

Minnesota History and the Schools

THE STUDY OF FAMILY HISTORY IN A MINNESOTA COLLEGE

Sister Mary Virginia

EACH STUDENT of American history at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul is required to write her family history.¹ She traces her ancestors back two, three, four, and sometimes five or more generations, through ages of war and peace, of famine and plenty, of discovery and invention, to find their European beginnings and record their progress in America to the present.

The assignment has proved a valuable instrument in attaining profitable teacher and student objectives, despite the fact that its introduction to the class in the form of a long paper of research caliber is annually bemoaned as "the last straw" and the incredible, inevitable confirmation of rumor. It has stood the test of ten years' satisfactory use, and it has survived the blightingly negativistic reception given it by class members when they receive their assignment. It generated contagious enthusiasm in at least one student, whose search for the "huge hill" vaguely recalled by her grandmother involved her and her brothers in "a concentrated scouring of all available maps of Germany and Austria" in their effort to locate her ancestral home and, incidentally, to settle one of the many family debates which resulted from her inquiries. More than that, it fostered the desire for further study in another who, regretting the fact that the Second World War prevented her from corresponding with European sources and augmenting her data, writes that the assignment "has not proved to be the burdensome task I had antici-

¹The family history project was inaugurated at the College of St. Catherine by Sister Eucharista, who not only taught American history, but served as president of the college. In 1945 she became the provincial superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the Diocese of St. Paul, and the teaching of American history in the College of St. Catherine was taken over by Sister Laurent, who has continued the family history project described herewith. *Ed.*

pated; on the contrary it has been interesting and very challenging. I intend some day to roll up my sleeves and really get to the bottom of my family history."

Interest in the work grows as the student reaches into her own past. As she pieces together the story of many individual lives, she begins to grasp the significance of the whole in terms of her own life. History, enlivened by her great- and great-great-grandparents, takes on the vitality of contemporary, personal import. Suddenly it has meaning; suddenly history concerns her.

"As I sit here at my desk about to write the story of my heritage," writes one student, "I am suddenly confronted with the realization of how ultimately connected with my life are the lives of my ancestors, and because of this it is absurd to think that my life began at my birth. My life began with my ancestors, and I fit into the pattern which they set long years ago. . . . I am proud to know that it was my ancestors who were among the first settlers in this new colonial land and that it was they who fought for its liberty in the wars which were bound to ensue, they who helped build America so that it would be a great land, a land of freedom and opportunity for their posterity as well as for the posterity of their fellow-settlers."

A student becomes aware of the religious conflicts which raged in nineteenth-century Ireland when she discovers her great-great-grandfather in the midst of one of them. She relates that "My great-great-grandfather M——, an Irish Catholic, was engaged in the business of transporting fishing boats, and one day while he was coming into harbor, he saw a small child fall off a raft into the sea. He saved this child and returned him to his father, who happened to be an Orangeman leader. Although the child's father was a religious opponent, he nevertheless expressed his gratitude to my great-great-grandfather, promising to repay him one day. About a year later, the Orangeman planned a revolt against the Irish Catholics, but the night before the attack the father of the rescued child risked his own life by coming secretly to Grandfather M——, warning him of the impending attack, and advising him to flee with his family in a boat which was awaiting them in the harbor."

One girl adds to her knowledge of the period of American territorial expansion by unearthing family letters in which Cousin D——, an alert politician in the 1890's, discussed the Colorado silver policies, the admission of Texas into the Union, and free silver in Texas. He wondered "why there is any doubt that Texas will give Bryan the biggest majority ever known in the state." And the Second World War concerns more directly the student who, hearing from an escaped Norwegian news correspondent that one of the men on a bus line had been executed by the Nazis for his "unpatriotic" activities, recognizes as a result of her study that the owners of the line are her relatives and that they had managed it for many years.

In the search for her family's beginnings, the student faces the ideals, problems, and customs which her ancestors faced, seeing in them perhaps for the first time the bone of that creed, code, and cult which shape her life today. She learns from direct evidence that truth, goodness, and beauty have survived in minds and hearts; that they have governed history from as far back as she can trace the minds and hearts of her forebears; and that they, in embracing these ideals, met with courage the problems accompanying propagandized indoctrination, religious and political persecution, flight, and exile so vividly recorded in their lives.

