

## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### A SCHOOL PROJECT IN LOCAL HISTORICAL RESEARCH

KERKHOVEN, MINNESOTA, April 28, 1931

TO THE EDITOR:

In response to your request I am giving below a brief résumé of a project in student historical research that I have launched at Kerkhoven.<sup>1</sup> I shall be glad to have you use the results of this experiment in any way you wish. If you know of others who are working along similar lines, I should like to exchange ideas and experiences with them. Perhaps I should state that I am certain that one less burdened with administrative responsibilities could carry out such an activity with much more satisfactory results.

After the Swift County Historical Society had been organized, I soon found that the task of collecting historical materials for its library—in the face of insufficient funds and lack of interested and trained individuals who had time for volunteer work—was quite beyond my own resources. The county newspapers responded quickly to a request for copies of each week's issue and in the storeroom of my office at Kerkhoven I began to build up a newspaper file dating from September, 1930. In addition a clipping file was started and kept up to date with the receipt of each issue of the local papers. But this is only a part of what an historical society should be doing. In our particular county seventy years had slipped by before any local effort was made to preserve the memories and incidents of the past. Our problem became: how shall we get the materials of the past into our files?

On several occasions I had thrown out the suggestion that we should be able to enlist the aid of history teachers in our local schools in getting our older boys and girls to do some of the necessary research work. This would be of great value to the

<sup>1</sup> The writer is superintendent of the Kerkhoven Public School and secretary of the Swift County Historical Society. *Ed.*

society and at the same time give to the students an insight into the making of history which few today acquire from their textbooks. Since my suggestions did not seem to bring forth much coöperative response, I concluded that it would be wise for me to undertake an experiment with an eleventh-grade American history class I was teaching to see whether such a program was actually practical.

In order to familiarize the students with the general outline of their local history, and also to convey to them the idea that there is a great deal of real history right at home, a week was set aside for a careful study of a *History of Swift County*, published by the Swift County Historical Society in 1930.<sup>2</sup> During the week I suggested that each member of the class could become an historian by helping to start the work of collecting factual materials and, to the best of his ability, writing a little essay on what he found. I tempted the students with the promise that their articles would be published in the local paper.<sup>3</sup> In the steps that followed—selecting research subjects, planning procedures, offering suggestions, and the like—I assumed the leadership. Topics were so distributed that only one student worked on a given subject, but whenever possible an individual was given a subject in which he was especially interested or on which he had easy access to materials. The absence of adequate documentary data made it necessary to pursue the investigations largely by talking with the older members of the community. Some township, school, and church records were used. After the project was once under way I allowed the students to complete it to the best of their abilities, neither hurrying them along nor putting too much of myself into the organization of the papers. I wished to see how well high school students could carry on such activities with a minimum of assistance. A few illustrations of the topics used follow: histories of Hayes and Sunburg townships, the Kerkhoven Lutheran Church, incidents in the life of the grandfather

<sup>2</sup> This volume, which is the work of Mr. Anonsen, is reviewed *ante*, 11: 434-436. *Ed.*

<sup>3</sup> For a list of some of the essays published in the *Kerkhoven Banner* before April 1, see *post*, p. 210. *Ed.*

of one of the writers, the store of O. Thonvold and Son, H. A. Steen's railroad career, and the medical profession in Kerkhoven.

Some of the papers were not very well organized, others were not as complete as they should have been, and several did not materialize, either because no sources could be found or because of the student's mental indifference. The majority of the students, however, particularly the upper third, showed themselves capable of collecting facts and putting them into such form that they could be preserved for future use. One student unearthed an old letter written from Sweden thirty years ago. If we get our boys and girls to rummaging around in trunks and attics with a definite purpose in mind, important documents are certain to come to light. Not the least interesting phase of the project was the weekly publication of some of the better essays in the *Kerkhoven Banner*. One week the editor made a real "scoop," for the student article that he received, on the "History of the East Salem Church," happened to come at the exact date of its fiftieth anniversary celebration.

What of the future? Would it not be ideal to make the project county-wide? History and social science teachers could make a practice of meeting at the county seat early in the fall each year to stimulate interest in local historical work, to arouse the enthusiasm of new arrivals, and to plan a definite program for the year. The society may have definite problems to meet, and it can ask the schools to consider these during the year. For the first few years I should suggest that the topics be of diverse and much scattered types, so that all our resources may be plumbed. I include social science teachers because they could assist materially with topics on government, economics, and sociology. Over a period of years a mass of material could be accumulated, which, if used judiciously by the society, could furnish the details for a true picture of the development of Swift County.

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