

Minnesota History and the Schools

A COMMUNITY STUDY AT ANOKA

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IF ONE HAD ASKED seniors in the Anoka High School, late in the fall of 1943, just how they were getting along with "the survey," some of them probably would have replied, "Oh, I've twenty more houses to visit," or "Why do we have to ask people so many questions?" or "We'll never get through," or something similar. As the survey proceeded, however, and as the final day of school, when graduating seniors received copies of the booklet they had compiled, drew near, most of the students were more than a little proud of their accomplishments.

The possibility of making a study of the Anoka community, its racial and historical backgrounds, the occupations of its people, its government, its churches, its schools, and its clubs, was suggested early in the fall of 1943 to four senior social science classes, in which ninety-five students were enrolled. The subject later was brought up occasionally in class discussion periods. Finally it was decided, tentatively at least, to make a study and write up the results for a pamphlet of some kind. An election was held to select the editors, a boy and a girl, and also a general chairman for each of the four social science classes in the high school. After the resulting group of six students had met and agreed upon a general outline for the study, it assigned one large topic to each of the four classes — history, social activities, economic affairs, and government.

It became apparent, however, that considerable preliminary work would have to be accomplished before special topics were investigated. In order to determine with some degree of accuracy how many people in Anoka were of Swedish descent, for example, the community would have to be pretty thoroughly canvassed. The general chairman of the social activities topic, under which most of the nationality questions would fall, worked with several other stu-

dents to divide the town into nearly equal areas. A student who lived as near an area as possible was placed in charge of soliciting answers to questions from people in that section. A number of articles were published in the two local papers asking for co-operation, which was readily given. Several weeks were devoted to student interviews requesting information as to the size of a family, the number of children in school, the occupations of husband and wife, church affiliations, national backgrounds, the number of years spent in Anoka, and the names of servicemen in the family. From the results of these questionnaires it was later possible to determine the approximate numbers or percentages of servicemen who had gone out from the community, of war workers, of persons of Irish descent, of church members, of retired workers, and a host of other interesting facts.

When the family survey was completed, committee chairmen, chosen by the general chairman of each class, and committees of three or four, chosen by the subchairmen, began to plan for particular topics. This involved numerous committee meetings, checking with the general chairman as to the probable limits of each topic, and determining the steps to be followed, the persons to see, and the questions to be asked.

Much of the work could have been accomplished, of course, by more direct methods than those used, but that would have defeated the purpose of the project—to get a large number of students to make plans, to decide what information was needed, to find out where it could be obtained, and to go and get it in a tactful way. The experience obtained in working together, making inquiries of helpful townspeople, consulting various sources of information, and putting material together in an organized fashion was a valuable one which, it is hoped, will carry over into other fields of endeavor and daily living.

Anoka has had a long and interesting history from the time of the Indians, explorers, and early settlers to the present. The class in charge of the history topic decided to begin with a visit to the Minnesota Historical Building in St. Paul, where the students found helpful informants and guides who gave them material about the

backgrounds of Anoka and other similar communities. The site of Anoka, it is believed, was visited as early as 1680 by Father Hennepin and his companions, who were followed by a number of other explorers. As early as 1846 the fur trade began to attract settlers to the junction of the Rum and Mississippi rivers. They soon were followed by others who engaged in logging, lumbering, and flour milling. Starch and shoe factories, too, played their parts in attracting settlers, and by 1900 Anoka's population lacked only a few hundred of being four thousand. For various reasons, sections of the town long had such characteristic names as Slab Town, Christian Hill, Swede Town, Whiskey Flat, and Frog Town, and some of these names remain even today. Although they found it difficult, the students chose, out of a large group of important individuals, twenty-five whom they considered the most influential citizens in Anoka's history.

For convenience it was found advisable to divide the history topic into subtopics, dealing with the Indian period, the first settlers, early industries, racial stocks, population trends, community leaders, and disasters and recoveries. Since it was impossible for the class as a whole to cover the background of every subject, a brief history of each subtopic was prepared by the committee in charge. For example, the committee on transportation looked into the problems of early transportation. Thus the study was topical rather than chronological.

