Blanchette: The Silver Dome Award. It's for excellence in broadcasting.

Dirksen: I tell you, Dave... Have you done much broadcasting since then?

Blanchette: I'm interviewed quite a bit by broadcast media outlets, and I do a lot of narration for the agency and privately, as well. But, as far as being in broadcasting itself, no, I really haven't.

Dirksen: Yes, yes. Well, you broadcast the news, only making other people really get on the air and do it, right?

Blanchette: Sort of.

Dirksen: Sort of, right. I know that you are a wonderful photographer, but tell me a little bit about some of your other hobbies and activities that you do in your “spare time.”

Blanchette: Well, I found that sleep is overrated. (Dirksen laughs) So, no, I own and operate a commercial photography studio and have for about twenty years. We specialize in weddings and portraits. I still enjoy going out and just taking pictures of things for enjoyment. I enjoy motorcycling, scuba diving. I’ve dabbled a little bit in sky diving, playing with the grandkids, riding bicycle, reading. I do enjoy reading. So, that pretty much sums up what little spare time I have.

Dirksen: You are busy, busy, busy. Well, of course, people have asked me if I met you when I came to work at Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, and I said, no. I’ve known you for so long. David, this is the twentieth anniversary for Memorial’s Festival of Trees, and you and your former photography partner—who worked at Memorial at the time—you came out, and you did all the photography for that Festival of Trees.

Blanchette: And not only that, but I was the PR chairman of Festival of Trees for three years.

Dirksen: I know. Isn’t that amazing? We go back a long way.

Blanchette: Yes.

Dirksen: Yes, we do. Now, I’d like to talk to you a little bit more about your career background, because I know that...of course, you started, as you said, without even having a degree, in Jacksonville, with the radio broadcasting, but, what really were your career aspirations when you started out?

Blanchette: I wanted to be a working journalist.

Dirksen: Now, what’s that mean?

Blanchette: Someone that’s actually in the profession, a reporter covering the news and letting the world know what’s happening in the news. I got to do that literally while I was in college. While I was a sophomore in college, I got the job at the radio station. So, I kept going. I did earn my Bachelor’s Degree in journalism. But, for eight years, I would broadcast the news every day, the local news in and around Jacksonville. We’d read the stories from the wire service for the national and state stories, but the local stories, we would go out and get the

news and interview the people and write our own news. That was just very thrilling, to be able to do that, because that is exactly what journalism is about. You go out; you gather the news; you write the story, and you inform people.

Dirksen: What was the name of that radio station?

Blanchette: WJIL-WJVO Jacksonville.

Dirksen: WJIL-WJ...

Blanchette: JVO.

Dirksen: JVO, Jacksonville. Yep. In your early career—not on the radio—what did you do then? What did you move into, after you were at the radio station?

Blanchette: With an impending marriage coming up, I realized that my salary at the radio station would not allow me to support my wife in the manner to which she deserved. (both laugh) So, I began looking around, and I had a lot of political contacts from my work in radio. I interviewed a lot of politicians and covered a lot of elections, and I thought, well, maybe I'll try for a state job.

So, I contacted my state representative and my state senator, who were Tom Ryder and Vince Demuzio, because, in that day and age, before the Rutan decision was handed down, that's how you got a lot of the state jobs, is contact your local legislator. There was an opening available for a public information officer at the Department of Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities. The salary—even though it was low for state work—was quite a bit higher than what I was used to at the radio station, plus you worked five days a week, and you had weekends off—or so I thought, not knowing really what a public information officer's duties at a major state agency were all about. (Dirksen laughs) But I did get the job, and I started work in December of 1987. My immediate boss was a gentleman named Dave Devane. His last name is D-e-v-a-n-e, and I got the job. Here's this kid, you know, twenty-seven year old kid, coming to work for...

Dirksen: I was going to ask you how old you were.

Blanchette: ...coming to work for a major state agency. In fact, the biggest state agency at the time. You know, at first he was kind of skeptical. Like, you know, they've sent me this kid who doesn't have experience in this kind of thing.

Dirksen: Plus you look like this kid.

Blanchette: And he sat me down in the room, and he says, "I don't know what connections you have. You know, I don't care where you come from, but I want you to know that these communication jobs are plum jobs with state government. They're very important, very prestigious, but they're also very tenuous. You

say the wrong thing, you're out. You know, you're constantly having to produce and make people happy."

That kind of scared me a little bit, because here we're in an agency where you take care of the mentally ill and developmentally disabled. Every morning we'd come to work, and there'd be morning reports from each mental health center, laid out neatly on our desks. It would talk about what unit had fires set in it, what residents attacked what other residents, what residents had died, what residents had escaped. It was just a litany of problems from overnight. And you had to prioritize those in the roughly half hour you had from getting your first cup of coffee until the phone started ringing.

After I had been there about a year, Mr. Devane had a falling out with someone—I'm not sure who—and he decided to take a job elsewhere. So, the job—kind of by default—came to me. So, I became the only public information officer for this major state agency at twenty-eight years old. That's when I realized it's not a nine to five job. I would get calls at all hours of the evening, from TV stations on deadline, or wire service reporters, or facility directors, at three o'clock in the morning, who were saying, "Patient A just stabbed or beat up patient B." Or something would happen—and being state government—the sitting governor always wants to know what's going on at each—

Dirksen: Who was the governor?

Blanchette: Governor Jim Thompson.

Dirksen: Okay.

Blanchette: They always want to know what's going on. So, it's my duty to inform the governor's staff whenever I get calls like that in the middle of the night. Well, my contact on the governor's press staff at that time was a young woman named Susan Mogergerman...

Dirksen: (laugh)

Blanchette: ...who was the deputy press secretary for Governor Thompson. So, when I'd get those calls, I'd call her, any time of day or night, and say, "Susan, the governor needs to know about this. Press will be asking him about this the next day." Fast forward a couple of years later, when I joined the Historic Preservation Agency, Susan Mogergerman, at that time, was deputy director—so I knew her rather well—and then became director. So, I already had a working relationship with her from my days in the Department of Mental Health.

It got a little bit old, after about two years of dealing with that kind of stress, and I started to look around for another information-type job in state government, that I could go to. The first that came open was at the Historic

Preservation Agency. I thought, well, that would be neat, you know, dealing with history. So, I went to—

Dirksen: Excuse me, when was this?

Blanchette: That was 1989 when I went for the interview; it was later in 1989. The director of the agency at that time was Michael Devine.

Dirksen: Michael?

Blanchette: Yeah. The division manager—the person to whom I'd be reporting directly—was Maynard Crossland. So, I had to go for a job interview, with these two gentlemen in the room. So, I'm there, and they're very friendly, and they said, "Oh, would you like a cup of coffee?" I said, "Sure, I'd love a cup of coffee." So, we chatted for a minute, and the interview started. I went to cross my leg and I knocked the cup of coffee over onto Maynard.

Dirksen: Oh-oh.

Blanchette: Maynard was a fabulous dresser; I mean, always wore impeccable suits. You know, he was very proud of his clothes. So, I got coffee all over this gentlemen, who is going to decide—

Dirksen: You were trying to impress...

Blanchette: Yeah. And I..."Oh, I'm so sorry; I'm so sorry." They both kind of laughed, and they said, "That's okay; that's okay; don't worry about it." They got me a fresh cup of coffee. Guess what happened?

Dirksen: Oh no.

Blanchette: I did it again. I got through with the interview, and I'm all flustered because, you know, I've spilled coffee on the guy who is deciding whether he wants to hire me or not. I went home, and I told my wife, I said, "Well, the interview went fine, except I dumped coffee on the guy who might be my boss, twice." She just says, "You clumsy oaf. Couldn't you keep from doing that for just a half an hour?" Well, I ended up getting the job and...

Dirksen: They wanted somebody who would spill coffee and put people at ease.

