

Minnesota History and the Schools

AN EIGHTH-GRADE PROJECT AT WATERVILLE

Sadie M. Rosenau

THE SCHOOL YEAR of 1944-45 saw the eighth-grade pupils in the Waterville Public Schools interviewing pioneers, browsing among files of local papers that had been accumulated through the years, and searching about in the school and public libraries for materials of interest about the history of the locality. For they planned to write a history of Waterville, deciding in November that their articles on the subject should be ready for final arrangement and typing by early spring.

The preparation of a booklet about the history of Waterville was an eighth-grade social studies class project conducted under the writer's direction. Discussions had frequently turned to questions on the development of the local community. This led to the suggestion that the pupils might enjoy writing a history of the community. They enthusiastically assented. They were led to think over the means for accomplishing such an end. The project was foremost in their minds when they came to class the next day. They asked many questions about the preparation of a history and what to write on.

The making of a general outline for the contents of the book was the first step. Pupils suggested what to include, and their suggestions were placed on the blackboard. They decided upon the following subjects to be included in a table of contents: the founding of Waterville, schools and churches, transportation, communication and public utilities, business enterprises, organizations, biography, and miscellany. The headings chosen indicated a topical rather than a chronological approach to the subject. It was decided that, in order to avoid repetition and make their booklet worthwhile, the pupils would form as many groups as there were topics, each responsible

for a section of the booklet. Each group or committee selected its chairman and began to plan its work.

The project was not a part of the regular class work and there was nothing compulsory about it. Each pupil was expected to be responsible for the article he volunteered to write. When the need arose class time was used for discussions and suggestions about the arrangement of materials, the taking of interviews, the best places to locate materials, and the like. Available literature was assembled in the classroom, where committees reported on their progress and pupils shared information. The methods of taking notes and the manner in which articles should be developed were discussed. Stress was placed on the importance of accuracy, since history is based on fact, and the pupils were instructed to state their sources of information. As a result it was relatively easy to check on the authenticity of the information gathered.

Sometimes pupils made comments on interviews. One boy reported that he had interviewed a woman whose husband began a small furniture factory and store at Waterville in the 1870's. A bedroom suite that he had made in 1876 of native walnut and carved with a jackknife was on display in October, 1945, in a local furniture store operated by his son.

Since some of the pupils had visited museums, they were able to discuss the value of articles found in such places as sources for historical information, as well as the need for the preservation of similar materials. The Historical Building at St. Paul and the establishment of the Minnesota Historical Society were mentioned. Attention was called to some items of historical value in Waterville, such as a photograph of the community in 1884 now to be seen in a local photographer's studio.

As the work progressed, the pupils found it necessary to divide their topics into subtopics. At times, they felt that they lacked sufficient information for an entire article. Problems arose when they tried to determine the reliability of their information, especially when they attempted to date various events.

Waterville is about seventy-five miles south of Minneapolis. Lo-

cated at a point where the Cannon River connects two beautiful lakes several miles in length, it was a natural spot for the development of a community, with a supply of water and fish in the deciduous tree area. The needs of the first settlers who went there in 1855 may be likened to those of the pioneers who migrated to the Northwest Territory. The founders of Waterville established a school and a post office in 1857, and they soon organized churches. The Waterville settlers, like those of the Northwest Territory, needed transportation facilities to market their produce. There were no railroads west of the Mississippi in 1857. The nearest market for the Waterville pioneers was at Hastings, which was reached by ox team by way of Faribault. The settlers tried to interest the territorial legislature in improving the Cannon River between Waterville and Red Wing, thereby opening an outlet to the Mississippi. Members of the class began to understand the relationship that transportation bears to production and marketing when they learned of the sudden growth of Waterville in the late 1870's and the early 1880's, following the completion of its first railroad in 1877. One pupil who was working on biographies interviewed a daughter of a settler who arrived in 1857. She saw a number of interesting items collected through the years and reported on them to the entire class.

When completed, the articles prepared by the eight-graders were arranged in appropriate order and typed. They were then bound, with an introduction, a table of contents, and a bibliography, in a booklet of forty-nine pages entitled the "History of Waterville." Copies were placed in the school library, the public library, and the library of the Minnesota Historical Society. Thus others may enjoy and profit from the work of these eighth-grade authors.

Another interesting local history project was developed under the writer's direction in the seventh and eighth grades at Gaylord in 1941-42, when a booklet on the growth of that community was prepared. In the same school at another time the seventh-grade class prepared a panorama as a means of reviewing Minnesota history. The class was made up largely of boys who enjoyed working with their hands. Some of them made miniature wood carvings repre-

senting such frontier articles as a scythe, a cradle, a plow, an ox yoke, a Red River cart, and a covered wagon. Such projects gave the pupils opportunities to organize and evaluate materials, as well as an understanding of community history and an appreciation of their heritage. Their co-operation with one another, furthermore, gave them practical experience in citizenship and democracy, since it called for both leaders and followers.

The Waterville project gave the pupils an understanding of the difficulties of pioneer life and the problems involved in the development of the community. They learned how people made adjustments to satisfy their wants and needs in an undeveloped country by organizing a local government, establishing a school, founding churches, and beginning business enterprises. The relationship of the community to the nation and the state was illustrated by the need for a post office and for transportation facilities, especially a railroad. History became associated with living people when the pupils learned that some of their number were descended from pioneers or that they knew people who arrived in the 1860's or 1870's. The interest aroused by the study of the community's past carried over into the pupils' regular class work, created a desire to read about state and national history, and increased their interest in the present.



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