Good afternoon. I’m here today to offer a welcome to a new sister organization, on behalf of the Symposium on Ohio Valley Urban and Historic Archaeology. I’m happy to see that historical archaeology has the critical mass of investigators to put new regional groups together. I also congratulate your organizers for coming up with a much less cumbersome name and acronym than our group has.

I’d like to give you a quick perspective on the Ohio Valley group. I do not presume to present our organization as a model for you to follow. But I hope that knowing something of the problems we’ve run into might help you steer clear of them, and maybe make your organizing efforts just a little bit smoother.

First, to call the Ohio Valley Symposium an “organization” is a overstatement the case. If you’ve looked at any of our publications (and there’s still time to buy copies for your very own library), you may see a list of officers, editorial consultants, and of course editor in
chief. In the more recent editions, my name is listed as President and Secretary-Treasurer. Actually, the more accurate title probably would be “Dictator for Life.” I am serving as the primary coordinator and contact point until the next coup, or until somebody volunteers, which so far nobody has shown any inclination to do.

The Ohio Valley Symposium began as a one-shot conference at the University of Louisville in 1983. Joe Granger got some seed money from his dean, and brought in Marley Brown as a discussant. The papers were a mixed lot, ranging from “Gunflints I have found” to some fairly informed attempts at establishing and testing patterns of settlement and socioeconomic variation. Just the idea that we got 40 or 50 people together to discuss historic sites in the region was a shot in the arm. Granger, with Phil DiBlasi and Don Ball, published a proceedings of the conference as well, which was an important addition to the very scant literature for the region.

Since then, we’ve managed to convene the symposium every year. We’ve published volumes representing most years, although we have not maintained a yearly schedule.

We are not a membership organization. That is, we have no dues structure. We do keep a mailing list, and we consider everyone who has participated in the conference to
be a member. One of my duties as dictator for life is to maintain the mailing list.

I also keep the money. I use an agency account held by my university, which doesn’t earn us any interest but keeps me from any IRS income problems. I usually serve as program chair of the conference.

Our symposium meets in a different place each year. We depend on colleagues to volunteer to host it, and so far we haven’t had much trouble finding somebody willing to do it. I can always host it in western Kentucky if we lack another site. Since it’s a small group, maybe as many as fifty attendees in a good year, the local arrangements take some attention but not a great deal of work. We try to keep the registration fee to the minimum necessary to cover costs. We usually have enough papers to hold a full day’s session, occasionally we spill over to a day and a half. We’ve found that if we can arrange a lunch at a designated restaurant nearby, we can keep people together and get an audience back on time to start the afternoon session.

I also keep the proceedings volumes, and more recently, have published them. So every once in a while I deposit a check and pack up a few volumes to mail. Of course, after each meeting, I have a bigger pile of money to process, but that’s only once a year. Publishing the volume means taking
the camera-ready copy submitted by the editor, dropping off at the printer, and picking it up two weeks later.

So all of that is my function as dictator for life. It’s really little more than coordination and accounting, and takes only a few days of work per year when you add it all up. That’s the easy part.

The hard part is editing the volumes. That takes real dedication, and that’s where we’ve had the most trouble.

Our first editors produced five annual volumes in pretty good order, and then bogged down on number six. Volume six eventually achieved almost mythical status--we could reference almost anything to Volume 6 in press, manifestos, masterpieces of synthesis, magnum opus of theory, with the confidence that nobody would ever actually see a copy.

After several years of waiting for Volume 6, during which no further proceedings were issued, either, we noticed a drop in conference attendance, as our participants lost confidence in the publication program. The one exception was our 10th meeting, convened by Charlie Faulkner in Knoxville. He got out a proceedings volume as a special publication of the Tennessee Anthropological Association, and thereby reminded us that it could be done.

A year later, several of us staged a barroom coup, which resulted in a new slate of organizers and a new
editor. This is when I achieved my dictatorship status, which was my punishment for coming late to the meeting. Take heed!

The new editor got hold of the submitted papers for volumes 7 and 8, and combined them into a single volume. He also produced Volume 10 for 1993. Thanks to improvements in desktop publishing, he brought a whole new look to the volumes, making them much more professional in appearance. With the new volumes, we also completed plans to change the title to Ohio Valley Historical Archaeology, pushing it more toward journal status.

Once again, however, the publication program bogged down for several years. Volume 11 from 1994 still is not in print. In frustration, I consulted with interested colleagues, and we appointed yet another new editor, Don Ball. Don apparently had bought himself a new computer and need something to justify it. He has produced two volumes in quick succession, Volume 12 from the 1997 conference to get us back to currency, and Volume 6, resurrected from the land of myth and fable. Volumes 11, a catch-up representing the gap years of 1994, 95, and 96, and 13 for 1998, are well on the way and should be in print by the end of the calendar year. So we are almost back on track, and are hoping that our credibility will be restored fairly soon.
By comparison, the Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology publishes some very well-produced volumes. I have the impression that their publication program is much more regular than ours, and I don’t know whether their early experience paralleled ours. Their organization is based on annual dues. The Ohio Valley region, and I suspect the region that you all represent, is not nearly so populated with historical archaeologists as the northeast. The Ohio Valley doesn’t have the sustaining population of colleagues, and so far not the will, to create anything nearly so structured.

There are a couple of morals to this story. An organization like ours needs a couple of individuals who are willing to carry it. This is the function that Charlie Faulkner served so admirably for the Tennessee Anthropological Association for many years. I wonder if many people really appreciate the service he performed, and I wish Kevin Smith the best of luck in taking over.

The hard part, and the crucial part, is editing the proceedings. The proceedings, published on a reasonably regular and timely basis, carry the credibility of the conference. When the proceedings bog down for any length of time, fewer papers are delivered at the conferences, and fewer colleagues attend. The organization can easily fail.
We have tried to spread the work load, by appointing consulting editors, reviewing editors, co-editors. The more people that are involved, the more the chain analogy comes into effect: the chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Some of the delays in publication have to do with a reviewing editor not coming through, holding up everything else. So, anyone who offers to help has to mean it, and follow through.

I’m beginning to suspect that three or four volumes are as much as we can expect from an editor. After that, the task becomes a major chore, delays become overwhelming, and things fall apart. If there’s any lesson for you from our experience, that’s probably it: the editor needs a lot of support, and an expectation of passing the job on to someone else when he or she has had enough.

Well, thanks for your time, and good luck. I congratulate the organizers of this event, and look forward to your success.