Blanchette: Yeah, apparently. For the first month I was there, I reported to Marygael Cullen, who was the chief public information officer for the agency. But after about a month, she did leave to pursue her own private venture. So, really, from January of 1990 on, I have been the chief Public Information Officer for the Historic Preservation Agency. So, I only worked for them a month—

Dirksen: Before you were made chief?

Blanchette: Before I was made chief Public Information Officer.

Dirksen: Good heavens.

Blanchette: So, that's kind of the short version of how I got the job that I'm in.

Dirksen: So, that would be 1990?

Blanchette: January of 1990. My initial read about the agency—wouldn't this be fun to talk about history and Abraham Lincoln—was very accurate. It's fun. I'm not ashamed to say, it's the best job in state government. I've done things that most people only ever dream of, and I do them almost every day. It's just... I couldn't think of a better job or career to be in.

Dirksen: Oh, my gosh, Dave, that's wonderful. That's unique, that people can say that and mean it with such sincerity **too**.

Blanchette: Yes.

Dirksen: Yeah, holy cow. Let's go back real quick a second. Michael Devine was the director, and what was Maynard's position?

Blanchette: Maynard was Deputy Director...

Dirksen: I thought Susan was.

Blanchette: Oh, I'm sorry, Maynard was Division Manager for Public Affairs and Development.

Dirksen: And then Susan was Deputy Director.

Blanchette: Susan was Deputy Director, yes.

Dirksen: Well, you started in as the chief information officer in January of 1990, and so, now it's November of 2009. So, you've had quite a history there...

Blanchette: Yes, I have.

Dirksen: ...of working with IHPA. So, you've worked with a wide variety of directors. Can you remember who all the directors were that you...

Blanchette: Oh, certainly. Mike Devine was the director when I joined the agency. I'll go through the succession of directors and my read on...

Dirksen: Good.

Blanchette: ...how they got where they were.

Dirksen: Perfect.

Blanchette: I don't know how long Mike Devine was director, but I'd only been there a short time. I remember this distinctly, because we were just kind of chugging along, this little agency that could. You know, everything was sunshine and roses. We were coming up to some difficult budget decisions, as you have to do every year for the General Assembly. Mike Devine had to testify before the General Assembly for our agency's budget, and he was coached by the Governor's office.

Dirksen: And that was Thompson?

Blanchette: Yes. They were thinking about cutting our budget, but he had to make the legislature aware that, if you cut our budget, these bad things are going to happen to this agency. So, he was coached, and he went into the legislative hearing. They said the expected question. You know, "What will happen to the agency if these budget cuts go through?" He says, "Oh, it won't hurt us very much. We can pick up and make do and make ends meet. Don't worry about it." It wasn't those exact words, but I could see the governor's people just get livid.

He was immediately called to a meeting with Governor Thompson and his top people. I was not in that meeting, but they came out of that meeting and told me that the governor hit the roof, you know, that it made him look bad with the legislature and that he couldn't trust him anymore. A few weeks after that, we had the opening of the Dana Thomas House, after the state put a lot of money into it.

Dirksen: That's because of Governor Thompson.

Blanchette: That's because of Governor Thompson. I saw firsthand what happens when you upset Governor Thompson.

Dirksen: Oh, yes.

Blanchette: He did not look at or speak to director Devine for that entire event, and he was around him for a good hour and a half, two hours, did not even acknowledge him. I knew at that time, something's going to happen. You know, he's not long for this world. And sure enough, I think Mike realized it too, and he took a job out of state, I believe for Wyoming.

Dirksen: (laugh) That's away.

Blanchette: I really think that's where he went. And then, Susan, being deputy director, was elevated to director, She served in that capacity for quite some time. She might be the longest serving director the agency's ever had. I'm not certain, but

she served the rest of the Thompson administration, all of the Edgar years and for part of the Ryan years, as well.

Dirksen: I think that does sound—

Blanchette: She got caught up in something that affected a great many people. That was the maneuvering around the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. There was a lot of jockeying for power and position and jobs and somehow—

Dirksen: This was during the Ryan?

Blanchette: This was during the Ryan administration.

Dirksen: And his deputy...

Blanchette: Bob Newton.

Dirksen: Bob Newton, yes.

Blanchette: The chief of staff. And, somehow she got caught up in the middle of that and was not able to get out of a bad situation. I remember going to meetings with her and with the chairman of our board and some other people...

Dirksen: Who was that at that time? Is that Julie?

Blanchette: ...Julie Cellini.

Dirksen: Um-hm.

Blanchette: And discussing...

Dirksen: The board of trustees.

Blanchette: Isn't this terrible that they are doing this, but we don't see any way out of it. So, Maynard Crossland, the division manager public affairs and development, then became director of the agency. He served for the remainder of the Ryan administration and part way into the Blagojevich administration. And then he was pretty much forced out.

Dirksen: Yes.

Blanchette: And then, Bob Coomer, the head of the historic sites division, became director of the agency.

Dirksen: He'd worked for IHPA though for quite a while. He was not brought in.

Blanchette: Right, he had worked almost from the beginning for IHPA; he decided to retire a couple of years after that. Then Jan Grimes became director of the agency.

I'd worked with Jan, because, by that time, by the time Blagovich administration came around, all of the information officers were consolidated.

We were taken out of our agencies and put in one central location. I represented Historic Preservation and Capital Development Board at that time, and Jan was director of Capital Development Board. On the road trips that inevitably you take with the director of the agency, I told her how wonderful the agency was, you know, HPA is a great place. So, of course, when the position came open, she went to the governor's people and said, "I want that. I want that job." So, Jan has been director ever since. So, that's how we've been through the various directors.

Dirksen: When did IHPA start?

Blanchette: Nineteen eighty-five.

Dirksen: So, you really came in, then, in '89. So, it was not that old.

Blanchette: It was not that old.

Dirksen: So, 1985. Was that under Thompson then?

Blanchette: It was under Jim Thompson. Most of our functions were, at that time, contained with the Department of Conservation, now known as the Department of Natural Resources. Thompson placed a great emphasis on history and historic preservation. So, he felt having a separate cabinet level agency was the way to go. So, he formed the Historic Preservation Agency.

Dirksen: Gosh, Dave, you have just a wealth of information in the overall context of this. One of the reasons that you have been so successful is that you are such a wonderful, have a wonderful way of working with people. That is apparent through all these years I've known you. But, also from listening to you too, how you've been able to achieve this and maintain this.

You've mentioned all the various directors. In your estimation, who do you think was really the strongest or the best overall director that maybe the agency has had?

Blanchette: Oh, that's a tough one. It requires you to place favorites.

Dirksen: There's a difference though. I don't want to put you on the spot.

Blanchette: Each one had their strengths. I'm not trying to be politically correct about this, but, the best overall, probably, for the agency and, not only, you know, good director but knowing what's going on at the agency and well-liked and respected by the staff was probably Bob Coomer. But Susan was also a very good director and had a good sense of what needed to be done. Maynard had

that personal touch;he knew the staff, he'd been through the ranks. Jan is relatively new, so I think she is yet to be tested and to establish kind of a legacy with the agency, but she brings a fresh perspective, being the only one since I've been there that hasn't come up through the ranks of the Historic Preservation Agency. So, I wouldn't say any were my favorite necessarily. The fact that each one of them has kept me around kind of indicates that I get along pretty well with them.

Dirksen: (laughs) Yes, yes. But what you have said has been very good, because they all have different strengths, of course, and you've mentioned that. In doing these things, you've also had to work, not only with the director's style of management, but you also had to work with the Governor's Office.

Blanchette: Oh, yes.

Dirksen: So, how has that been? Blanchette: So much of what we do is driven by who's in power.

Dirksen: Yes.

Blanchette: The smart people realize that upfront. They get to know the people that make the decisions, and then you cater the message that goes to them.

Dirksen: Now, go back a second. When you say "the smart," you mean the directors, or do you mean like people like you?

