

Minnesota History and the Schools

THE EDUCATIONAL SERVICES OF THE CLAY COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM

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A HISTORICAL MUSEUM may serve as a safe depository for historically valuable materials, as well as for items and materials that may in time become valuable; as an exhibition place where visitors can find entertainment and receive information; a place where both children and adults can receive instruction from trained guides; a source for materials that can be used to illustrate informative talks before various community groups or classes; a place where student groups or individuals can do research; and a place where basic information can be found to supplement and illustrate class work in the social studies and in English, in order to help the pupils develop an understanding of different areas at various times and to stimulate them to re-create life in the past.

A museum that is housed in a school has decided advantages, for the instructional utilization of its holdings is increased by its mere accessibility. The Clay County Historical Society's museum, which was established in 1936 in conjunction with the PWA program, secured two rooms in the Moorhead State Teachers College. A record of historic materials in the vicinity had been retained since 1925, when an earlier history project sponsored a splendid exhibit. With this list as an aid, the workers made rapid progress. Within a year, six thousand items were collected. At present the museum's holdings number fifteen thousand. It is now engaged in gathering county war history materials under the auspices of a county-wide committee of volunteer workers.

How has this museum been utilized by various groups for educational purposes? In the main, three methods were used. First, certain items were selected to illustrate lectures before various community

groups. Second, talks were given to groups of pupils who visited the museum in order to provide them with a background of information about the displays. Third, museum materials were used in research work done by class groups all the way from the fourth grade through college.

On numerous occasions the president of the Clay County Historical Society used objects from its museum to illustrate lectures presented before Parent-Teacher associations, community clubs, or service groups. She gave twenty talks on such subjects as "Indian Tools and Art," "The Vikings in the Red River Valley," "An English Colonization Project," "The First County Newspaper and Its Features," and "Old Township Records Tell a Tale."

For the thirty-six schools, including many from rural districts, that visited the museum in the school year 1939-40, a thirty- to fifty-minute illustrative talk was prepared, in which the backgrounds for the exhibits were explained before the pupils viewed them. Students as a rule do not see very much of historic value in museum displays without such a preliminary survey. The value and interest of the Clay County museum for the pupils was greatly increased by these preliminary talks. They dealt with various themes. Materials displayed in the museum were used to show that the Indians, Chippewa and Sioux, in Minnesota adapted their lives to their surroundings, that the pioneer was inventive, that firearms have changed, that lighting systems are different from those of frontier days, that musical instruments have been improved, that various national groups have contributed many things to American life, and that old manuscript records are interesting. The topics given the most attention varied with the ages and grades of the visiting groups. An effort was made to emphasize the materials with which the pupils had come in contact recently in their school work or which they would study in the near future. High school pupils were trained to serve as guides. Two usually were stationed in each room, to answer questions, explain displays, and act as guards.

On several occasions the museum was open for special studies. When the pupils in the third grade were studying pastoral life and

wool, a lady demonstrated carding, spinning, and weaving with the museum equipment. The study of Indian life was aided by an excellent exhibit of both Chippewa and Sioux materials. Designs for projects in the making of pottery, bead bracelets, and purses were patterned upon the exhibits. Talks on Indian tools were based on exhibits in the museum. An exhibit of a medieval tapestry was the occasion for a special study by a fifth-grade class as well as by a college history class. An exhibit of artifacts from an extensive personal collection of Indian objects from the upper Sheyenne Valley gave many grade, high school, and college classes a chance to visit the museum and to follow up new avenues of interest.

High school classes in American history and college classes in Minnesota history made extensive use of the museum's research facilities. The high school pupils consulted a file of *Harper's Monthly* for the period from 1870 to 1890, which includes various articles on the opening of the Red River Valley; the *Red River Gazette* of 1872, where the stories of Glyndon and of a British colonization project near Hawley are recorded; and old township records, which proved to be valuable in picturing problems from 1872 to 1894. Splendid realistic materials for reconstructing frontier life and conditions were discovered in reminiscences appearing in local publications, letters, recollections, biographies recorded by museum workers, pictures, diaries, and journals. In 1939-40 a class in American history found these sources so stimulating that its members undertook the preparation of a series of original radio skits. A number of skits were written for presentation on Sunday afternoons over station KVOX in Moorhead. The radio staff tolerated a group of youngsters who had a good time experimenting with sound effects. The broadcasts dealt with the following subjects: "The Red River Valley," "The Voyageurs," the "Ox-cart Trade," "The Selkirkers," "Steamboating on the Red," "Did Paul Bunyan Log It Off?," "Rumors of the Coming of the Railroad," "The Settlement of Glyndon," "The British Colony Near Hawley," "A Buffalo River Settlement," "Early Days in Moorhead," "Banking Begins," and "Early Church and School Days." A bit of the opening episode of a skit on the settlement of Hawley is

presented to illustrate the museum's connection with these radio programs.

Setting: Clay County Historical Museum. Harriet and Elfie are looking about the museum in an indifferent manner at first.

Harriet (accidentally backing into an Indian-clad model): Excuse me, Elfie.

Elfie: Why? I'm way over here, Harriet.

H. Oh, Oh! I guess I should have asked the pardon of Sitting Bull. Good thing he isn't here to challenge me. You know this museum stuff sometimes scares me even in my dreams. Dull enough stuff here, but awful on my imagination at night.

E. Look here, Harriet. What if we got them to rig up Old Sitting Bull with this revolver that was taken from him and this stone heart that he claims came from the Great Spirit with a message to resist white man. Then you had better not back into him so awkwardly.

