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# Getting SASSi with the History Advocate

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(with Karen Agutter JHSSA Editor)<sup>1</sup>***

## **The South Australian Stories Survey Initiative (SASSi)**

In March 2024, the History Trust of South Australia (HTSA) conducted a pilot project entitled South Australian Stories Survey Initiative (SASSi), which was designed by Kiera Lindsey, South Australia's inaugural History Advocate, in collaboration with CEO, Greg Mackie and consultant Dr Heidi Ing. The purpose of this initiative was to gather information about South Australia's history activities so that Lindsey could glean granular information about the state's history activities and advance data-driven advocacy in ways that reinforce state-wide history networks and identify potential stakeholders for future projects.

After five months of consultation and co-development with 50 organisations and individuals (October 2023 - February 2024), the SASSi pilot was launched on 4 March 2024. The launch was supported by a campaign involving the History Trust website, electronic email lists, community organisation websites, media outreach as well as numerous in-person presentations by the History Advocate. In total, well over 3000 individuals received information about SASSi, thanks in large part to the HTSA's active collaboration with key history organisations such as Genealogy SA;

Pioneers Association SA; History Council SA; Historical Society SA, and the Professional Historians Association SA.

Participants were asked to respond to twenty-one questions associated with their areas of interest, the geographical dimensions of the research, time periods under study, time spent per week on projects, sources of information used, communicating the project and its results. Respondents were also invited to identify any affiliations with other researchers or organisations. Looking towards the future, respondents were asked if they were interested in collaborations and what assistance they might seek to promote their projects and communicate their results.

In response, SASSi received 260 individual submissions covering 398 distinct SA history related projects which are currently in development, including in the early planning stages. Respondents were affiliated with 161 history-related organisations state-wide, ranging from the three State universities<sup>2</sup> and project partner organisations, to smaller organisations supported by the HTSA History Fund and Museums and Collections (MaC) programs.

Findings from the SASSi pilot were then presented at a well-attended free public event during the History Festival in May 2024. To ensure the history community has access to these findings, the SASSi presentation was also filmed and is now available on the History Trust's website ([www.history.sa.gov.au/south-australias-history-advocate/sassi-south-australian-stories-initiative](http://www.history.sa.gov.au/south-australias-history-advocate/sassi-south-australian-stories-initiative)).

Some of the key findings from SASSi include:

- The age range of respondents was 24 to 87 years old with the average age being 66.
- 53% held tertiary qualifications, with 18% holding PhDs.
- 96% of respondents were South Australian, but not necessarily living in the state or Australia.
- Combined, 45% respondents described themselves as 'enthusiasts' or 'volunteers', while 15% identified as a 'creative person'.
- Less than 10% identified as educators or academic historians. Likewise, as professional historians or working in the heritage sector.
- Respondents resided in 50 council districts, with 31% residing in regional South Australia.

For Lindsey, one of the most significant findings related to the average amount of time respondents dedicate to history activities each week: 15 hours or 2 days a week. 'This statistic speaks to the vital role of history for both individual and community wellbeing', she explains, 'and equips us with solid data with which to talk to councils and government about the vital role that history performs in meaning-making, community-making and everyday wellbeing'.

When it came to respondent's broad areas of interest, family history was the most popular, followed by local, then social history. Other broader areas of interest included built heritage, colonialism and

oral history. There was also a solid focus upon histories of women, museums, First Nation culture, and migration. The majority of respondents were interested in 19th and 20th century history, with just over 20% indicating a focus on 21st century history and under 10% on 'pre-colonial' and 'deep history'.

When asked if their project related to a specific geographical region:

- 51% indicated they were interested in SA 'as a whole'.
- 32.4% of projects were specifically focused on Adelaide City.
- Other regional areas that were well represented in projects included the Mid North; the Adelaide Hills; the Barossa, and the Fleurieu Peninsula.

The diversity and creativity of the individual projects was remarkable, from: efforts to preserve and maintain the Kalangadoo Railway Station in the State's south east; the establishment of interpretive walking trails on the Eyre Peninsula; researching the Cornish born on the Yorke Peninsula; a variety of heritage and history projects about individuals and stations in the Flinders ranges; the history of citrus growing in the Riverland; mapping German residences and businesses in colonial Adelaide, and a wide range of other projects which add compelling insight to our knowledge of South Australia's history and heritage. The methods of presentation were similarly varied, including books, websites and podcasts, photographic exhibitions and displays, oral histories, mapping, and capturing history in song.

Interestingly, there was a nearly equal split between projects described as solo initiatives and those described as collaborative. Across the two categories, approximately 80% were keen to collaborate with others and well over 50% welcomed assistance from the HTSA and the History Advocate in promoting their work. For Lindsey, this appetite for collaboration is another significant finding,



indicating that people are keen to work together to ‘give the past a future, now!’, she explained, by quoting the History Trust’s tagline.