Blanchette: Directors, top staff and public information officers. You realize, for instance, here's Governor Thompson, but you don't talk directly to Governor Thompson. You talk to people underneath him, who then talk to him.

Dirksen: Yes.

Blanchette: So, you get to know those people. You get to know how they manage, what they like to hear, what they don't like to hear, the form they like to hear it in. When they call, you always take their calls. When they ask you to do something, if it's humanly possible, you do it. The smart directors and the smart agencies and the smart agency people know that, and they realize that you can get a lot done, and you can get what you want to and need to get done, if you go about it the right way. There's no use butting heads with someone who has the ability to hire and fire you at will.

Dirksen: Right.

Blanchette: The best way is to find out how to communicate with that person or persons and do that. This agency has been so successful, because each director and the top division managers and myself and some other key people have realized that, and we have always been able to do that.

Let me give an example of one way that we were able to do that during a key development period for the Presidential Library and Museum. At the end of the Edgar administration was when that project really, really took off. Governor Edgar had given us money to hire the exhibit designer and the architects. So, we were well under way, but we needed to make sure that whoever was elected next embraced the project. Well, there were two people running for governor after Edgar decided he is going to step down that was George Ryan and Glenn Poshard. Well, we got our heads together, and we thought, how can we possibly get these two men interested in this project? It's something that's never been done before. You know, there's a lot of opposition to it. It's very expensive. A lot of people are questioning, Do we need this? You know, especially during these lean budget times.

Dirksen: And this was what year?

Blanchette: This was late '90s. Let's see, Edgar's last year was '98, I believe. So, this would have been the election of—

Dirksen: No, is that right? That's right, because the library was dedicated in October of 2004, and then the museum was...No, the library was open October of 2004, and then the museum was dedicated in '05.

Blanchette: Well, whenever Edgar's last year in office was. We knew that we had to interest both these candidates, because, at that time, we didn't know who was going to win. So, we decided, let's do our dog and pony show. By dog and pony show at that time, that was going underneath the Old State Capitol to the bank vault where we kept all the Lincoln artifacts. We'd bring VIP's down there. We'd have them put on the white gloves, and they'd get to hold the Lincoln artifact, and we take their picture with the Lincoln artifact.

So, we went to George Ryan's people and Glenn Poshard's people, and we separately asked them, would you like to have a tour of the Lincoln collection? They both came down, different times, different days, of course. We schmoozed both of them. We made sure that, when they were doing campaign stops that were nearby, that one of us would go to the campaign event of one or the other, stand in line, got up to them, shake their hand and say, "Hi, I'm so and so, with the Presidential Library, and we hope you enjoyed your visit the other day with the vault and hope you remember us," you know.

It really, really worked, because George Ryan got elected. I remember I went to one of his fundraisers. It was in Jacksonville, where I live, and he and his wife were both there. George Ryan and my father went to the same high school. They were only a year or two apart. So, they knew each other, not well, but they knew each other.

Dirksen: The name was familiar, um-hm.

Blanchette: So, I shook his hand, and gave my spiel and went down to his wife. She said, “Oh, George hasn’t stopped talking about that since he took that vault tour. You know, that was just wonderful. We can’t wait to become involved in this.” That’s an example of how we are able to work. You decide who you need to talk to, how you need to talk to them...you know, get them interested. In this case, we’re covering our bets. We’re going with both candidates.

Dirksen: Who is the “we” you keep talking about?

Blanchette: The top people at the agency: director, division managers, myself, chief legal counsel, at times, the legislative liaison.

Dirksen: So, those would be the people that formed the think tank on how to get this done.

Blanchette: Yes.

Dirksen: One of the things that I’ve always been interested in too, though—and tell me about this—is what role, then, did the board of trustees play in that, because, after all, all agencies don’t have board of trustees.

Blanchette: Board of trustees has played a very active role in just about every major decision, especially the chairman of the board, Julie Cellini. You can’t say enough about her and what she’s been able to do for the agency and for the Presidential Library and Museum. There’s no doubt that key trustees also get to the top people, the governor and governor’s people and people running for governor, U.S. senators, and in some cases, the President of the United States.

Really, the trustees are there to grab their attention, get them interested in something, turn their attention toward the agency, and then the trustees—usually Julie or a couple of the other trustees—would say, “Okay, senator so and so is interested.” Can you provide them with this, or can you give them a tour of that or I’m going to bring them by such on such a day. We need to accommodate them. So, we accommodate them. It’s all very much a team effort, much more of a team effort than I think most people realize. I was in a meeting recently where some of the rank and file staff were expressing displeasure about the fact that there is so much politics involved in everything involved with state government.

I spoke up, after they had their say. I spoke up, and I said, “Yes, there’s politics involved, and you can’t possibly realize how much we have benefitted from politics. Not politics—the bad word that you don’t say in polite company—but politics as in working through your elected officials and knowing how to do it and getting things done, you know. That’s how Illinois, ideally, works, and that’s how it has worked for most of the agency’s history.

Dirksen: It's so great to hear you say that, Dave, because I'm sorry to say that so often times, people have a very negative impression. You have certainly been able to clear up a lot of things. The fact, too, that there was such a focused energy on doing something together, that had to be an exciting thing to experience too, that you all were working on something together, and you all knew it. One of the things I've never understood is why is it that other agencies don't have a board of directors? Why is it that the IHPA is one of the few?

Blanchette: That, I'm not certain of. I mean, the agencies that don't are probably the longer standing state agencies. I really don't know why that is. Capitol Development Board has a board, and Historic Preservation has a board, and a few other state agencies do, but, by and large, they don't. That's not to say you couldn't get things accomplished at these other agencies, but our board is unique in that there are truly blue ribbon individuals that are always on that board. It's a plum assignment for people. It's not paid, but the benefits—the intangible benefits—are substantial. So, a lot of people desire to serve on that board. As a result, we've got just stellar people on the board. And I'm not just saying because I have to work with them—

Dirksen: No, they are.

Blanchette: ...but, I mean, we really, truly have had stellar people and continue to have.

Dirksen: Yes, yes. And Julie, I know, Cellini, is still the chairman, and who else is on that? I'm not sure I know.

Blanchette: Ed Gensen, Doug Donenfeld, Dan Arnold... I know there are a couple more that aren't coming to mind right now. I really need the list in front of me.

Dirksen: Sure, sure. You've done so many things within the IHPA, but how did you ever balance—or how do you balance—the work that you do and the messes that you put out, between the overall agency and the individual sites? How do you do that?

Blanchette: I have one-on-one relationship with every site manager.

Dirksen: Wow.

Blanchette: One of the first things I did—when I came on board—was to visit each site and get to know each site manager. Over the years, I've known many of them for every year that I've been at the agency. But, it's like they told me early on, "It's nice you're coming out to visit us, but the proof's in the pudding. You've got to demonstrate to us. We're very practical people. We're out here in the field. We deal with tourists and local governments and snow removal and flooding. You've got prove to us that you'll do what you say."

So, I have worked very, very hard, over the years, to make good on my promises to those site managers. You know, I will publicize every event that you have. I will publicize every major success that you have. When bad news needs to be delivered, I will work with you to deliver that bad news in the way that benefits the most possible people, that makes your job the easiest. To this day, I put out three hundred news releases a year, sometimes more. Two-thirds of those are for our historic sites. These are the frontline people. They are, without question, some of the most dedicated state employees I think I've ever met. They look on their sites as though the sites are their children. I mean, they really live and breathe what they do at those sites. When we have to do budget cuts at the sites...

Dirksen: That's very hard.

Blanchette: ...it cuts them...

Dirksen: Oh, it does.

Blanchette: ...as though, if you are cutting them with a knife. And I realize that, and I just do my utmost to do everything possible to publicize things for them.

Dirksen: How many sites are there within the agency?

