

THE CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL MUSEUM¹

During the winter of 1924-25 I introduced a course combining American and Minnesota history in the Cambridge High School. In presenting it I wished to emphasize the local approach to history. Like many teachers of history I frequently brought into the classroom or encouraged my pupils to bring in articles illustrative of the topic under consideration, especially when the objects were connected with the history of the locality. Such material, however, could be kept for only a few weeks and it often was not available when it might have been most useful. As a result the idea of establishing a small historical museum to preserve such material permanently was developed. The superintendent of public schools was consulted, and he not only approved of the plan but consented to furnish a room. The problem of equipping the room then had to be faced, but this was solved when the senior class of 1925 presented about two hundred dollars with which to purchase cases and other equipment.

We decided at once that, although the museum could be thrown open for a public display now and then,—at least once a year,—in order to justify its existence it must be made to serve the real purposes of education and be used chiefly in classroom activities. Its value for the latter purpose was soon demonstrated when a fourth grade teacher, who was using Buck's *Stories of Early Minnesota* as reading material, desired to stimulate interest in her reading class. When her pupils were reading the chapter on the Sioux Indian we worked up an Indian display for her class, using as many of the objects mentioned in the chapter as it was possible to collect. The

¹A talk on the founding of this museum and on local history activity in Isanti County was presented by Mr. Troelstrup at the seventy-seventh annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society at St. Paul on January 11, 1926. For an abstract of this talk see *ante*, 7: 43. *Ed.*

teacher expressed her appreciation of the results by saying, "I wish we could have more displays like this." Not long after we were asked if we would set up our Swedish collection for the seventh grade geography class. We tried to reproduce as accurately as possible the household utensils, furniture, and the like that would be found in a typical Swedish home in the old country. In this display was a pair of wooden shoes that had been made by a Swedish resident in Isanti County. Almost immediately a few of the girls in the class protested that something was wrong, and finally one girl piped out that she had never heard of wooden shoes in Sweden. Very soon the whole class was pouring out arguments pro and con. The problem was not solved until the following day, when the pupils presented evidence secured from books and parents. Problem solving, even on a small scale, seems to increase the interest of the child. One wonders if these children did not learn something about the determination of social fact.

The museum was a real help in the Cambridge high school classes. In my course in American and Minnesota history, numerous relics, articles, and manuscripts were brought to class — some for project work, a few to create atmosphere, and others to visualize environment. In studying the American Indian, the class planned a display of Indian relics. Each member was asked to bring in all the articles he could find bearing on the problem. The net result was surprising, to say the least, possibly because Cambridge is located in the Chippewa country. It seemed as though these pupils must have searched every attic, barn, and Indian grave in the county. It became a real problem to find storage room, and we found it necessary to accept only such material as would have classroom value.

Incidentally this bit of exploration brought to light several letters, a diary, and other documentary materials of minor importance, which later were used as the basis for term theses. The local women's club became so interested in the work that

it offered three prizes of five, three, and two dollars for the best papers on Isanti County history. Something like fifty papers were submitted. The best papers were those based on diaries, old letters, newspapers, and interviews with the old settlers of the community. In a few cases these interviews stimulated the old-timers to send in valuable relics and written information on various phases of the county's early history, which had remained practically a closed book up to this time. The best of the papers on local history produced in the class were preserved, but not to gather dust. Succeeding classes made use of many of the papers, and calls came from the neighboring towns where people had heard of our work.

The senior social science class was studying the problem of immigration. The students peeped into grandma's long-forgotten chest in order to locate letters written by relatives or friends in Sweden or other European countries to the immigrants, or sent by loved ones in America to those left behind in the Old World. A few "America letters," in which immigrants told of conditions in the New World, were located. From these the class tried to answer such questions as the following: Why did so and so leave the old country? What were the attractions in Isanti County, Minnesota, and America? What were the newcomers' first impressions here? Did they all feel like one who wrote, "If I had money I would go back"? How did these people influence our community, state, and nation? These questions and many more could be answered by a careful study of published source materials relating to immigration,² but most students would regard such book work as drudgery. The interest stimulated by local curiosity would be lacking. I had found some of the books on the subject fascinating, but it is quite another problem to transfer

