

Minnesota History and the Schools

HOW THE JUNIOR HISTORIANS WORK¹

Arthur J. Larsen

LOCAL HISTORY — the history of the community, which encompasses the neighborhood and the family — is in a measure national history, even world history, on a small scale. For what is the history of the nation but the composite story of its individual communities? And what is the history of the world but the story of all the nations? In some respects, of course, the background of every community is unique. But many aspects of its history it has in common with other communities. The history of the settlement of a community is a part of the history of settlement of the state, the region, the nation. So it is with the history of transportation, industry, agriculture, politics, social institutions, and other phases of the community's history. To know and understand our own community, therefore, is of infinite help in knowing and understanding the history and the problems of the state, the nation, and the world.

Recognizing the significance and importance of local history, the Minnesota Historical Society for many years has fostered the work of county historical societies throughout the state in the advancement of local history. These societies, which have been organized by and for grown-ups, now exist in sixty-five of Minnesota's eighty-seven counties. But it is of greater importance that young people should know and understand the history of their state and their community. No person can assume his proper place in the community unless he knows and understands the principles of good citizenship — and it is a function of history to teach what good citizenship is and how it is developed. No child can fail to grasp the meaning of his community if he understands its beginning

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and its development—another function of history. The origins of community industries, of social customs, of community economic prosperity or poverty—these must be known and understood to ensure the intelligent attack on community problems which must accompany good citizenship. If these facts are not taught to the child, it is almost a certainty that the adult will never learn them. To help children toward such a knowledge and understanding, in 1945 the state society organized a Junior Historical Society.

Any school that is an annual institutional member of the Minnesota Historical Society may organize a chapter of the Junior Historical Society. Each chapter has a teaching sponsor and, if possible, a co-sponsor from the community, and it elects its own officers. Chapters may participate in the activities of the state-wide junior organization, which include a history writing contest for which prizes are given, varying in character from a book about some phase of Minnesota history to a scholarship in the University of Minnesota, and ranging in value from one to seventy-five dollars. Prize-winning essays are considered for publication in *Minnesota History*. Other worth-while papers are printed in the *Gopher Historian*, a publication issued for Minnesota junior chapters. The Minnesota Historical Society is now giving every junior chapter six books dealing with some phase of Minnesota history to serve as the beginning of a special chapter library of reference books and pamphlets about state and local history. Chapters pay a registration fee of two dollars to the Minnesota Historical Society upon organization, and thereafter an annual fee of a dollar. These fees help to pay the cost of the charter issued to each new chapter, of prize essay awards, and of necessary correspondence.

A number of schools in widely separated sections of the state have made excellent use of the Junior Historical Society in the brief space of time that has elapsed since its organization. It may interest you to hear what a few of the junior chapters are doing.

Last year members of the Lakeville chapter, among other things, received a firsthand lesson in the history of the Second World War through the collection of a war souvenir exhibit, and an excellent lesson in geography as well. They learned about their community

through talks at the chapter meetings by adults of the community and by excursions to places of historical interest. They trained themselves in writing by preparing articles for the school paper, and through their work on the historical essay contest under the guidance of both the history and the English departments.

The Waterville chapter, with members from the eighth through the twelfth grades, learned about the war by preparing a book which told the story of the service of the men and women of the community in the Second World War. The chapter members drew up a blank form providing for the name, residence, rating, training stations, assignments, time of discharge, and interesting experiences of each person in military service. They interviewed service men and women and their families or wrote letters to them to obtain the information desired. Members were chosen to put the information into narrative form, and committees were appointed to index names. Those who did the typing and stenciling were given credit in the commercial course. Through the sale of copies of the resulting book, which contains about eighty pages, the chapter hopes to pay the expenses of the project and perhaps buy a book for the school library. Who can say that the lessons of history, geography, political science—in fact all the social sciences—were not better learned in this firsthand way?

The Grand Rapids chapter as its project is collecting from old newspapers, personal interviews, and school board minutes, material on the history of the school district in which it is located. This is reported to be the largest school district in the state, and the children, besides learning about their own educational system, are receiving a liberal dosage of community history as well.

An especially active and enthusiastic chapter is that in the Menonite community of Mountain Lake. Its membership is composed of seventh graders who hope to stay in the chapter for five years, and it is limited to students with high scholarship and good deportment records. Last year the chapter raised over thirty dollars to pay the expenses of visits to places of historical interest. The members are now at work on a cookbook, to be composed of old-time recipes from the community, which they plan to complete during

the current school year. They are planning also to hold an exhibit of articles brought from Russia by early settlers in the Mountain Lake community. Through the program, these children are gaining a knowledge of their own backgrounds, are learning their own folklore, are achieving an understanding of their own heritage, and an appreciation for the peculiar virtues of their own community. One reason for the enthusiasm of the Mountain Lake Junior Historians is the fine spirit of co-operation existing between the school and the community. Citizens interested in the activities of the chapter took all the members to Minneapolis and St. Paul, and parents have presented history books to the club and have taken out memberships in the Minnesota Historical Society. The chapter even held meetings, which were conducted by the co-sponsor, during the summer.