The class that studied social activities saw fit to subdivide its topic into education, library facilities, churches, institutions, medical facilities, clubs, and recreation. Formal education began in Anoka as early as the winter of 1853-54, although the first public school was not built until 1855. Graduates of 1944 were interested to discover that the first regular graduating exercises were held in 1881, when nine seniors finished their high school course. In addition to the school libraries, Anoka has a Carnegie Library, founded in 1904, which makes approximately 6,880 volumes and 62 periodicals available to the public. Anoka has eleven church groups with a total membership of about 3,250—an interesting figure when it is compared with a population estimated at close to 7,500. For the past

eighteen years one of the church groups has been holding annual conferences in the city with about three thousand people from all parts of the United States in attendance. In 1905 the city's size was increased by the addition of the Anoka State Hospital grounds; at present there are about fourteen hundred patients in this institution. Plans have been made to build a modern sewage disposal plant after the war to replace the existing system, which is considered insanitary and is the city's most pressing health problem. There are in Anoka nearly thirty clubs and organizations which are active in social and other affairs. Anoka has been known for some twenty years as the "Halloween Capital of the World" because of the unusually well-planned and civic sponsored activities arranged each year for this occasion.

The class in charge of economic affairs had perhaps the most difficult task of the four in deciding how best to cover its particular topic. It compromised on committees for retail stores, banking, agriculture, communication, transportation, occupations, and manufacturing. After much research on the subject of buying and selling, it was determined that the retail stores in the community sold slightly over thirty-seven per cent of their goods to customers from outside the community. One of the stores, the Goodrich Drug Store, has been in business in the same location on Main Street since 1855, when it was established by H. L. Ticknor. Both of Anoka's weekly newspapers have been serving the public since the middle 1860's. From the days of the Indian varied means of transportation, ranging from Red River carts, steamboats, and horse-drawn streetcars, to railroads and busses, have carried explorers, settlers, and travelers to and from Anoka. Approximately a third of the city's employed population in 1943-44 was engaged in war industries. The Federal Cartridge Corporation has maintained a plant just outside the city limits since 1917; there are two other large war plants near by; and six smaller manufacturing companies are located within the city.

Because Anoka is the county seat of Anoka County, the class that dealt with government had a twofold task to perform. Committees were organized on county officials and functions, county funds, city officials and functions, city finance, courts, and welfare. Anoka has a

city manager government—often considered the best type for the separation of the legislative and the executive functions and for managing a city much like a business concern. The budget processes, methods of determining tax rates and making appropriations, and the various funds within the budget were investigated to determine how vital are the financial affairs of government. Federal, state, county, and city sources of income for welfare purposes were found to exist, although most welfare programs are administered on the county level by the county welfare board. Students attended sessions of the municipal, probate, and district courts and learned the types of cases that come under the jurisdiction of each. They attended meetings of the city council and the county commissioners and visited local officials in order to determine their exact functions.

No community study made in 1944 could overlook the community's war effort and its plans for the postwar period. Anoka's leadership in the bond drives, its co-operation with the Red Cross blood bank, its memorial for servicemen, and its other war activities are evidences of patriotism on the part of its citizens. Several hundred of its young men and women are serving their country in the armed forces, and many of those at home contribute toward war production. Anoka is beginning, too, to plan for the postwar period by organizing committees to study the many problems that will arise and to suggest constructive action.

The tangible result of the Anoka community study is a booklet consisting of fifty-eight mimeographed pages, in addition to title pages, a foreword, maps, and illustrations. Its title, *On Both Sides: A Study of the Community of Anoka, Minnesota*, is based upon a translation of the Sioux word from which the city, located on both sides of the Rum River, takes its name.¹ The *Anoka Herald* kindly made available for the booklet fifteen cuts which the editors chose to use as illustrations, and these were printed on the *Herald's* press by the father of one of the students. Members of the senior class cut the stencils, ran them off on a mimeograph machine, mounted the illustrations, and stapled into folders the material for an edition of

¹ A copy of this booklet has been placed in the library of the Minnesota Historical Society.

more than a hundred. All this was done after the final examinations and classes were over. In fact, the study as a whole was for the most part an extra project conducted in addition to the regular curriculum.

The use of local history in helping the student become aware of social and economic problems has long been a factor in education. Often throughout the grades, teachers and pupils working on such topics as Indians, transportation, breadmaking, and the like have conducted exploratory field trips to find out what the local community can offer on the subject. Teachers realize that students' beliefs, desires, and manners are to a great extent conditioned by their home environment, and that their relation to the community should be recognized more and more in the working out of the curriculum. Problems of communication, the retailing of goods, and city government, for example, might be better understood if the local situation were clear before attempting the study of similar problems on a wider scale.

In the interest of better community living, an appreciation of the long and terrific struggles of the students' forebears to build up a community and a knowledge of community activities in the past and the present is much to be desired. It is hoped that students who have begun to probe into community activities of this and other states, as did those in Anoka, will become aware of their community's problems and be interested in solving them.



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