Conditions in 1850 Russia are summarized for one student by her grandmother's account of her early life there. The student reports the interview as follows: "People at this time were forced to pay a tax to keep Poland built up and also to help Germany. A tax collector came around every few days and collected the tax. He was empowered to take furniture, clothing, pictures, or anything else for which the government might have use; however he was not allowed to take any clock or crucifix except from the very poorest, who could not pay any of the tax and who, because of this, were forced to stand by and allow the collector to board up the windows of their homes as a sign of their destitution. After the tax had been paid, the boards might be taken down, but not before. . . . The food and furnishings were very meager . . . mostly cheese and potatoes were eaten. For extra money the people sold their butter, never eating it themselves.

. . . One might gain a small strip of land only by working in the government's potato fields. . . I seldom had a new frock, but ripped and turned an old dress for my Sunday best." Another student learns of the problem of adjustment to American life from stories like the following told about her Italian forebear: "L—— stayed in S—— for four years, but he was not happy. Like other Italian immigrants, he had strong muscle, a tenacious will, and unlimited perseverance. By temperament he was imaginative, emotional, sensitive, and he loved social contacts. He came to realize more and more that his home in Italy possessed certain compensations that America lacked. In Italy he was surrounded by relatives and friends; he spoke a language known to all; he lived a communal life in which there was equality and comradeship based upon identity with the group of which he was a member. More important, the restlessness of modern industrial life had not yet penetrated the village in which he lived, had not yet created in him new and unsatisfied wants. In his new work in America L—— noticed that some men who did the same kind of work as he assumed an attitude of superiority, scorn, and even hostility toward him. When he tried to set up friendly associations, he could not do so because he spoke very poor English. Instead of becoming friends with those with whom communal life might have been established, he was forced to remain a stranger open to inevitable personal and social conflicts."

The customs of her ancestors, handed down through generations, are given into the student's hands, and she finds them to be indicative of her heritage of a Christian way of living. From her grandmother one girl learns that "Customs in Germany differ from those in America. When I was a girl, the oldest of the children was considered the maid of the house. She was held responsible for the children, whose quarrels brought punishment upon her rather than upon themselves. . . We greeted each other with 'Praise be to Jesus Christ,' to which was answered 'Amen'. . . We received small bouquets of blessed flowers, carrots, and onions, together with a small portion of salt on the feast of the Assumption; the flowers we saved to be burned during cyclones, but we ate the carrots that day!

And on Christmas we never spoke of Santa Claus, for the Christ Child was the 'Giver of Gifts.'" Another student learns from her father about a festive Italian custom: "On St. Joseph's feast a public novena was held in several homes, where altars were erected and bedecked with flowers, candles, and vigil lights. These nine days of prayer were climaxed by banquets held in the homes of the 'Josephs,' who had as their guests an elderly couple and a boy of twelve years. These three persons symbolized the Holy Family and were served a twelve-course dinner. Upon entering the house, the representative of St. Joseph approached the hostess, kissed her hand respectfully, and sat down at the table."

Such incidents the student cannot find in her history text, but they are essential to history because they are its very stuff. They reflect the personal life, without which there can be no nation. Of considerable value to the student, therefore, is her study of her family's background, for it gives her a basis for comparison and contrast between vibrant personalities and historic and national groups as portrayed in her text and class lectures. When her own forebears are brought into focus and are seen living the historic events which occurred within their life span, the cold, concise statements in the text become real to her, and she is able to write thus about the influence of the first Bonaparte: "The brilliant star of Napoleon Bonaparte had been rising rapidly in the South, and his newly formed Republican army easily captured the latent fire in the hearts of the youth in the bishopric of Metz. So J—— too, though now the father of a child, went off to fight as a devoted patriot and a great admirer of Napoleon's genius. For eighteen years he fought zealously for the cause, with only occasional visits back to his faithful wife and growing son. Perhaps it was on one of these rare visits that he found time to pose for his portrait—a stately figure in the full dress of Adjutant-General, which remains in our family to this day. . . . But J—— grew weary of the marching, the brutality, the desolation of war. By 1809 this dissatisfaction was quite apparent, and despite his loyalty to the Emperor, he was thankful for the chance to return home in 1814, when Napoleon was

exiled to Elba. But the patriots must have kept in contact with one another, for early in 1815, when Napoleon suddenly reappeared upon the scene, J—— was among those who welcomed him back. Again he fought valiantly to the very brink at Waterloo, where he escaped, along with the fortunate six hundred survivors.”