² For example George M. Stephenson, "Typical 'America Letters,'" in the Swedish Historical Society of America, *Year-Books*, 7: 52-98 (St. Paul, 1922); and Theodore C. Blegen, *Ole Rynning's True Account of America* (Norwegian-American Historical Association, *Travel and Description Series*, vol. 1 — Minneapolis, 1926).

that fascination to students. The local material seemed to serve as a stimulant of no mean strength. For example, one girl located a letter dated "*Stockholm den 3 Augusti 1869,*" addressed to her grandfather. The problem of translating the letter was solved when another student volunteered his services. On the very next day the class gave evidence of its curiosity to know the contents of that letter. A scholar, perhaps, would not find this letter very different from hundreds of others from Sweden, but the class considered it a "find." It suggested the idea of making a collection of old letters for the museum. A few of the letters aroused interesting class discussions as to the value of such evidence, the ability of the writer, his position, education, and the like. This line of thought developed in a simple way the laws of historical evidence, which are always rather difficult to introduce to high school students.

In a similar way the social science class attacked a problem relating to an old Swedish chest, dated 1766, which had been donated to the museum. In size it was similar to a modern "hope" chest. Strong iron bands supported the corners, ends, and center. Wooden pegs were used for the most part in fastening it together. The key was one of those old iron models, about six inches long and two and a half inches wide at the largest point. Members of the class prepared a list of possible problems relating to the chest. A few of these problems might be mentioned as examples of the thinking processes and activities of the students: Was the chest made in Sweden? How do we know? Is it not possible that the date 1766 was carved at a later date? Why were both wooden and iron nails used? Will this throw any light on the age of the chest? Is it possible to trace its wanderings from the time that it left Sweden to the present? These questions indicate what was going on behind the scenes. A few of the problems were not solved. One boy, more inquisitive than the others in the class, decided to look into "this chest business," as he preferred to call it. He proceeded to investigate

by interviewing the donor. He was given a list of people who might give him more information, and before he had completed the project he had had several interviews. The results of his investigation were made known to the whole group through a report. The material in this report, while not dealing entirely with immigration,—for there was a romance connected with the history of the chest,—revealed considerable information. Interest in this problem was not limited to the social science class. The English department used the question as the basis for a theme. A few of the papers thus prepared were later modified and accepted as history themes.

One of the most valuable features of the museum project was the location and use of a few local sources by the students. People seem to be exceedingly niggardly when it comes to releasing old letters, diaries, business records, and the like. One has to play the part of a beggar with considerable tact and intelligence in order to secure such materials. Old newspapers were given more freely and with fewer strings attached than manuscripts. We were fortunate in locating three bound volumes of the *Isanti County Press*, published from 1874 to 1881, which were used extensively in preparing history theses on the early development of the county. On the basis of this material one student wrote a paper in which he traced the "Early Development of Transportation in Isanti County," from stagecoach days, through the period of the local fights for better roads, to the coming of the railroad; and he told how a decision of the Minnesota supreme court relating to the Lake Superior and Mississippi Railroad created a "profound sensation in the city" of Cambridge. Another student chose as his topic "Local Interest in National Politics in 1880." He quoted the *Press* of May 13, 1880, as stating that "Isanti County speaks for Blaine. H. F. Barker and Lyman Brown, both strong Blaine men, sent as delegates to state convention. Barker attended National Convention at

Chicago to 'whoop 'er up for Blaine.'” When the Ohio and Indiana elections went Republican, he quoted the *Press* again: “Three cheers and ten tigers for Ohio and Indiana.” An interesting example of the use of “dirty” money in politics to purchase an office was brought out by a student who prepared a paper on “Local Politics in 1880.” He quoted the *Rush City Post* of November, 1880, as follows: “One of the remarkable features of this Republican government is that a man can spend \$500 to be elected to an office with a salary of \$400 a year. That’s what Squire Barker done for the County Attorneyship of Isanti County.”⁸ The *Isanti County Press* answered the charge by saying that this was a lie, “But if you promise not to lie any more about our worthy Attorney Barker, we will promise not to lie any more or throw any mud at your Attorney Norgood.” Stories of Boss Tweed would mean little to pupils in a small Minnesota town, but a report on a county mass meeting which nominated county officers in October, 1878, made clear for them the meaning of boss control. The writer of this report quoted the *Isanti County Press* to the effect that the meeting was “both a mass and a fraud. . . . The fraud consisted in the Nesbitt ring, while pretending to hold a mass meeting irrespective of party, deliberately packing the convention by postal cards and other means addressed to leading Democrats urging them to attend, and by organizing with a Democratic chairman.”