Blanchette: There are approximately sixty historic sites and memorials, but about two dozen have staff. There are quite a few that aren't staffed—like memorials to various governors—but, then there's the flagship sites like New Salem and Cahokia Mounds and Bishop Hill and the sites in Galena, Springfield's Lincoln sites. But there are certainly fascinating little sites Pierre Menard Home, Bryant Cottage, Vandalia Statehouse. Each one is deserving. Each one is a welcome addition to its community. So, I serve all of them equally.

Dirksen: How do you see that the IHPA, since you started there in 1985, '86?

Blanchette: Nineteen eighty-nine.

Dirksen: Eighty-nine, sorry. That's right, 1989. How do you see that it's changed...or has it? Maybe it hasn't.

Blanchette: That's a very difficult question, because, yeah, without question, it's changed, the biggest change being the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. But in many ways, it hasn't changed. The people in preservation services division continue to do the work they've always done. They administer the state's preservation laws and programs. The sites division continues to keep the historic sites open. What has changed is the amount of funding that's available to do it. You're expected to do more and more with less and less. So, there are fewer special events and fewer special things that we are able to do, because there just isn't money to do them. One of the

strengths of the agency is, that no matter what happens, we seem to be able to get things done. That's also the major weakness of the agency, because, when our budget is cut, we somehow pull it together and still keep on doing mostly what we've been doing before. Well, the powers that be, see that and they think, "Well, maybe they didn't need the money after all."

Dirksen: Yes.

Blanchette: So, you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. But the reason that it works that way is because of that sense of paternity that we have toward our sites and our programs. I mean, the people love what they do, and they're not going to let a little thing a budget cut keep them from doing it.

Dirksen: They all work and work and work and work because they care. I know I've just watched the various people over all the years that I was lucky enough to work for IHPA, and they are...they're just so committed. They are just so dedicated to everything that they do.

Blanchette: They're committed, and I should be committed.

Dirksen: (laugh) Well, you're from Jacksonville.

Blanchette: Yeah, of course. (Dirksen laughs)

Dirksen: In your current position, are there any other people within the agency that work with you on this, or are you still the only one?

Blanchette: Well, even though I'm the only public information officer, communications manager, I mean, it's certainly not a job for one person. Everybody who deals with the public is an ambassador for the agency. So, it's definitely a team effort to put a good public relations face on the entire agency. You know, the people in the museum that run the shows, that greet the visitors, are just as important as the ones who put out the news releases. The people at the historic sites that mow the grass and pick up the trash are just as important as those that run the special events and run the site. So, even though I'm the only one with the title, we all interact with the public, and we all have a stake in the face that we're putting forth before the public and the opinion the public has of us. So, yes, I'm the only one that does it, but I'm not alone.

Dirksen: Yes. But you are the only one though, David, that, when people call, that you need to interact with, and you become the voice of IHPA.

Blanchette: Yes, I am.

Dirksen: Yes, yes. You do such a good job. In your role with IHPA, what do you see that you have really done to enhance, protect and promote the agency? I mean,

to me that's kind of what you do. I mean, I sit here, and I see all kinds of things, but that's because I know you and have watched you.

Blanchette: Really, it's just keeping the public perception of the agency positive and keeping the agency's name out there. The agency's name isn't well known with the general public, but the things that we operate are well known. Everybody knows Abraham Lincoln. Not everybody knows the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. At least they don't think they do, but they do. If they've been to Lincoln Tomb, they know IHPA. If they've been to the Presidential Museum, they know IHPA. If they've gotten a tax credit for historic rehabilitation, they know IHPA. So, they know pieces and parts, but they don't know the name of the agency. It's kind of an unwieldy name, Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. I always joke with each new director that comes in, let's change our name to "History R Us." [Dirksen laughs] But so far, no one has bitten on that, but it certainly would be memorable. But we are well known to the public, the pieces and parts that people are interested in.

The trick is keeping the positive exposure high and minimizing the negative exposure. You're always going to have problems: a site floods, somebody's not happy with a ruling we've made on their historic preservation project, someone doesn't like something we've done at the museum. I mean, there's always going to be problems, but the trick is keeping that barrage of positive publicity. It just keeps coming and coming and coming and coming. So, when the inevitable, negative thing happens, it's already overbalanced by the positive that's already out there. And so far, that has worked. The question comes, will there ever be a time where that won't work? Well, probably, but I hope I'm not around for it. So—

Dirksen: Well, knowing you, though, you will have seen it coming and prepare for it.

Blanchette: Some things you can prepare; some things you can't. A good example of something you can't prepare for was the fire at the Pullman Factory in the late 1990s. I was literally walking my dog on a Sunday. It was early evening. It was after dark. It was in the winter. My cell phone rings, and it's a Chicago Tribune reporter. He says, "I need a comment on the fire at the Pullman Factory." And I said, "What fire?" He said, "Well, there's a fire. The Pullman Factory is burning down." I said, "That's impossible. I would have known about it by now, if that was happening." He said, "I am standing here looking at a burning building, right across the street." And he described the building, described the street. I'm like, "Holy cow, he's talking about Pullman." So, I said, "Give me your number, and I'll get back to you." Just then I saw another incoming call. It's from Bob Coomer, the head of our historic sites division. He says, "Dave, I just got word, Pullman's burning down." What do you say? I mean, the only thing you can say is, it's a tragedy, that we'll do everything we can to try and preserve what's left; we'll examine the possibility of rebuilding and then we'll work with the authorities to catch those responsible.

But, that kind of thing you can't see coming. You just have to be prepared. You have to be able to rely on your staff to get you the right information, just like Bob did. The thing is, here's the reporter; it's on a Sunday, and he's on the crime and fire beat, and he's right there. It's one of those, "Oh, crap" moments, you know, where you realize something's going on.

Dirksen: What do you do? I mean, I totally understand how that would **happen**. But what do you do about things that deal with personalities though? How do you handle that?

Blanchette: Try to be as accommodating as possible. The key is in listening. Normally when I deal with people, it's proactive. We know something's coming, like the bicentennial or the Presidential Library and Museum, a special event at the site. So, I have some time to work with the people. If I've worked with them before, I already know kind of the personality and how to approach them. If I haven't, I try to just talk to them for a while and decide, does this person like a lot of control over things. Do they like to just kind of turn it over and let somebody else do the work? Just little nuances like that that help me decide, how should I approach this? Definitely, personality plays a big part. That's half of what politics is: personality and knowing who the personality is.

But, not only politics, but news media relations, because you're dealing with individual reporters, each of whom approaches life a different way. I still, to this day, visit the State Capitol press room once a week and talk to each of the reporters in each of the bureaus who are there, who aren't busy on something else. Four times out of five, I'm not trying to sell them a story or anything. I'm just there to talk. Keep abreast of what they're interested in, what they're working on, what their family life is like, what sports teams they root for.

Dirksen: Know whose face is behind that...

Blanchette: Right. So, when I do have something to sell, I'm not a stranger sticking my head in just trying to get them to do something. No one likes to be used. And, to this day, I think I'm the only one that does that any more. It used to be every public information officer would do that or something like it, but I think I'm probably the only one left that does it anymore.

Dirksen: Oh, I can see you doing that. But along those lines, though, too, it helps you. I know that we have had some very trying issues with individuals at IHPA and ALPLM. When you have had those situations—

Blanchette: Most times I could work through it. There are a couple of times that stand out, that where I couldn't. The one time that stands out is my dealings with Richard Norton Smith, who was the first director of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. It wasn't because he wasn't good at public relations. Oh,

contrary, he was very good at public relations. He had people that he put his trust in that, in my opinion, he shouldn't have. Those are the people that I locked horns with, and then—since they had his ear—he would believe them over me. So, for a year or so, they had somebody else in there that was doing the day-to-day PR [public relations] for the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. They brought in somebody on contract. I was still the overall communications director for the agency, but that person, who was in there, was doing the day-to-day PR work for Richard Norton Smith and setting up his interviews and that sort of thing. I actually became good friends with that person and was able to talk with her on numerous occasions, and she was having the same difficulty. But, since she was brought in at his urging, somehow he viewed her as more trustworthy than me.