South Australians’ love of, and interest in, our State’s history is well known and perhaps best illustrated by the ongoing and increasing success of the month long History Festival which is held in May each year. Nonetheless, another key finding from the survey highlights the growing problem associated with the thousands of South Australian history volunteers who have been caring for the state’s collections for decades. For example, when SASSi respondents were asked where they required most assistance, 71% indicated a need for more support in their community museums as they are largely reliant upon elderly volunteers and struggling to recruit from younger history enthusiasts. Other areas where respondents also requested support included communicating their work via publications; information on funding and grant writing; resource digitization, indexing, cataloguing and maintaining data and collections.

On the one hand, the SASSi survey paints an optimistic picture of the state of history in South Australia with an active and committed cohort of history enthusiasts and a diversity of projects being undertaken. However, there are also some worrying signs. In particular, the aging demographic identified by the survey confirms that South Australia can no longer afford to avoid the urgent need for generational renewal, or what Lindsey prefers to describe in terms of “intergenerational exchange” because this emphasises the powerful possibilities which

can be unleashed when people from different generations get together to share skills, insights and knowledge. ‘SASSi confirms that we need to work together to develop strategies that empower and inspire younger people to think of themselves as “history heroes and cultural custodians” who are not only equipped to care for our historical assets but also champion our unique stories.’ And for that to happen, she added, ‘across the state in ways that ensure solid and ongoing change, these strategies must also be sustainable and scalable’.

So, where to from here? In addition to identifying the areas of strength and weakness highlighted by the survey results, ‘our next step is to experiment with modestly sized projects’, Lindsey continued, ‘so we can work out how to address these issues and learn together as we go’. There is significant potential for further education around publishing and publicising projects across a wide range of mediums, to ensure that South Australian stories secure their deserved place within the national narrative. Future funding opportunities and fellowships will also help to cultivate greater collaboration among history enthusiasts and experts across the state. However, thanks to SASSi’s extensive media campaign, a number of individuals and organisations outside of South Australia’s history community have expressed interest in participating in future projects.

To this end, the History Advocate is currently in the planning stages of two ‘Catalyst Projects’ both conceived of as responses to the SASSi findings, and focused upon the priority area associated with stimulating greater intergenerational exchange. Both are being designed with the intention of having broad applicability but will commence as pilots which produce exemplars which attract further support and funding.

The first of these is entitled ‘Seen&Heard’ and is co-chaired by the History Advocate and Helen Connolly: Commissioner for Children & Young People & Lindsey, as History Advocate. Seen&Heard aims to encourage

young people to engage with the history of Adelaide's statues in ways that involve both critical and creative thinking. The working party hope to launch Seen&Heard at an event which will involve young people engaging with statues in theatrical, even traffic-stopping ways. In addition to providing young people with distinctive ways of being 'seen and heard' as history makers in Adelaide's CBD, this project is being designed to foster partnerships with heritage, arts and youth organisations in ways that will be sustainable and scalable.

The second 'Catalyst Project', 'History Heroines' is conceived of as a regional initiative involving a collaboration with HTSA, history organisations and the Girl Guides of South Australia. The History Advocate, Kiera Lindsey, and CEO of the Girl Guides SA, Melanie Dancer, are currently in discussion about a pilot project that would partner with regional history and Girl Guide groups on the delivery of activities which train young women in basic history skills such as digitizing, oral history, collections management and curation, so they can develop competencies in history-making activities and volunteer within their local communities.

In conclusion, SASSi offers a compelling snapshot of the current status of history practices in South Australia today. In addition to highlighting many strengths, the survey findings confirm there is an urgent need for considered and collaborative action if we are to ensure history both as a practice and passion survives, let alone thrives. While the History Trust of South Australia remains committed to energetically supporting history through a raft of programs and enterprises which champion both individual and organizational history-making, the future depends upon the history community seeking out new partners in public and private enterprise with whom they can develop fresh approaches which empower younger generations to see they have a future in history. 'We would do well', as Lindsey remarked at the opening of her presentation on SASSi during the History

Festival, 'to embrace the edict of that famous advocate Helen Keller: "Alone we can do so little; together so much"'.

If you would like to be part of the solution the History Advocate can be contacted through the History Trust of South Australia.

#### **About the author**

The History Advocate is the History Trust's principal public spokesperson on South Australian history. In this capacity, Kiera undertakes research, provides advocacy and outreach to historical organisations, individual practitioners and the broader community, while also guiding the sharing and telling of the diverse stories to bring our history into focus for present and future generations and give the past a future – now.

#### **Endnotes**

1. This article is based on material supplied by South Australia's History Advocate, Dr Kiera Lindsey, as well as a subsequent interview conducted by Dr Karen Agutter (JHSSA Editor) on 8 July 2024.
2. University of Adelaide, Flinders University and The University of South Australia.