

Minnesota History and the Schools

COMMUNITY HISTORY IN THE MILACA HIGH SCHOOL¹

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ONE OF THE major concerns of American secondary school teachers is the development of effective citizens. Today the crucial state of social conditions at home and the attacks of totalitarianism abroad make education for citizenship a vital necessity for the national welfare. In an effort to do a more competent job of education for citizenship, teachers have stressed the development of democratic procedures in the classroom, practice in the process of reflective thinking, and a more extensive study of contemporary problems. Pupils are given an opportunity to participate in proposing, planning, executing, and evaluating learning activities.

An opportunity to see and understand their own community was given the seniors in the Milaca High School in 1941-42, when they spent the entire year studying their town as a project in social science. They chose as their topic "What Makes Our Town Tick?"

The class was organized into various committees to collect material on such topics as the area, the physical setting, history, population, farms, buying and selling, manufacturing, finance, transportation, communication, occupations, distribution of wealth, standard of living, health, education, churches, government and politics, recreation, social ideas and standards, national defense, and the like.

Each committee was composed of a chairman and five members. They first read a good deal of material on their topics, and then they went out into the community to see how their findings applied to their town. The class next began to piece the entire pattern together through field trips and classroom discussions. They consulted with local businessmen to learn about their business experience; they

¹ Further details regarding this project may be obtained by addressing the author at the Stillwater High School, Stillwater, Minnesota.

asked a good many questions, and discussed each function of the community with a large number of local citizens.

Milaca is a dairy center, so the study began with a survey and personal observation of the chief industry, dairying. The students visited the local co-operative creamery, viewed it in operation, saw the making of butter, powdered milk, and other products, and then began to study the problems of dairy farming. Land and land ownership next attracted their attention, and they continued with a study of the history of the area from Milaca's founding as a lumbering village in 1885. The material uncovered for the early history of the town came from interviews with old settlers living within the area and from the files of the *Mille Lacs County Times*. A good deal of valuable information about pioneer days was discovered. In an early issue of the county paper, for example, the students learned why Milaca happened to be the county seat; they found that there was rivalry between towns, and that Milaca was chosen because it is nearer the geographic center of the county than Princeton. The students learned a good many interesting yarns, and collected pictures of the first saloon in Milaca, the Indian camps on Big Eddy Hill, lumbering activities, the Hinckley fire of September, 1894, and numerous other subjects of historic interest. The town became the curriculum, and the students with great enthusiasm and sincere interest pushed their study to find what made their town's smallest gears mesh. All the occupations within the community were studied in order to learn how the individual satisfies his wants and needs. Living standards, problems of health and education, and the local, state, and federal governments in relation to the community were observed at first hand. The class also examined local politics, recreation, social ideas, standards, and similar matters until they had the complete story of their town.

After completing their fact-finding work, the students decided to give the facts and their evaluation of them permanence. They did this by preparing a book entitled "Our Town." In their work they received the co-operation of the local newspaper, which made available all its cuts, among them some that were over fifty years old. The students at once realized that they would make the results of

their study clearer by using pictures. But how was this to be done without incurring enormous expense? They experimented with the cuts and found that they could obtain good reproductions merely by rolling printer's ink on the cuts and transferring the pictures onto sheets of paper placed over them. With a little practice, they obtained satisfactory results. The cuts were then cleaned and returned to the files. This gave the students over a hundred pictures, some measuring eight by ten inches, for their book.

Student editors and committees went to work and organized into chapters the material that they had gathered by means of interviews, personal observations, and the reading of records on such subjects as early days, population, government, clubs and lodges, transportation, economic trends, and education. When the writing was completed, three typewritten copies of the work were made, the pictures were inserted, and the manuscript was sent to Minneapolis, where for a very nominal fee a publisher put on covers and plastic bindings. Thus three copies of "Our Town" were produced. One was placed in the Milaca High School library, a second in the village library, and the third was sent on request to the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul.

In studying the community the class saw so much of the interior mechanism that makes it tick that they decided to film the story, thus making a movie for a public showing. This would take money, however, and since there was none available, the students had to raise it. They did so by forming a corporation and selling stock. The class was organized as a corporation, a charter and bylaws were written, and a board of directors was elected. Stock was sold for twenty-five cents a share, and bonds paying ten per cent interest were sold at fifty cents each. The corporation was capitalized at fifty dollars.

Using "Our Town" as the story, scenarios were written and scripts prepared. With a great deal of enthusiasm, but no technical knowledge, the students set out to make their movie. They borrowed sixteen-millimeter cameras from camera fans, who helped to train student cameramen. Student technicians made lighting and editing equipment from odds and ends in the industrial training classes. For

experience, they first made a short eight-millimeter film. More training in camera operations, acting, directing, cutting, and editing followed. Finally the cry "Lights! Action! Camera!" was heard, and the students exposed eighteen hundred feet of sixteen-millimeter sound film as they trained their lens on the community. The shooting of the film was the center of attention for the entire community, and excellent co-operation was obtained from everyone in town. The major share of the work was done during Easter vacation, but the students were so busy they scarcely knew there was a vacation.

A good deal of work went into the cutting, editing, musical background, sound, and narration of the film. Since so much interest had been developed in the community and county, it was very easy to sell tickets to fill to capacity the school auditorium for the showing of the film. In its technical qualities, the film far surpassed the expectations of the most optimistic parent. The students decided that the proceeds would go to the American Red Cross. The showing was a tremendous financial success, and gate receipts amounting to two hundred and fifty dollars were turned over to the Red Cross.

The results of this project reach far beyond the financial success of the film, for ninety-six students gained training in meeting people, in writing and making a book, and in motion picture techniques. As a result of the technical training received in photography, a large number of boys and girls turned to this activity as a hobby. Members of the class gained an insight into their own community that will make them more useful citizens. In addition, the entire community attained a new view of the town, and acquired pride in its past achievements and a reasonable degree of faith in its future possibilities.

Too often the pupil learns what happened a thousand years ago without learning what is happening now. He is taught to admire the wonders of Athens, Rome, and Sparta without knowing what local city councils, mayors, county commissioners, and the like really are. He is taken to visit in imagination the forum, without ever seeing with his own eyes the inside of his own city hall!

In a project of the type described herewith a good deal of caution must be exercised. First, the teacher and the class must sell the proj-

ect to the school and the community. The teacher must remember to be tactful in his research and observations. Before visiting a bank, store, factory, or court, he should make all arrangements with those in charge. Thus he will avoid disappointment and ensure appreciation of the purpose of the visit. To guard against spending a disproportionate amount of time on one aspect of the subject, it should be clearly outlined in advance. The outline of a "Community Survey of Cumberland, Wisconsin," in Edgar B. Wesley's book on *Teaching the Social Studies* (Boston, 1942), will prove very helpful. A high degree of resourcefulness on the part of the teacher, the development of reliable student leaders, and a good deal of co-operation from the community are required. The teacher must be conscious of the fact that he is teaching not just in a town but in a particular town, and he should see that his pupils, likewise, acquire an interest in the local community and have a real desire to contribute to its welfare.

Although no one wishes to inculcate in his students a blatant provincialism, everyone recognizes the emotional values that spring from local pride and a feeling of attachment to the community. That the pupils at Milaca became better citizens as a result of their participation in the community project described herewith is the belief of the writer.



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