Make no doubt, Richard Norton Smith was the best to hire in the months leading up to the opening of the Presidential Museum and in the months following the opening. He knew what had to be done. He had the contacts. He could call and get Jim Lehrer of PBS, or he could call and get Tom Brokaw at NBC. I mean, he knew these people. He was perfect for it. That doesn't mean it wasn't painful, and it was painful for a good number of people. There was a lot of bloodletting. There was a lot of personnel changeover during those times, but in the end, I'm glad we had him for when we did.

Dirksen: Yes.

Blanchette: It's like going through an operation. You're better when it's over, but, by God, it hurts when you're going through it. You know, even with the bad blood that occurred between us, I still think that it was the right move to have him in.

Dirksen: Yes, he is. He's a brilliant historian, and his background in other presidential library museums was evident, about how he knew what to do.

Blanchette: But he's not on my Christmas card list.

(End of interview #1. Interview #2 continues.)

Interview with Dave Blanchette

HP-A-L-2009-032

Interview # 2: November 5, 2009

Interviewer: Julie Dirksen – ALPL Oral History Program

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Dirksen: Hi, Dave. It’s nice having you here this afternoon. This is Julie Dirksen, and I’m with Dave Blanchette, who is the communications manager of the IHPA and the ALPLM. It was my pleasure to talk with Dave a few days ago, and today, which is Thursday, November the fifth, we are going to continue with our interview and, hopefully, be able to get it wrapped up today. So, once again, Dave Blanchette is here with me.

Dave, we stopped after our first interview. Today we’re going to talk about the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum. So, first of all, let’s talk about some dates. When did you really become aware of this project?

Blanchette: I became aware of the project right when it became an idea in someone’s head.

Dirksen: And whose head was that?

Blanchette: I think it was chairman of the board, Julie Cellini, and director at the time, Susan Mogerman. And I think Springfield Mayor Karen Hassara probably had a little bit to do with it too. What happened was, we displayed the Gettysburg Address, underneath the Old State Capitol’s interior stairwell. It was in a bank vault. It was well protected. It was just hard for the public to see one of the most important documents in human history. And State Senator Judy Barr Topinka got us some money—I believe it was \$50,000—to build a new display case for the Gettysburg Address. Those individuals started to think, “Well, if we can get \$50,000 for a new display case for one document, why don’t we work on something to display and keep the rest of our 50,000 item collection.” So, that’s when, I believe, the idea started.

Dirksen: What was the timeframe? What was that?

Blanchette: I think that was about 1990.

Dirksen: Okay.

Blanchette: So, that's when the idea really started. Of course, my job is dealing with the news media and publicizing things, and we got publicity for the \$50,000. But, ironically, the thing that started all this never happened. (Dirksen laughs) We never built the new display case for the Gettysburg Address. So, we built a huge display case for everything else.

Dirksen: Oh, that had to have been just an amazing time, because it's one thing to sit and brainstorm, but it's another thing to really start seeing things happen.

Blanchette: Yes. No one dreamed, at that time, that it would become what it has. You know, it started out as a new library, and then it started out as a much bigger, then it blossomed in to a much bigger library, and then we quickly realized we would need two buildings, instead of just one. Now the campus has a library, a museum, restored Union Station, a parking garage and Union Square Park. So, four entire city blocks, with an idea that started as a building on one city block.

Dirksen: Did you just transfer over, more or less, all of your time when the ALPLM started, or were you still working also on the IHPA?

Blanchette: I've always worked IHPA, and most of the news releases I write and most of the publicity I do was then, and remains, for the state historic sites, and during certain situations, the preservation services division if they're dealing with a hot issue. The ALPLM is a pretty steady stream of publicity, and when we were heavy in development of it and getting ready for the opening and during the bicentennial, it was getting the lion's share of my effort in publicity. But, for the most part, most of my job has always been publicizing state historic sites.

Dirksen: Yes. And so your job responsibilities really haven't changed; they've just increased.

Blanchette: (laugh). Yes, they've been augmented, I guess, would be a good way to put it.

Dirksen: Right. Okay. We talked briefly about seeing you were involved in the planning stages, a couple of things with that. When did you all decide that this project needed to reach beyond the IHPA board of trustees? Susan Mogerman, who was then the director of the agency at that time, and the mayor, Karen Hassara, when did you realize that it needed to be more people? For instance, federal funds, and how did you do that?

Blanchette: I was not involved in the decision making process. I was just involved when the process was either public or about to be public, because it was my job to transfer the wishes of those doing the planning and the desires and get that out

to the public through the news media. But, as I recall, fairly early in the process, they realized this was going to be an expensive project. And, at least, in the beginning, a fairly controversial project, because it was expensive. So, fairly early in the process, they realized, not only would we have to involve the governor and the legislature for the State of Illinois, but also the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States government, as well.

They knew, by having visited and knowing about the other presidential libraries in the country, that we did not fall under the Presidential Library Act. That's everyone from Herbert Hoover on forward. So, we knew that we wouldn't have the federal dollars to operate the facility, once it was built. But, by the same token, we knew there probably wasn't going to be the willingness on state legislators to approve all of the dollars it would take to build it. Operating it, possibly, but to build it, that's a pretty hefty price tag. So, talks, as I recall, began fairly early on, with some key members of the Illinois congressional delegation.

Dirksen: So, one of the biggest challenges then would be—of course, isn't everything—would be the funding?

Blanchette: Would be the funding, but also the public opinion.

Dirksen: Yes.

Blanchette: Because that's what those who control the funds base a lot of their decisions on, is public opinion. Will the public support this? Do they support it now, and will they support it after it's done? And that was a difficult battle. That was the hardest part for me, because the public was of the opinion that, well, we've got all these Lincoln sites, why do we need another one? You know, we've got X number of libraries in Springfield. Why do we need one more? We're in a time of budget crisis. Why should we be spending this money? We should instead spend it on patrol cars and health clinics and public aid and things like that.

Dirksen: And this was in 1990?

Blanchette: This was in the early '90s, as the planning was gathering steam. So, it was from about 1991 on, that myself and Tom Schwartz and some other people embarked on really a speaking tour for Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis Clubs, you know, women's groups, anybody who would have us, talking about our plans for this facility, what it would mean, what we were envisioning. And, you know, that speaking tour has never stopped. We still do that, to this day. We still get requests. It's taken a different tone, because early on, it was all about, here's what you can expect. Now, it's all about, here's how we did it. But it's a speaking tour that has never stopped. I think I've probably done more than 200 of those...

Dirksen: Oh, I bet you have.

Blanchette: ...over the years. I know Tom Schwartz has done at least that many, and the various directors of the agency have done quite a bit as well. But, it was like Lincoln's life itself. Everybody thinks that Abraham Lincoln was always this popular guy everybody's always liked. But, no, that's not the case. He was not popular until his second term in office—which was very brief—and after he was assassinated.

Well, this idea was not a popular idea early on. It only became popular after it was almost done, and people started seeing what this was really going to mean. Up until that point, it was very, very hard to convince the public we should be spending this kind of money in this economic climate.

Dirksen: And, what was the final amount there for the library museum? Not for the other things.

Blanchette: The library and museum—I'm going off the top of my head—I know the entire complex, library, museum, Union Station, parking ramp and Union Square Park, a hundred and sixty million. I believe the museum was about ninety million, just by itself, and the library was thirty, thirty-five million dollar range.

Dirksen: I think that is close to it, from what I understand and remember hearing about too. In fact, it may have been a few million more, but it's close, right?

Well, after you did all these things and you worked so hard, and all these people have done that, let me ask you this: Do you think that the ALPLM has met, exceeded or failed what the expectations were?

