

Minnesota History and the Schools

A SURVEY OF METHODS AND MATERIALS¹

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WHEN I ACCEPTED the job of dealing with the problem of state and local history in the schools, I decided to try to find out what was being done with the subject in the schools of the state. In a sense, then, the bulk of what I have to say is a report of a survey, somewhat random in nature, of practices throughout the state in dealing with state and local history.

I sent over fifty letters to school systems throughout the state. They went to superintendents and principals in five geographical areas, with ten each going to the south, west, central, northeast, and northwest sections of the state. The letters requested information about materials and methods of using state and local history in schools of the community; in no sense did they constitute a formal questionnaire. An attempt was made to distribute the requests both geographically and according to the size of the community.

Most of the letters were sent to superintendents of schools with requests that they be passed on for answers to the teachers doing the most successful jobs in any given area. Some letters were sent to principals of junior and senior high schools in the state's larger communities. By this method it was hoped that a representative sampling could be secured from among the various grade levels of the elementary and secondary schools. Unfortunately only twenty-four replies were received; only five of these were concerned with the elementary schools. This material was supplemented, however, by personal interviews and telephone conversations. In addition, I

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attempted to get a picture of what has been done in representative teachers' colleges in the state to prepare their graduates to teach state and local history.

All of you, of course, are familiar with the recommendations made in the *Curriculum for Elementary Schools* published by the Minnesota department of education in 1928. A study of Minnesota history is advocated for about half the time spent in social studies in the fourth grade. Curriculum bulletins of the state department dealing with secondary school social studies were published in 1932. According to these documents, a definite part of social studies ranging from a third to a half of the year in the seventh grade is devoted to state and local history. Scattered allusions are made to Minnesota history in eighth-grade social studies, but no definite suggestions for its correlation with American history appear. Similar scattered allusions to state history are made in a syllabus for American history in the eleventh grade, and local and state history is touched on briefly in a syllabus for a course in social science given in the twelfth grade, where it deals with state and local government. A recent publication of the state department of education, *A Guide for Better Instruction in the Minnesota Schools*, issued in 1946 as *Curriculum Bulletin* no. 1, contains a chapter on "Using Community Resources in Learning" which stresses the history of the locality among important aspects of community life.

Thus we see that while the teacher has been provided with certain guideposts in the use of state and local history in her teaching, she has been largely on her own. Perhaps this is as it should be, for everyone connected with education realizes that teachers are the prime movers in deciding what to teach and how to teach it, state curriculum and state board examinations to the contrary notwithstanding. As a matter of fact, curriculum bulletins do not, and perhaps cannot, reflect what really is being done in actual practice, materials, and methods. Consequently, I feel that a description of practices in some of our schools will prove helpful and suggestive to all of us.

I received some interesting comments that I should like to relay to you about the use of state and local history. One teacher men-

tioned a feeling among some people that nothing seems to have happened in their community which has affected to any degree the world at large. Of course, as we know, all human activities affect someone, sometime, someplace. Thus the history of a community goes to make a part of world history. When we think in such terms, we are impressed with the fact that there are no unfavored communities so far as historical background is concerned, even though there are many who would have us so believe. An imaginative teacher undoubtedly can find a much richer basis of local history in her community than anyone would suspect.

Some of my correspondents, while admitting the value of state and local history, deplore the fact that with so many topics clamoring for inclusion in the curriculum, they are at a loss to find time for all. You are aware of many of these topics—intercultural education, emphasis on international organization, implications of atomic energy, to name a few. An interesting contrast to this point of view is that presented by another teacher. She emphasized her belief that local history is not in fact *in* the curriculum; rather it *is* the curriculum. As we are all aware, using local history is not an innovation in the schools, since it goes back at least to the eighteenth century and probably farther. This teacher points out that studying local and state history and studying world citizenship are not mutually exclusive, but are complementary in nature. Building historical knowledge directly on pupil experience, she shows the importance of this perspective in studying local history. Thus we can see an application of the psychological principle of moving from the known to the unknown—studying the local community and moving out in ever-widening circles.

In telling you the results of the survey, I should like to describe them in terms of where, in the curricula of the schools reported, state and local history occurs, what materials are used, and what types of activities are employed in teaching the subject. As a part of the curriculum in the Minnesota schools, local and state history vary from incidental correlation with other subjects to the basis for as much as a year's course. Minnesota history is taught almost universally throughout the elementary schools of the state in the fourth

grade for blocks of time extending up to half of the school year in social studies or history. In the elementary schools of Winona, in addition to this grade work, the history of the city is studied at the end of a course on the community in the third grade. Some of my correspondents mentioned a brief study of Minnesota history in connection with geography. The local history of Minneapolis is handled in the third grade in that city, developing out of a study of present-day Minneapolis and then expanding to embrace the story of the Indians and of pioneer life in the entire region. A similar procedure is followed in St. Paul, where in the fourth grade the pupils study their city and its history before branching out into state history.

The most comprehensive and inclusive coverage of state, and perhaps of local, history takes place in seventh-grade social studies, according to reports received in the survey. In some schools state history is taught in connection with the geography of Minnesota in the seventh grade. In others it is taught with civics. Several teachers report that it occupies a complete semester of work in seventh-grade social studies. Nearly all report that the history of the particular area in which they teach is definitely correlated with the study of state history as a whole. In some cases separate units deal with local history. Many teachers of eighth-grade American history indicate that they deal with state history when it impinges upon the national scene. A typical example of this practice is found in the study of exploration in the state or in the local area concerned.

