

# Minnesota History and the Schools

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PROJECT AT MANKATO

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ONE OF THE units in the social studies course for the fourth grade at the Mankato State Teachers College is entitled "How Historians, Geographers, and Scientists Think and Work." Previous to the fourth grade the pupils have had social studies and science in each grade, and a considerable background has been built up. Hence, in the fourth grade they are ready to think about geography, history, and science as fields of thought, each of which makes a distinct contribution to our body of knowledge and to our ways of thinking. In studying this topic the pupils have participated in a variety of experiences, one of the most valuable consisting of contacts with their community. Some of the contacts with the Mankato community have been made in the classroom, while others were made during excursions to local resources in their natural settings.

The teacher introduced the subject by giving the pupils an opportunity to read and examine a number of interesting and attractive books in each field. An interest in these books encouraged the pupils to explore not only their homes but the homes of other Mankato residents in an effort to obtain additional material. Parents, friends, and relatives of pupils showed their interest by permitting children to take to school books from sets, travel books, biographies, and other volumes of some value. Historical, geographical, and scientific magazines also were brought into the classroom. As one would expect, many of the books and magazines were too advanced to be read by the children. They proved to be helpful, however, in giving the pupils an understanding of the subject matter when their attention was called to carefully selected photographs, maps, diagrams, and graphs contained in them. The teacher also selected interesting portions to read or tell. Thus the pupils

became very much interested in collecting additional material, and suggested that a good way to learn how historians, geographers, and scientists think and work would be to pretend that they were young historians, geographers, and scientists, and attempt to write a short book in each field. This would give them firsthand experience in securing information from various sources, in evaluating the material collected, in organizing the content, and in writing a book.

First, the children decided upon the scope of the content to be included in a book in each field, just as a writer does in planning a book. For their history book they selected the title "How the Pioneers Lived Near Mankato." They then began to collect information from various sources, in so far as possible going to sources utilized by professional historians. In getting information, they again contacted the homes of their community. They not only brought into the classroom books and magazines which contained pertinent material, but, in their exploring, they found letters written by relatives who lived in pioneer times, old newspapers containing interesting accounts of pioneer incidents, photographs of pioneers, and objects used in pioneer times. All material collected from the Mankato homes was put in a place accessible to the children, and it proved invaluable in helping them get information for their books.

A further community contact was made with residents of Mankato who came into the classroom and related their own experiences or told about relatives who lived in pioneer times. They gave the pupils an opportunity to get information by listening to talks or lectures, a source that historians, geographers, and scientists utilize. They also gave the pupils a chance to examine any articles they showed and to ask questions following the talk.

The children were encouraged to interview people familiar with frontier conditions, including two daughters of pioneers. In advance of the interviews the pupils discussed ways of conducting them and the reasons why historians, geographers, and scientists do not accept too readily all information given by those interviewed. The person who recalls a historical event might be prejudiced; he might be more interested in telling a good story than in giving accurate in-

formation; his memory might be faulty; or he might repeat what he has heard, instead of describing what he has actually witnessed. The pupils learned that historians usually take notes. Since nine-year-olds write slowly and have difficulty with spelling, the teacher took notes for them so that they could give their undivided attention to conducting the interview. Upon their return to school, copies of the notes were given to the pupils to use in relating their experiences to their classmates. Later the information obtained in interviews was incorporated in the pioneer history.

In order to have the experience of getting information from another source frequently used by historians, the pupils visited the Blue Earth County Historical Society's museum, which is located about three blocks from the school. The visit was intended to help them understand how historians and others use museums in obtaining information for books. To learn more about pioneer life, they examined articles in the museum carefully, determining whether they were originals or copies, and comparing information given on labels with that obtained from other sources. Thus they began to appreciate the problems that members of a museum staff must face in gathering accurate information about articles on display. The children learned that articles which have been repaired might not be exactly as they were originally. They realized the importance of examining only pioneer articles and ignoring on this particular visit all other articles on display. Time did not permit as careful an examination of all pioneer articles as the pupils wished to make, so many of them, in groups and individually, went to the museum again and again following the class visitation.

As they came to appreciate the importance of the preservation of pioneer objects and their value as sources of information, the pupils planned a classroom historical museum. In a built-in cupboard with glass doors, they arranged the articles that they brought from their homes, displaying them in much the same manner as the articles on exhibit in the Blue Earth County museum. Thus they gained a greater appreciation of the work done by the museum staff in classifying and preparing articles for display, and also a greater interest

in preserving historical objects than they had had previous to their visit. Several pupils became so interested that they went with their parents to the historical building at Sibley State Park, which houses objects too large for display in the Mankato museum.

On another occasion the pupils visited the historic Seppman Mill, about six miles southwest of Mankato adjoining Minneopa State Park, which supplied the pioneers of the 1860's and 1870's with flour. The purpose of this visit was to make the pupils understand that a historic building is a source of information frequently utilized by historians. Changes in the original construction made during repairs on the old stone building were described by the teacher before taking the pupils on the excursion. Thus they learned that historians do not necessarily gain an accurate impression of the original construction of a historic building by observing it carefully and recording their observations accurately. By reading books and pamphlets about the original mill and comparing early descriptions with its present appearance, the pupils were able to tell how it looked originally. They planned to frame the description they prepared and place it on the exterior of the mill so future visitors could profit from their research. The children were given permission to do this by the director of state parks, but to their disappointment they were unable to obtain a waterproof frame. At present their description of the old mill, with a diagram showing the original construction, hangs in the fourth-grade classroom.

After evaluating the information collected through community contacts and by reading, examining photographs, seeing films, and the like, the pupils organized the content of their books in outline. Earlier they became familiar with different types of organization that historians, geographers, and scientists use in writing books for children. They realized that writers had to decide what to include and what to discard, as more material is usually collected than can be included in the text of a book. They decided what to discuss in detail, and what could be given less emphasis.

In their books the pupils used such aids as diagrams, maps, graphs, and charts to supplement the verbal explanation, as was done

by writers of informational books used in the classroom. They also used footnotes, appendixes, and bibliographies to give readers additional information that they did not wish to include in the text. Photographs clipped from an anniversary issue of the *Mankato Free Press* and pictures on postcards were used as illustrations. The completed books were dedicated to future fourth graders; to assist them in understanding how historians, geographers, and scientists think and work.



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