Blanchette: It's exceeded what the expectations were, with the caveat that we weren't sure what to expect, but we were hoping that it would be something good. The initial attendance estimates were very wide ranging, ranging from, you might get a hundred thousand a year to, you might get six hundred thousand a year. Realistically, we knew it would fall somewhere in there, and we were hoping it would be toward the higher end of the spectrum, rather than the lower end.

Dirksen: But you were basing that on what?

Blanchette: We were basing that on the input given to us by experts in the industry—among them, Disney Corporation—that we consulted. We didn't consult them for design, but we asked them certain things: how big should we build this; what sort of traffic should we expect and that sort of thing.

We average four hundred thousand visitors a year at the museum. Good years are more than that, slower years, a little bit less than that. But, the first year was very high visitation. Then, it kind of leveled off a little bit. This is

where we defied the experts. The experts said it would be high; then, it will level off; then, it will go down a little bit. Well, we were high; then we leveled off. But we've stayed leveled. So, we've sustained a pretty high visitation for a presidential library and museum, and we're proud of that.

Part of that is some forward thinking that some people made early in the process, about having constantly updated exhibits in both facilities and special programs to give people who have already been there another reason to visit.

Dirksen: For the temporary space?

Blanchette: Temporary [exhibit] space, yes.

Dirksen: The other thing too that...just watching and, of course, being a part of it and seeing what the ALPLM did, is that, not only is that the temporary space, but it's not just the numbers. It's the reaction of people, the public, as well as people who are in the field. What do you think about that, about how these people, these museums, have come in droves to see what has happened with this museum and the design of it and then gone back and tried to replicate that?

Blanchette: This is a great source of pride for us, the fact that we've become the model for what a history museum of the future should be, and the future is here. It's here at the Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

The folks from Mt. Vernon came and took a very close look at us before they revamped their facility. When President George W. Bush was here for the opening, in April of 2005, he was overheard to remark, that, "Yeah, I'm going to have to send my people back here to see how you did it, when we're planning my presidential library." And he made good on that. They did come back, just recently. It was a very low key visit, but they came and looked to get some ideas. President Obama was here, as a U.S. Senator, for our opening. We know that he was very impressed with our facility and, undoubtedly, will use some of the ideas that we started here in his presidential library, wherever that happens to be.

Other history museums and general museums from around the country have come and taken a look. This is gratifying, because we took a lot of chances on this museum. The first chance that was taken was, do we go the safe route and go with what Bob Rogers called, "dead stuff on walls?"

Dirksen: Who was Bob Rogers?

Blanchette: Bob Rogers is the chairman of BRC Imagination Arts, the exhibit designer. We could have gone the safe route and gone with the traditional museum set-up, with displays and maybe an audio visual program and exhibit halls, where people walk by the exhibits and see pretty things and see artifacts.

But we decided—when I say we, it wasn't me, but it was the team, in general—decided, let's do something different. Let's throw out the mold. Let's treat the Lincoln legacy as the one-of-a-kind thing that it really is, and let's make this an experience. Let's not put people inside Lincoln's house; let's put them inside Lincoln's head. Let's let them appreciate what his legacy means, why it was so difficult for him, the things that he had to overcome. Give them an emotional attachment to the story, because, if you've got an emotional attachment to the story, you're much more likely to retain that information and that experience. And you're much more likely to share that experience with other people. This is something I've said over and over again. But, in the beginning, this was a radical idea.

Dirksen: How did you take that idea, then, because it was so radical, and get that word out, Dave? Because, for you, they haven't seen it yet. So, how did you do that?

Blanchette: I hadn't seen it either. Being in the room during a couple of Bob Rogers presentations, where he was talking about his vision for the museum, you became a convert. But then, because you don't have a product sitting there in front of you that you can refer to, so, you're inspired by this talk that he gives. And then, I go out, and I'd sell it to the public. And then, it starts to wear off a little bit, like I'm still just selling an idea. There isn't something tangible I can keep referring to.

So, Rogers got the idea—and it was a very good idea—to bring several of us out to Burbank, California, where they were developing the exhibits. He wanted to show us all of these things that we'd been trying to convince the public were good things in a museum. He wanted to show us where they were in the development stage, particularly, the Ghosts of the Library. It's a Holavision technology, where live people interact with ghosts on stage. Plus, he wanted to show us some other things.

We went to the BRC studios and design facility in Burbank, and we actually got to interact with the ghost and see the technology and see things in various stages of development. It was like suddenly a door opened. It's like, now I know. I have something that I've seen, that I can touch and see and hear.

Dirksen: And you can promote.

Blanchette: So, I really was able to much more effectively promote. It came along just at the right time, because that was just a little more than a year before we opened the facility. It was from that trip that I got the idea that, okay, I now know what this is about. Now I've got to get the media on board with this. So, we planned a media tour of the shell of the museum. The building was just a shell. The concrete...

Dirksen: You're talking about the museum?

Blanchette: The museum, yes. I lined up a bunch of local reporters, and I briefed them all on what was going to be in each room. They were supposed to learn what each room the museum was going to be. They got so excited about that; were role playing and everything. We brought thousands of members of the general public through this empty shell of a building, with these reporters, who were so excited about what was going to be there, not having seen it, only to have had me talk about it, excitedly, because I'd been there to see the technology.

That really started to build the enthusiasm for it. At least for the media and public relations standpoint, that was kind of a turning point, from the negative to the positive. Why are we spending money on this; we don't understand this; why do we need this; this is all risky; why are we doing this? All of a sudden, the opinions started changing. This is going to be great; this is going to be something Springfield's never seen before; this is going to be world class. It was all in that brief time period, from the trip to the exhibit designer, to involving the media, and then, we've been going gang busters ever since.

Now, that's the museum. Everyone, I think, agreed we needed a new library building. That wasn't quite as hard a sell, because things had been shoehorned underneath the Old State Capitol. We had long since run out of space. It wasn't very user friendly. We had twelve million items pertaining to all aspects of Illinois history that needed a new home. That was fairly easy, or easier, to sell than a museum, something brand new.

Dirksen: That opened first, correct?

Blanchette: The library opened first.

Dirksen: October of 2004?

Blanchette: No, it was 2002. It opened for one day.

Dirksen: Really?

Blanchette: Yes, and then we shut it down. (Dirksen laughs) Remember the climate control systems...

Dirksen: Oh, that's right.

Blanchette: Had the problem with the climate control systems, which is another public relations nightmare. Luckily, the state decided they were going to use the contingency money from the construction project to fix the problem, while at the same time, pursuing legal remedies against those responsible. It's a good thing we did, because it took six years to settle the legal case. So, yeah, then we did open it for good, in October of '04.

- Dirksen: Yes, oh my goodness, yes; that's right. Well, you have so many, many wonderful stories and memories, but, if you could pick just a couple, who or what are some of your all-time favorite ALPLM memories?
- Blanchette: I mentioned one of them, going to the exhibit designer, because it was such an eye-opening experience.
- Dirksen: Yes.
- Blanchette: It just really lit a fire under me, like, now I know what I'm promoting.
- Dirksen: You understood, yes, because none of us could envision that, without seeing something, yes.
- Blanchette: Then, for me—for a public relations media type person—it was the two huge media events that we've had, the opening of the museum in April of 2005, where we had twenty-five thousand people, four hundred reporters from around the world, the president and the first lady and everybody you can imagine.
- You know what, about that, we were going to be one of the top news stories on the face of the planet that day. We were all poised to be one of the top—maybe not the top, but certainly one of the top—right in the middle of that ceremony. There's four hundred reporters. I'm right in the middle of these reporters on the risers, and cell phones started going off and PDA's and Blackberry's started going off. I'm like, what is going on? The president's about to speak. Well, they chose a new Pope at that moment.
- Dirksen: That's right.
- Blanchette: They chose Pope Benedict to be the new Pope. So, all of a sudden, from being one of the top news stories on the planet, to being second tier.
- Dirksen: Yes.
- Blanchette: But, still, we got that worldwide coverage. Those reporters were there. They were going to do a story.
- Dirksen: That's right.
- Blanchette: But, then, the other thing that I remember is the celebration of the bicentennial. Even though we didn't have one huge event like that, it was one week long, continuous high profile event. We had CNN broadcasting live from inside the museum; we had media from all over the world that were there and, of course, another presidential visit. It was across town, but we had the media in town for that, that needed somewhere to go, and they came to the museum.