The matter of simplification and reduction of taxes has been for some time an important and interesting problem to those who “foot the bill.” But to high school boys and girls taxes usually mean little or nothing. What can be done to create interest and drive out hibernating curiosity on this subject? In my class this problem was solved in part at least by using local sources. One member of the class, who prepared a paper on “Local Attitudes on Taxation in 1878 and 1927,” quoted the following letter from the *Press* of August 1, 1878:

⁸ Quoted by the *Isanti County Press*, November 25, 1880.

EDITOR ISANTI PRESS,

I sea in your last paiper the comisoners have abaited the ackstra kost and interest on the back tackses. Now I just tell you, I want som money back too. I pad mi tackses as soon as I cud, so as to not to hav now given as to understand that longer wi wate the better it is for us and the cheeper it will be. Now I shall just remember this in the coming times, and I bet thee all do the sam. I sea if we wate long enuff wi wont have to pai at all. . . . For being a good paier I will sine myself.

A POOR OLD PHOOL

The editor remarked that this letter was representative of public opinion in 1878. Obviously, the writer was a better taxpayer than a letter-writer.

One student took as his subject for investigation "Early Educational Problems." His paper was exceedingly long, but it incorporated interesting and valuable material. For instance, the type of school that might have been found in Isanti County in pioneer days is revealed in the following quotation from an "Inventory report to the County Superintendent of Schools" published in the *Press* of October 27, 1876:

Number of visits from Director? None. Clerk? One. Treasurer? None. Co. Supt.? One. Other persons? None. Has the schoolhouse been kept in general repair? No. Has the school room been properly supplied? No. How is it ventilated? By cracks in the floor. Have the windows blinds, curtains or neither? Neither. How many blackboards? One. Condition? Bad. What wall maps? None. Charts? Not any. Globe? None. Dictionary? None.

The school house would make a good jail, but for the reason that the persons might get through the cracks.

The last statement was attached to the inventory presumably by the teacher. She indicated that she had been in only one fight, but that she was arrested for "Assault and battery." She was concerned in "two lawsuits" during the brief term. What student would not be interested in education if given the opportunity to use live sources such as these?

Through the use of material collected for the museum the students obtained a feeling for sources that is so essential

for a just appreciation of the significance of local history. Just as a good teacher in the science laboratory desires to impress upon his pupils the process rather than the mere knowledge of an experiment, so the teacher of history sends his student to the sources to learn the art of historical mindedness. Local history is his laboratory. The museum proved valuable in stimulating a fundamental and abiding interest in history, which became something more than dates, terms, and dry books. The students peeped at history in the making through letters, diaries, deeds, newspapers, and the like; they lived with the pioneer in his political, religious, industrial, and social activities. They listened to tales of "wild land speculations" in 1876, when their city was "totally abandoned and the only visible sign of it . . . was the beautiful map recorded in the office of the Register of Deeds." *Sic transit gloria mundi*. Their study of religious development took them to the meetings conducted by pioneer circuit riders, where they witnessed "many wonderful things — four different skulls of John the Baptist, one skull of Simon Peter." These riders had some difficulties in Cambridge, for, according to the *Press* of January 21, 1875, the sheriff threw a favorite missionary in jail for "breaking in the schoolhouse . . . and then chopped up the Bible." Politically, the students participated in local, state, and national elections. They attended the "Big Republican Rally" of October 31, 1878, at the Isanti County court house, where the air was filled with slogans like "Rally around the flag boys, rally once again," "Don't go back on the party that gave us 160 acres of land," "Secure your staterooms in Nesbitt's Ark which will positively leave on time Wednesday morning." In a broad sense it may be said that the possibilities for correlating the museum collections with the work of departments other than history and the grades is as broad as the directing mind.

It is hoped that this brief review of what has been accomplished with the aid of a school museum will be of value to

teachers who really desire to improve their classes — who dare to introduce “something different.” While it is not claimed that there is anything new in this method, as there have been several pioneers in the field, it is practically certain that few teachers are using such methods today. It might be pointed out finally, that the one regret of those who have tried the museum idea is that they did not earlier put into use this vital and important educational aid.

ARCHIE W. TROELSTRUP

HINSDALE TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL
HINSDALE, ILLINOIS



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