H. But Elfie, we came to see if we couldn't find something on colonization and settlement here that we could use to compare with the colonization along the Eastern coast.

E. Let's look through the files of old books first. Here's one on the Red River Valley.

H. Here, Elfie, look at this. It is labelled the first newspaper in Clay County. Would you ever believe it was printed in Glyndon? Let's ask the kids in class where our first county paper was printed and I bet they'll be deflated when they find it wasn't in Moorhead.

E. Isn't it a funny paper, no headlines, such narrow columns, and fine enough print to bother more than grandpa.

H. See this, Elfie! Here's an article all about the visit by a Reverend Roger of England who is seeking a location for a colonization project. He plans to bring a thousand settlers in the spring. Say, that's more ambitious than the London Company was in beginning Jamestown. Say, wouldn't this be fun to use as a skit for our radio program. I'll bet very few ever thought about English colonization in Minnesota.

E. Let's suggest that as the basis for one of our radio programs. Bet Maurie will make a good Reverend Roger. Do you suppose there are any descendants of those early settlers who can add to these accounts?

H. There's a whole year's bound file of the *Red River Gazette* to furnish us with information.

Although these programs may not have been valuable contributions to local history, they added greatly to the pupils' enjoyment of

its study and gave them practical experience in the use of historical sources.

Another group, descendants of the original settlers of the Buffalo River neighborhood, belonged to a book and writers' club. At the suggestion of the group which had used museum materials for radio programs, the leader of the club asked permission to use a diary kept by Levi Thortvedt as a background for a series of radio programs on the Norwegian settlement at Buffalo River. The recollections of the diarist's granddaughters, who did much of the writing of the skits, added greatly to the value of the diary accounts. The resulting programs, which were broadcast on Thursday nights, were followed with much interest by old and young. Part of one episode, reproduced herewith, shows how the past can be recreated by careful co-operative enterprises.

Reader: April 6, 1861, found our little band of seventeen immigrants on board the old Russian battleship "Pereosa." Due to the narrow fjord at Tveitstrand, the "Pereosa" lay anchored out near some islands, about a mile from shore. In order to get an early start, the boat was loaded, and the passengers boarded it the day before sailing.

What a busy day that had been! Small boats hurried back and forth carrying food supplies, luggage, large gaily painted chests, and about two hundred passengers. There were men and women and children from many of the numerous valleys of Norway, many resplendent in their national costumes, with gaily embroidered vests and aprons.

There had been last-minute purchases; among them two glass dolls, some silver spoons that a silversmith has fashioned from some old trinkets—Thone declared he had charged three prices for his work—and then some wonderful sweet crackers for the children.

So the ship "Pereosa" slipped out into the dark North Sea and into the Atlantic, headed for the New Continent.

The "Pereosa" was a one-deck sailing vessel. Black with large black and white checkered sides was the color design of the ship. A lone aisle divided it lengthwise; canvas curtains were hung crosswise to form booths or rooms. There were stoves where passengers could cook their meals. Each family brought provisions to last fourteen weeks. The men were given the rooms in the center of the ship.

We find them on deck now watching the shore lines of Norway; the shores with their beautiful fjords, mountains shading in gray and purple,

fade slowly into a semblance of distant thunder heads. The travelers turn away with tears in their eyes.

As the hours slip by, more and more whitecaps are appearing on the blue-green ocean. A heavy fog is rolling in from the sea. On a small perch six or seven feet above the deck on the bow, the lookout man stands with his fog horn in his hand.

We hear the old grandmother speaking.

Grandmother: Well, I never dreamed I would leave dear old Norway and at my age. I'll never see Norway again.

Knute: Well, we are on our way at last. Hooray!

Bendick: I wish we were across all this water. Don't you, Ola?

The fog horn sounds.

Thone: Why does he keep blowing that horn?

Ola: Don't you see that scud meeting us? It's getting so thick I could bite a piece out of it.

Thone: Don't you think we had better turn back right now? I just know I forgot my copper coffee kettle. I just feel it. I shall certainly not have my carpet bag out of my sight for a minute, for there I have my silver spoons. That silversmith was nothing but a big highway robber — that's all.

Ola: Isn't it about time to eat? I am as hungry as a wolf.

Thone: Well, if I can't find my coffee kettle, there will be no coffee. I wonder if it is in with your stuff, Bendick?

Bendick: I am sure Anne hasn't unpacked a thing. The baby was so fretful.

Ola: I hope she isn't any worse.

Thone: You tell Anne I'll help watch the baby for her tonight, so she can get some sleep.

Ola: Yes, we will all help watch. But let us eat.

The above extract is commendable especially for its detail and Scandinavian flavor. It furnished an excellent learning situation for both listeners and participants.

The museum was used also by college students in Minnesota history classes, who consulted exhibits, books, diaries, narratives, pictures, and other items when engaged in research on such topics as navigation on the Red River, townsite speculation, the history of Moorhead, and the history of wheat growing. As an aid to further work, the museum has kept copies of many of the papers prepared in these classes.

The writer, who has been closely associated with the Clay County museum, considers its utilization for instructional purposes in the schools its most valuable aspect. It may have some value for those who merely visit it, but its chief benefit comes from arrangements that foster better seeing by a readiness to see. Its value is further enhanced by making it a laboratory where the past can be re-created through contact with concrete materials. No museum has done its job thoroughly until it becomes a school laboratory and, through the children, a place for learning by the community.



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