A few weeks prior to that, we had whetted their appetite in connection with kind of an unsavory thing. That was the impeachment of Governor Blagojevich. There were media from around the world that were in town for that.

Dirksen: And so, what was that? In 2000?

Blanchette: That was January of 2009.

Dirksen: Nine.

Blanchette: They were in town for that. Well, of course, impeachment proceedings weren't going on twenty-four/seven. So, I went over there and kind of stood around. When they were in a break in the action, I'd say, "You know, we've got this great library/museum, and the bicentennial coming up, why don't you come over and take a look?" A lot of them—CBS News, NBC News, CNN. CNN liked it so much, they decided to come back and broadcast live on Lincoln's birthday.

Dirksen: That's right.

Blanchette: So, you know, those are some of my favorite memories. Yeah, those are some of the favorite memories, I'd say.

Dirksen: Oh, you've got so many.

Blanchette: Um-hm.

Dirksen: Plus, you've made so many for people, because of your outstanding ability to tell the story. You have always done that, Dave.

The ALPLM has had two directors, Richard Norton Smith and Rick Beard. Richard, of course, was the first one. What do you see as their individual strengths and weaknesses, and how did this affect your job?

Blanchette: I believe I spoke about Richard Norton Smith in the earlier interview. He was undoubtedly the right person to choose to get the facility open and operating. He had so much experience with presidential libraries that he just knew what needed to be done. Even things that sounded crazy at the time have proven to be good, just because of that experience. I mean, you can't trade that experience for anything. So, his strength was in his experience, and he was very good about having contacts in the national media and political contacts, and he no trouble calling these people up and asking for favors. And they would often grant the favor.

Dirksen: Do this. Yes.

Blanchette: On the negative side, he wasn't the best people person, as far as relations with employees. I think that he felt extremely confined by the political environment in Illinois. I don't think he ever really got it, or, if he got it, he just refused to...

Dirksen: Chose not to see it?

Blanchette: ...to play the game. So, it was a constant source of strife. He liked certain employees; he didn't like certain employees. I was one of the ones he didn't. So, we constantly clashed, he and I, and he and some of the people that worked directly for him. And, in the best interest of everybody, he was able to hire his own communications manager to deal just with library/museum issues. I was still involved in library/museum promotion, but the day-to-day stuff, someone else dealing with Richard Norton Smith. And that suited everyone just fine.

Dirksen: Plus, you remained, of course...

Blanchette: Yeah, the overall IHPA communications manager. ick Beard: his strength was in quiet team building, I would say. He had a very good sense for how things would work, involving other institutions and entities and employees and volunteer groups. A lot of the successful ideas we had for the bicentennial began as Rick Beard ideas. I freely credit him, especially the Gettysburg Address simultaneous reading. That was his idea.

Dirksen: It was?

Blanchette: And that was one of the great successes of the bicentennial. He was very well liked by staff. He didn't tear down fences. He mended fences and built fences between people. So, as a result, among those of us that worked around the facility, he was very well liked, and we were certainly sorry to see him go. Although having to deal with...

Dirksen: With the aftermath, yes.

Blanchette: ...with the aftermath. I know why he had to go, but I was certainly sorry that it happened.

Dirksen: Yes, yes. If you could twirl a magic wand, what would you do for the ALPLM?

Blanchette: Oh, my. Whatever magic wand you have to use in Illinois, it's got to involve money. (chuckles) So, I think, have somebody very rich set up a trust fund for the library/museum (both laugh) that ensures its constant operation, so we wouldn't be subject to the vagaries and uncertainties of Illinois' budget situation and the political climate.

But also, to have something there that allows us to acquire things, as they become available. There's still a lot of Lincoln stuff out there that I'm sure we would like to have

or, at least, have a chance at having. So, it's got to be operational dollars. I don't think there's anything that was done wrong that needs fixing with the library or the museum. But, just a constant source of funds, I think, would be a good thing to have.

Dirksen: And maintain it like you were saying.

Blanchette: Yes.

Dirksen: Okay. Well, you did talk just briefly about this, Dave. I do want to expand on it just a little bit. This last year, the year 2009, was, of course, the Lincoln bicentennial celebration. Part of the thing was not only just here, but certainly across the United States. What were your responsibilities with the national, state and local commissions?

Blanchette: Okay. I had no responsibility with the national, although we did have conference calls and do certain joint things with them. Early in the process, when they formed the Illinois Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission—

Dirksen: This is the state one?

Blanchette: —this this is the state one, yes—they decided that I would be a good communications manager for that, as well. So, I added that. But that was good, because most of what the state of Illinois was doing, involved our agency in one way or another.

We started on the right foot with quite a bit of money for advertising and programming and grants, and then the budget cutting came. It got to the point where, if the budget wasn't cut, then it was frozen. We were getting very close to the bicentennial year. I believe it was probably early to mid-2008, and we realized that the states of Kentucky and Indiana had millions of dollars. They were spending...

Dirksen: Millions.

Blanchette: ...to promote their bicentennials. Here in Illinois, where we have by far the most Lincoln sites and Lincoln legacy, we weren't spending very much. In fact, almost nothing at all. And the decision had to be made: do we just wring our hands and hope that the money gets freed up, or do we just start looking at some non-traditional ways to promote the bicentennial? That was my main duty, how can we get publicity for this, without spending any money? So, Rick Beard came up with the Gettysburg Address simultaneous reading, trying to break the Guinness Book of World Records. That got worldwide publicity.

Dirksen: Tell us a little bit about that, because that was phenomenal.

Blanchette: We were trying to break the Guinness Book of World Records for the number of people reading the same document simultaneously. The old world record—that still exists—at two hundred thirty some odd thousand for reading Charlotte’s Web. So, we were doing this very last minute. We only had about a month to promote this. So, we put out the word, through the news media, and it got worldwide coverage. People all around the world were sending us notes, saying they were going to do it. The only thing that kept us from breaking the world record was, we didn’t have enough time to set up everything up. Guinness Book of World Records requires very strict ways of verifying that people participated. We didn’t really have enough time to get that out to everybody and make sure they filled it out and got it back in. But we still had over 180,000 people participating.

Now, we’re going to try that again in 2011 for the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. We’re going to try to read Lincoln’s Farewell Address to Springfield on February eleventh, the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of that.

We had people on an aircraft carrier. We had people in Europe, all over the United States, people in their cars reading it, so that we actually got sponsorship for some of that. Our marketing department was able to get some sponsorship. Almost everything else we did, no sponsorships, no advertising dollars. The only thing spent on it was my time in sending out news releases and setting up interviews. The twenty-four hour vigil, that was somebody’s idea.

Dirksen: That was here on the night before Lincoln’s birthday.

Blanchette: The night before Lincoln’s birthday, where people could see important documents all night. That was a huge success, got a lot of coverage. The president’s visit to speak, obviously, got a lot of coverage.

Dirksen: Yes. President Obama, he came here.

President Barack Obama with Dave Blanchette. Presidential advisor David Axelrod in the background in the green jacket.

President Obama was the featured speaker for the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial dinner on February 12th, 2009.



Blanchette: President Obama.

But some of the weird things, like the Post-It note portrait of Lincoln on the bridge between the two buildings, got a lot of attention.

Dirksen: Well, the birthday cards.

Blanchette: The birthday cards, yes.

Dirksen: Talk about that.