One student has read in her text that “many Irish came to America because of the potato famine,” but she herself can write: “On a gray, foggy day in October, 1849, three boys, looking very lonesome and lost, stood at the rail of a ship just out from Liverpool and pointing toward the fascinating land of America. They were the three A—— boys, who had never been any farther away from home than Cork, in southern Ireland. Now, because of the potato famine, there was not enough food to go around. . . . For the first few days the boys were too seasick and lonesome to do anything but dream of their farmhouse, their parents whom they left at their front gate, and all the happy days they had known in Ireland.” The story is that of her own grandfather. The same girl’s lecture notes refer briefly to compulsory military training as a reason for the immigration of Germans to America in 1850, but after speaking with her grandmother about the latter’s parents, she adds: “In Germany F——’s father had been a combination tailor-shoemaker and general storekeeper. The people in the small village had been discontented and had started a small revolt. They were, of course, no match for the trained Prussian soldiers and were put down immediately. In typical German fashion, the soldiers looked for someone to make an example and picked on F——’s son because he was the burgomaster. They forced him to quarter, feed, and clothe eleven soldiers for three years. This was also a check on the village to insure against further uprising. . . . The situation grew unbearable, and before the three years had elapsed, the burgomaster’s family managed to scrape together a little money, procure the necessary papers, and set out secretly for America.”

History, taken as the totality of chronological events and effects of these events on groups or nations, has not always exhibited the power per se to imprint itself forcibly upon the mind of the under-

graduate student. By enlivening historical facts in terms of people she knows or knows about, however, the student is more apt to retain considerable portions of historical facts and also to see them as vital forces which, in part at least, have molded or have been molded by human beings and by the ideals and aspirations of her ancestors.

Her appreciation of these ideals grows apace with her knowledge of them. She has a greater respect for the real values of life after she has seen that they have been preserved for her only by dint of personal sacrifice. Her eyes are opened to the true nature of her forebears. She sees her great-great-grandfather, risking his life to teach at the University of Dublin in the face of English opposition; her grandfather, receiving his education in snatches between months of farm work; her grandmother, "singing in her heart," as she teaches her children the catechism lesson when they cannot get to town for Mass. She begins to realize that it is her duty to preserve and enrich, so far as is in her power, the precious heritage of values which these commonplace parents and children, these unsung heroes and heroines, have passed down to her and to her country. As one student writes, "To them, my ancestors, America was a refuge for sufferers, a land of free men. They came and fought for these things, and now this freedom is ours. We are the sons and daughters of America. Will we accept the challenge to keep it and to keep it free and noble?" And again, in the words of another girl, "It is for us who have been blessed by such a heritage to show our appreciation by living up to the principles that were laid for us in their lives, by building up the race which they founded, and by instilling into the hearts and minds of our children the love of truth which our ancestors would want to be possessed by all true American children, so that the pride of our land will grow, and the democracy for which our forefathers struggled will survive in this land of the free and home of the brave." Definitely the assignment brings about a change, qualitatively and quantitatively speaking, in the student's attitude toward personal worth, and where there is change, there is evidence that learning has taken place.

By working with her material in the assigned form, the student is given the opportunity to develop specific skills. She must base her work on historical fact, which necessitates resourcefulness in research and a discriminate evaluation and organization of her materials. Her objectivity and accuracy are challenged, and perhaps it is not too much to presume that after this study she bows to a correct footnote.

Beside exercise in research technique, the assignment offers a wide field for the creative writer, for the historical facts must be expanded by personal histories. The nature of the assignment is such that it requires ingenuity in effectively presenting material which has not been recorded previously. The student is urged to express her own ideas, to make her own comments, and to come to her own conclusions regarding her data. She is encouraged to be creative while profiting by the discipline of historic fact.

Admittedly the assignment consumes the time and energy of both student and teacher, but its obvious advantages seem unquestionably to outdistance whatever inconveniences are involved. The study of family history has been a most effective tool in building up in the student a knowledge of and appreciation for her own and her country's past and in fostering in her the desire to contribute a personal share to the preservation and advancement of its future.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).