

Minnesota History and the Schools

A HIGH SCHOOL SURVEY AT ST. CLOUD

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IT IS WELL to stop now and then to take a backward glance, to view the distance traveled, to pay tribute to those who have contributed to the forward march, to renew our respect for accomplishments, and to gain a better perspective of the distance yet to be covered. These are worthy reasons for a history survey. But pedagogically speaking, such a survey provides a great opportunity for correlating the work of the various departments in a school, for motivating work which otherwise might be dull, and for focusing the attention of an individual as well as a school upon a significant piece of research.

Prompted by a suggestion from the Minnesota Historical Society, the St. Cloud Technical High School launched upon a survey early in 1945 which was to extend over an entire semester, with a grand finale scheduled for April 6. Obviously, it is essential that someone take charge of such a project who knows enough about local history to guide and inspire both teachers and students who are less fully aware of and have less knowledge of local matters than the leader. Miss Gertrude Gove, an instructor in American history who has done a great deal of research on St. Cloud history, organized the present survey.

A steering committee composed of the heads of the departments of social studies, English, speech, music, journalism, art, the librarian, two students from each of three English groups, two from each of three social studies groups, and one from each of the other departments involved planned the work and discussed the various possibilities for study. On the basis of their findings, the chairman organized material and gave suggestions in mimeographed bulletins which were sent to all classrooms in the school. The bulletins con-

tained lists of available newspapers, books, and pamphlets, and suggested places where such material could be obtained. Names of persons who might be interviewed were listed. At a general assembly, Miss Gove reviewed the highlights of St. Cloud's early history. Slides of significant places and people were shown, and appropriate photographs were displayed in the history classrooms.

Emphasis was placed mainly on the history of St. Cloud from about 1855 to 1925. Particular phases of the study seemed to adapt easily to special interest groups. The "problems of democracy" classes were eager to learn more about the background and working of the city's government. This was analyzed, evaluated, and contrasted with other types of city government. In such local and state buildings and institutions as the city hall, the Stearns County Courthouse, the Minnesota State Reformatory, and the State Teachers College, members of the classes found ample opportunity for investigation. They showed a lively curiosity about the choice of St. Cloud as a location for these institutions, as well as in their current operation.

The classes also studied the sociological make-up of their own groups. Every student worked out his own family tree, indicating all its known branches. Some rather startling information came to light. One youngster, for example, claimed descent from Louis XIV through Madame DuBarry! Despite its French name, the St. Cloud community is predominantly German, with a large Polish contingent and a small Swedish settlement. A very interesting phase of the study, therefore, related to the contributions of these European nationalities. The language classes were especially interested in family trees. Students of German analyzed those showing German ancestry and published their conclusions in the school and city papers.¹

The economic geography group devoted some time to the study of St. Cloud's chief business—the granite industry. The many schools, hospitals, and other institutions established in the vicinity of this strongly Catholic community by members of the Benedictine

¹ See the *St. Cloud Daily Times*, February 6, 1945.

order became the chief interest of a class in world history. Many personalities who were instrumental in founding the Catholic church in the community, as well as their European backgrounds, became subjects of study and research.

The American history classes had many sources for study. The students learned that an early fur trade route, over which Red River carts carried from Canada furs bound for New York and London, led through what is now the heart of St. Cloud. They studied the westward movement and the slavery question. They learned that there were slaveowners in St. Cloud. The American history students, as well as home economics groups, made studies of food, clothing, furniture, education, recreation, and other phases of American social history from 1855 to 1925, giving special attention to St. Cloud developments.

Folk dancing in physical education classes had more significance when the dancers knew they were learning the intricate steps that were familiar to their grandparents or great-grandparents in Poland, Germany, or Sweden. Even American folk dances were more dramatic in the social setting of historic St. Cloud.