Blanchette: We just put out a news release saying... Well actually, the U.S. Postal Service, throughout the year, had to unveil the Lincoln bicentennial stamps somewhere. So, we said, "Well, do them at the Old State Capitol." So, they did. We make it easy for them to do events like this, and so they did that. After one of those events, we said, "We just come up with a hair brained idea, based on *Miracle on 34th Street*." I came up with this idea actually. Remember the scene in *Miracle on 34th Street*, where all the letters that have been written to Santa Claus throughout the years, the post office never knew where to deliver them?

Dirksen: Oh yes.

Blanchette: Suddenly this guy is in court. The judge rules that, yes, he's Santa Claus, so the Post Office dumps all the letters to Santa Claus right there in court. I said, wouldn't it be a great idea if we could be named the official mailing address for Abraham Lincoln, and people could send birthday cards? So, the U.S. Postal Service said, "Fine, you're the official mailing address. If they address it to Abraham Lincoln, it will go to you guys." So, we put out a news release, and we got thousands of birthday cards from the country, big and small, simple and elaborate, kids, senior citizens, and they just came in by the thousands. It was just a tremendous, participatory PR gimmick. PR gimmicks are one thing; participating, getting people to actually make something and send it in, that's a huge PR success, because it involves them. They feel like they've got some ownership in that. So, we got tremendous participation from that, and all we had to do was ask the Post Office, can we do this? and then put out a news release about it. It cost us nothing.

Dirksen: Going back, though, to what you said in the very beginning of this whole thing, is what was so amazing about the bicentennial celebration here in Illinois, is that the people that got together were so creative, because there were not the funds.

Blanchette: We did something else that involved spending money, but it wasn't our money. It was the Lincoln bicentennial motorcycle. We based that on a TV series and got the idea, let's make a circuit rider motorcycle. So, we convinced a local businessman, who was a car and...

Dirksen: A wealthy local businessman.

Blanchette: Right...a car and motorcycle enthusiast, to have a custom motorcycle designed on a Lincoln theme call it the *Circuit Rider*, in honor of Lincoln's riding the circuit as an attorney. So, it was designed and built, and then we rolled that thing out at a news conference. It has traveled all over the place promoting the bicentennial. Just, people come up, and they see it, and it attracts a different sort of crowd.

We knew that the success of the bicentennial would not be in attracting the people that always come to Lincoln events, the historians, the Lincoln enthusiasts. The success would be measured by attracting the people who don't normally come, and that's where we were really successful in a lot of these things. We attracted the stamp enthusiasts for the postage stamp, the motorcycle enthusiasts...

Dirksen: And the coin.

Blanchette: The coin, the Lincoln bicentennial coin. You know, just all these different ideas attracted a whole new type of person, and, hopefully, they went away being fans of Abraham Lincoln because of it.

Dirksen: Well, the enthusiasm, plus the numbers. The visitation numbers were strong, not only in Springfield. I mean, not only with the museum, but throughout Springfield and the area too.

So, a lot of that, Dave, is because of your outstanding work too. What do you think of the different celebrations? What do you think are some of the ones that Lincoln would be most proud of?

Blanchette: He doted on his kids. He and his wife were very permissive, but also loving, parents. I think anything that involves smiling, excited children, they would really approve of. The sending in of the birthday cards is a good example. The kids' events at the museum and at the various historic sites is another good example. The reading of the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln was self-taught, but he's probably one of our most poetic and literate presidents, an extremely good writer. If he saw 180,000 people, or knew 180,000 people—a good number of them children—were reading his words, all at the same time, I think he would be extremely proud of that.

Dirksen: The enthusiasm and just dedication of so many people to make that whole celebration what it was, was fabulous.

Blanchette: Yes.

Dirksen: Well, do you think that the celebration, the bicentennial celebration, has provided some ongoing legacy events that we can do or that will carry on the story of Lincoln?

Blanchette: I think so. We're talking about periodically bringing the the twenty-four hour vigil, where certain key Lincoln items could be viewed...

Dirksen: That would be good.

Blanchette: ...overnight. The simultaneous reading of a Lincoln document, that's definitely going to be brought back in the future. We've established a precedent for unveiling Lincoln-related postage stamps, Lincoln-related coinage, here in Springfield, at our local Lincoln sites. So, yeah, there are some legacy projects, and there will probably be projects, where the idea will be spawned from the bicentennial, where it won't be an exact duplicate of something we did here, but people got an idea, hey, they did that at the bicentennial; let's do it for event A or event B.

Dirksen: The other sites too. I mean, it's not that this was just all about the museum and the library, all the other historic sites.

Blanchette: In fact, it was mostly about the other sites, and the library/museum was a site. The Old State Capitol saw its visitation triple, I think, during a short timeframe. Lincoln Home numbers are astronomical. And each of those had a huge role. Lincoln Tomb, a lot of visitors there. So, the library/museum was a big site for the bicentennial, but it wasn't the only site. And let's not forget that the three times that Barack Obama was here, during his campaign for presidency and as president, none of them were at the museum. Two of them were at the Old State Capitol.

Dirksen: Yes.

Blanchette: You know, President Obama realizes, as do a lot of people, the importance of direct connection with an actual historic site. You know, the museum tells the story of history. The sites are history. So, having an event at the site is a direct connection to history. But, at the same time, you come into the museum, you get excited about history, and you want to go to that original site. It gets the juices flowing. It gets you excited and then you [sound of taking off]. It's the starting gate, and you get out of the starting gate, and you go on your journey of discovery.

Dirksen: Yes. Well, Dave, just a couple of more questions, because you are just so wonderful to share this time and knowledge and memories and everything with us. How do your current job responsibilities differ today from when you started back so long ago, now? How do they differ?

Blanchette: On a large scale, they don't differ at all. I'm still responsible for promoting each of the sites and what they do and the accomplishments and their special events and defending them when things go wrong. You know, that job has always been the same and always will be. It has changed a lot in the way that I communicate those things. It is much easier in a way, and it's much more

difficult in a way. It's much easier, because I can get the message out to so many people so quickly, right now.

Dirksen: How?

Blanchette: Electronically, through email, through radio news services, through satellite news feeds, when necessary. It's all very instantaneous, all very far-reaching. But, at the same time, it's a double edged sword. That means, if something goes wrong, a lot more people find out about it real quick. So, the calls and the emails come in very, very quickly, and they expect you to answer much more quickly. So, it's much more based on deadlines now than it used to be. But, by and large, the job's the same. The way that you do the job is slightly different.

Dirksen: Well, but aren't you involved now too with the different situation, in that you are no longer just with IHPA?

Blanchette: That's correct. I also represent the Capitol Development Board and its part of the reorganization of the communication manager corps in state government. So, when issues involving state construction projects come up, yes, I do represent CDB on those, and I give them the same effort that I give to the Historic Preservation Agency.

Dirksen: A man of all trades, right. You got it. (laughs)

Blanchette: Not all, but quite a few.

Dirksen: Okay. One last question. If you could go back to the beginning of your career, what or how would you change it?

Blanchette: If you're talking about the career with the state or the career in general?

Dirksen: Career in general. And then we can break it down to the state, but let's do the career in general.

Blanchette: I've never even thought about this question before, but...I often say that I have the best in state government.

Dirksen: You do say that.

Blanchette: And nothing that I've experienced in the twenty-two years I've been with the state or the thirty years I've been involved in journalism, has convinced me otherwise. I wouldn't change a thing.

Dirksen: You are a lucky man.

Blanchette: I am so lucky. I'm one of the most blessed people that I've ever met. I know I'm lucky to be where I'm at, and most days I enjoy every minute of it. I don't

think I'd change anything, because even the bad times have taught me something which I've been able to use. So...wouldn't change it.

Dirksen: Wow, you are lucky. So, would that apply too with any of your state position, besides the initial part of your career?

Blanchette: It applies everywhere, yes, but especially in the state position. You know, I'm very lucky to be where I'm at.

Dirksen: That's a nice way to end this. Thank you, Dave.

Blanchette: It's been my pleasure.

(End of interviews)