Throughout the social studies programs in the senior high schools of Minnesota, according to this survey, state and local history are treated only incidentally in connection with world history, American history, and social science or the problems of democracy. Points at which such courses may deal with local and state materials have been indicated by some correspondents. One teacher touches upon the history of her city in connection with the study of industrialization in American history. Another tells of using state and local history materials as subjects for themes and term papers in various classes. In International Falls, a senior high school American history teacher has found it meaningful to stress the inter-

national aspects of local history. Territorial status and admission to the Union are further points in American history at which state and local history have been brought into the social studies program in other schools. Two correspondents mention community surveys in which community history plays an important part. Two of the schools reporting had local chapters of Junior Historians.

Teachers' colleges reporting indicate that a three- or four-hour semester course in Minnesota history is required, in some cases for history majors, in others for elementary trainees. A study of Minnesota government is provided in political science courses. Courses in sociology lay stress on the community as a laboratory and on the use of community resources, but ignore the historical aspect. In one college, trainees have the opportunity to participate for at least six weeks in the teaching of a Minnesota history course in the training school.

Materials used as sources of information about state and local history vary from secondary sources and textbooks to family photograph albums. The two most popular texts used in the teaching of state history seem to be Theodore C. Blegen's *Building Minnesota* (1938) and George E. Freeland, James T. Adams, James W. Clark, and Maude L. Lindquist's *Social Studies for Minnesota, Seventh Year* (1941). A few of the books mentioned by correspondents for supplementary reading are Grace Lee Nute's *Voyageur's Highway* (1941), Clara Painter and Anne Brezler's *Minnesota Grows Up* (1936), Daniel E. Willard's *Story of the North Star State* (1924), James W. Clark and Maude L. Lindquist's *Early Days and Ways in the Old Northwest* (1937), Robert Mayo's *Adventures in Minnesota History* (1931), William Watts Folwell's *History of Minnesota* (4 vols. 1921-30), the annual volumes of the Minnesota *Legislative Manual*, the Federal Writers' Project's *Minnesota, A State Guide*, published in 1938, and histories of counties and local communities. Some letters mentioned the use of films in presenting state history. Others suggest such sources as stories told by local pioneers and their descendants, local legends, current and back files of local newspapers, family photograph albums, publications of local historical societies, publications of the Minnesota Historical Society, col-

lections of local museums, articles of historical significance assembled by students and teachers, court records, town records, and school and church records.

To me personally, the most interesting feature of the survey was that in which various teachers reported on activities and projects carried on by their classes in the study of local history. There are many more of these activities than I have time to describe here, but I would like to tell you about some which seem the most unusual and imaginative.

Many of the replies mention stories to be gathered among pioneers who are still living. Some describe visits to the classroom by "old-timers" who answered such questions as "Why did you come to Minnesota?" or "Why did you come to Douglas County?" Often the old-timers are the grandparents of some of the students. One St. Paul teacher told how she developed an annotated list of people who had something to tell about the history of the city and who were willing to be interviewed by high school students. The address, telephone number, convenient times for calls, and similar information about each individual listed are recorded in the annotations. Suggestions were received from one teacher about stimulating investigations of family backgrounds by her students. Such inquiries resulted in the recording of interesting stories of pioneers, both immigrant and native-born.

The preparation of maps, models, booklets, and papers, and the collection of historical articles result in materials that can be exhibited on bulletin boards or in showcases. A large showcase of Minnesota materials, ranging from examples of Indian crafts to books and maps, arranged in the lobby of a junior high school by members of a seventh-grade class, stimulated much interest among all the pupils in the school. One teacher received such items as a soap carving of an ox cart, a cardboard model of Fort Snelling, a pioneer doll, a log cabin made of matches, and a miniature covered wagon.

One correspondent described the preparation of short papers by students on their city's part in Minnesota's lumbering history. Another mentioned articles dealing with local history written by stu-

dents for their school paper. Field trips were mentioned in numerous replies to the survey letter of inquiry. Such trips involved visits to county and local historical museums, to courthouses, and to historic sites, such as forts, old buildings, and homestead sites.

Among the most striking activities mentioned were community surveys. One of these resulted in a community history prepared by members of a class. The letter in which the project is reported neglects to mention the grade, but this fact may be unimportant, since the description, part of which is quoted herewith, has implications for all grades. "I think my most interesting project was carried out while teaching in a small community which was of no historical significance to anyone but the local inhabitants," reads the letter. "This project was a history of the community from the time of its earliest settlement until 1940. Necessary information was obtained by means of interviews with the oldest inhabitants; use of written records from town, churches, and school; and use of court records. After a fund of information had been gathered, the actual writing was done by a small group of students meeting with me twice a week. When the project was finished, we had a forty-five page typewritten manuscript, divided into chapters on the early settlement and pioneer life, growth of the churches, development of schools, and growth of the town itself. In addition to seeing their manuscript become part of the school library, the students obtained some experience in the problem of original research, and also had to face the problem of trying to straighten out contradictory information." A second community survey was made by the senior social science classes of 1943-44 in the Anoka High School. An impressive mimeographed pamphlet, complete with maps and pictures, resulted from their efforts.

The results of this survey prove to me that many Minnesota teachers are doing good work in handling state and local history. At any rate, the reports received indicate the varied activities that can contribute to the pupil's understanding of the importance of his own community.



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