Composition work in English classes received an added impetus through the suggestion of such topics as "Down the Old Ox Road," "Let's Take a Ride on the Ferry," "Today I Met —," "I Wish I Had Known —," "The Most Interesting Branch of My Family Tree," "You'd Never Believe It Now, but —," "On This Spot Stood —," "This Is Sacred Ground," and "This Was the Scene of Many a Frolic." In some of the themes prepared, the first court scene became the subject of a dramatic sketch, an old home told its personal story, the first jail break was described in dime-thriller style, a conflict between the press and some of the town's first citizens was recalled, and many other incidents were recounted.

Since all are enrolled in English and social studies classes, every student in Technical High School contributed to the success of the survey. Many interesting examples of correlation of work could be cited. One girl interviewed two former managers of early St. Cloud legitimate theaters and reported her experience to her English class.

Then she outlined the history of St. Cloud theaters before her American history class. For her speech assignment, she reviewed one of the smash hits presented at the Old Roxy. Another student became so interested in Jane Grey Swisshelm, an early St. Cloud editor and journalist, that she sat up most of the night reading the latter's autobiography, *Half a Century*, reported on the book before her history class, wrote a character sketch of Mrs. Swisshelm for her English class, and molded a sensitive clay model of the pioneer feminist's head for her art class.

During the entire semester the students were encouraged to search in their homes and keep on the lookout for articles of historical value, such as books, dishes, tools, embroidery, weapons, and sheet music, as well as for anything that had belonged to pioneer residents of the community. The art department arranged the resulting collection in a display which the entire school enjoyed.

Finally, on April 6, which was designated as St. Cloud's Album Day, many students and faculty members dressed in costumes that were or could have been worn in St. Cloud in the years from 1855 to 1925. Thirty of the most authentic and attractive costumes were chosen for a style show arranged by the Home Economics Club. In the early afternoon the entire school assembled in the auditorium for a program revolving about the "Story of St. Cloud." The vice-president of the student council served as master of ceremonies. The music department opened the program with an orchestral selection—a rhapsody combining German, French, Polish, and Swedish themes. A collection of war songs of various periods of American history was next presented. Members of the speech, physical education, and vocal music departments then unfolded the story of St. Cloud by narration and shadow pictures. They paid tribute to the several nationalities, the great and the less great men and women, their religious and educational life, their business and agrarian interests, their social and provincial influences, all of which have made St. Cloud the community it is today. The style show followed with a narrator describing each costume, and a group of faculty members from the Teachers College judging them for authenticity and beauty.

The inevitable "barber shop quartet" then sang several selections typical of the "gay nineties."

The publicity for the project was handled by the art department, which prepared posters to serve as special reminders, and the journalism department, which reported in the school paper on the progress made. The city newspapers were especially generous in giving the project publicity.²

Throughout the semester the students discovered how exciting research can be. They pored over dusty old newspapers in the office of the *St. Cloud Times*, and they learned that it takes patience and hard work to gather a few facts. They experienced the joy of working together. They saw the subjects studied in various classes throughout the school in their true relationship. They learned to take pride in their own family backgrounds and in the history of their home town. They were proud to acknowledge as fellow townsmen such men as Joseph B. Sartell, the founder of Sartell; the Koeppers, who founded Avon; C. C. Andrews, the father of Minnesota forestry; Jacob V. Brower of Itasca State Park fame; the plow manufacturer, Nicholas Lahr, "whose plough could scour the prairie sod"; and Peter Martini, St. Cloud's own artist.

Though no startling discovery was made, no momentous conclusions were drawn, no work of stupendous import was accomplished, the teachers at Technical High School believe that every student achieved a new grasp of a history which he helped to write, a true appreciation of the things that make St. Cloud a good community in which to live, a proper respect for those who have contributed to its welfare, and a sense of responsibility that will lead them to take care of unfinished business.

² *Times*, April 4, 7, 1945. Reports from students in journalism appeared in the school paper, *The Tech*, for March 7 and 23, 1945.



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