At International Falls, the members of the Junior Historian chapter have made a special study of their community and of the basic industry—papermaking—upon which the life of the whole region depends. In the area of a great social experiment—there are said to be thirty-nine national groups represented there, but only two socioeconomic classes—these youngsters are learning history, sociology, economics, and, to a certain extent, the chemistry of a great industry.

Among the entrants in last year's Junior Historian essay contest were seven pupils from Mountain Lake and six from International Falls. The first prize was won by a member of the Mountain Lake chapter, and three prizes were won by members of the International Falls chapter. The other two prize winners were members of the Lakeville and St. Cloud chapters.

That Minnesota educators have recognized the value of local history in the schools is evidenced by a number of local history projects carried on in the past without benefit of the Junior Historical Society. In 1941-42 the seniors in the Milaca High School spent the school year studying their own community. The students gathered their facts through interviews, personal observations, and reading printed and manuscript materials. They assembled information on such subjects as occupations, land and land ownership,

living standards, health, education, local politics, the relation of local, state, and federal governments to the community, and many other subjects. On the material gathered they based a book entitled "Our Town" and illustrated it with cuts borrowed from the local newspaper. They produced three typewritten copies of the book. One was placed in the Milaca High School library, a second in the village library, and the third in the library of the Minnesota Historical Society.

The students then decided to make a film from their book. The class organized as a corporation, capitalized at fifty dollars, and sold stock at twenty-five cents a share and ten per cent bonds at fifty cents each. They wrote scenarios, borrowed cameras and learned how to use them, constructed lighting and editing equipment, and made eighteen hundred feet of sound film. The two hundred and fifty dollars realized from the showing of the film was given to the Red Cross. The capable and resourceful teacher who conducted the project made the following comment on its results: "Ninety-six students gained training in meeting people, in writing and making a book, and in motion picture techniques. . . . Members of the class gained an insight into their own community that will make them more useful citizens. In addition, the entire community attained a new view of the town, and acquired pride in its past achievements and a reasonable degree of faith in its future possibilities."

In 1943 the seniors in the Anoka High School made a somewhat similar study of their community, which resulted in an illustrated booklet of fifty-eight mimeographed pages. At St. Cloud, in the spring of 1945, the many departments of the Technical High School co-operated to build a program about the story of the city.

For the past ten years the College of St. Catherine has required every student of American history to write her family history. The assignment, greeted by the moans and groans with which all undergraduates receive a writing assignment, has produced unusually fine results. The student traces her ancestors back through several generations to the European country of her family's origin. In the study of her family history she learns about the customs of her

forebears, the problems they faced, the contemporary trends and events that fashioned their lives. Sister Mary Virginia, reporting on the progress of this project, says that as the student "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." In the light of this major awakening, it is but incidental that she has received invaluable training in original historical research, as well as training in organizing and writing material that has never before been recorded. Professor Philip D. Jordan of the University of Minnesota has made comparable use of family history in teaching his course in Minnesota history. Through the study of family backgrounds his students have gained a broad appreciation of the values of national, state, regional, and community history.

An interesting and unusual project was the year-long program conducted last year by the Jordan Junior High School in Minneapolis. The whole program was based on the thesis "I am an American." Every class in the school, every student enrolled, and their friends, their parents, their relatives were brought into the program. The basic principle underlying the project was that of trying to understand one another—white and colored, immigrant and native stock, Swedes and Poles and Greeks, Indians and Chinese, all the polyglot of national groups that an American community can produce. Throughout the year and throughout the school the efforts of teachers and pupils alike were directed to a study of the contributions which each national group and each geographical area had made to the national culture.

Students of the art class made a series of mural paintings, each about four and a half by ten and a half feet in size, picturing contributions to the Minnesota community in different stages of its development by peoples of various racial and nationality groups. Among the nineteen subjects included in the paintings are American Indian food production, Indian crafts, French fur traders, a treaty between the Indians and the French, English fur traders, a pio-

neer farm, early Fort Snelling, Minnesota's first school, an early general store, lumbering, the state's first railroads, open pit mines, the Duluth harbor, a modern Minnesota farm, and a modern Minnesota city. Plans are under way to place the paintings on the walls of the school cafeteria and stairway landings.

The year-long program at Jordan Junior High School culminated in a tremendous pageant which presented in review all the elements of that community against a background of an American way of life. The pupils, their parents, and their friends learned more about history in its application to everyday life through this study of the community than any amount of formal textbook instruction could have taught them.

The adaptability of junior historical activity to co-operative program planning in the schools is evident in some of the projects mentioned. The teaching of history is only one objective in these programs. They are just as useful in the teaching of citizenship, economics, sociology, psychology, and English. Historical plays can be written in connection with the study of the drama. And at least one school has used historical subjects in the teaching of art. To the teacher who is in search of new approaches to the problems of teaching her subjects, the Junior Historian chapter offers a convenient vehicle. It provides new avenues for a co-operative approach to the subject matter, and through that co-operative approach—by the English teacher, the economics instructor, or the geography teacher—the subject matter is enlivened, made somehow easier, and is better understood. Those who have tried it, say that it is an educational venture well worth the effort. The students demonstrate its worth.



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