

HISTORY AT THE CROSSROADS

Rhoda R. Gilman

A LATE SPRING blizzard howling at the windows of the University of Minnesota's Social Science Tower matched the bleakness of the mood inside when five members of the Minnesota Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History (MCCPH) met last April with the state commissioner of education, John J. Feda. Their purpose was to convey to him their sense of urgency about the unhappy state of history in Minnesota's public schools. Among those present were history department chairmen from the University of Minnesota and Augsburg College; the head of the state historical society's education division; a high school teacher and former board member of the Minnesota Association of History Teachers; and a St. Paul attorney who was interested in history and convinced of its importance to citizenship in a democratic society. Others were unable to attend because of highway conditions that day.¹

The committee members spoke about their deep concern over the falling enrollment in history classes at all levels of the educational system and the lack of any coherent sense of the human past among recent high school graduates. They discussed the extent to which "relevant" social studies like psychology, economics, sociology, and ethnology have replaced history in the core curriculum of both elementary and secondary schools. They pointed out that most elementary and many secondary teachers are themselves the products of schools that have downgraded history at the expense of topics more in vogue; therefore, many of these teachers are unprepared to impart even the limited amount of history assigned to them. And the committee agreed that it is commonly known in educational circles that a high school history teacher stands an almost even chance of being hired to coach sports as well as to interest students in the story of American or world civilization. Adding to the committee's frustration during the four years of its existence had been the members' inability to learn — even approximately — how much history was included in the Minnesota school curriculum. Their feeling was that the state's education department neither knew this (which officials had admitted) nor was interested in finding out (which officials had blandly denied).

A document that both supports and focuses the committee's concerns is a 1979 study of "The Teaching of History in the Public High Schools of Iowa," carried out by historians from Cornell and Grinnell colleges and the University of Iowa. No similar survey has been made in Minnesota, but personal observations of committee members and discussions with groups like the Minnesota Council for Social Studies and the Minnesota Association of History Teachers suggest that if one were done, the results would closely parallel those found in Iowa.²

According to the Iowa study, high schools do better instructing students in American history than in world history. As in Minnesota, most Iowa schools require a year of American history for graduation, but world history is often optional, and enrollments in both the latter and in world studies courses have declined steadily. In 1973 only 10 per cent of all students in Iowa high schools were enrolled in world history classes, and the trend continues downward. In the area of state history neither Iowa nor Minnesota has a requirement, and only a few optional classes are offered. Since there is no prescribed content for these courses, what is taught, as well as the quality of instruction, depends heavily on the training

¹The MCCPH is a state affiliate of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, formed in 1977 by the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. Since then some 16 other national and regional historical organizations have added their support. Attending the April, 1982, meeting were Stanford E. Lehmborg, Orloue Gisselquist, Rhoda R. Gilman, Marjorie A. Ferris, and Kenneth P. Griswold.

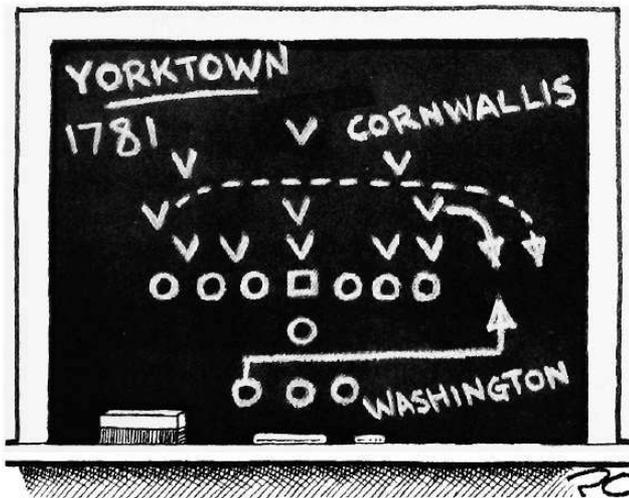
²Although few state-wide studies like that in Iowa have been publicized, concern over the subject has been widespread in recent years. See, for example, Richard S. Kirken-dall, "The Status of History in the Schools," in *Journal of American History*, 62:557-570 (September, 1975); Allan O. Kownslar, "The Status of History: Some Views and Suggestions," in *Social Education*, 40:447-449 (October, 1976). References also may be found throughout the pages of *The History Teacher*.

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and interest of the teacher, which offer no reasons for optimism.

In Iowa, high school history teachers may be certified in history, American history, world history, or "all social studies." The last area is the most popular, since it allows the instructor to offer courses not only in all fields of history, but in other social sciences as well. In small school districts especially, there is a premium on staff who can handle a wide variety of subjects. Yet, as the Iowa study points out, state certification requirements give no clear definition of "social studies" or "social sciences," leaving open the possibility of someone teaching American or world history who has had no specific training in either. This stems from an unspoken assumption on the part of many educators that anthropology, civics, economics, geography, psychology, sociology, and history are all essentially interchangeable — along with newer hybrids like area studies, urban studies, world problems, and minority and women's studies.

More disturbing yet is the fact that less than half of Iowa's high school history teachers have undergraduate majors in history. Nearly one-third of those outside the largest school districts have physical education majors. Of all Iowa history teachers, 39 per cent are also coaches. Although many of these coach/historians indicated a preference for teaching history if given a choice, they reflected a solid conviction that their jobs depended more on their coaching than on their teaching.



The seven Iowa professors concluded their report by recommending a state-mandated requirement for one year of world history in addition to the present requisite for American history; the tightening of certification for history teachers; and a major re-examination of the role of athletics in Iowa high schools. Although there has been no comparable survey for Minnesota, the members of the MCCPH feel that these recommendations provide a minimum platform for Minnesotans concerned about

the teaching of history in their own schools and for anyone who is convinced that a clear idea of the past is necessary to understanding the present and to making choices for the future.

THE RESPONSE the committee received from Commissioner Feda was thoughtful and forthright. Faced with a long list of urgent educational problems, all overshadowed by a desperate emergency in school funding, he could promise little. Himself a former teacher of history, he did not question its value in the curriculum. He pointed out, nevertheless, that widespread deficiencies in the teaching of both mathematics and sciences are likely to get more public attention, and schools struggling to meet increased pressure for vocational and technical training will be cool to the suggestion of requiring more history. The commissioner agreed that the coaching/history problem is a serious one and probably little different in Minnesota from that in Iowa, but in his view this is a hiring question that can be approached only through public pressure on individual districts.

Committee members felt that, in contrast to previous encounters with the state education department, their concerns had at least been heard. Feda promised to pursue vigorously the questions of teacher qualifications and of how much history is actually offered in the classroom under the blanket of social studies. He agreed that more information in these areas is urgently needed.

In the course of the discussion, one committee member, a teacher from Robbinsdale, made a comment that leads to many reflections on the place of history in the school curriculum. She observed that in her own education history had always performed an integrative function. Amid the contrasting models of the world that she found in studying economics, political science, psychology, and sociology, the story of how these models themselves had developed, along with the events and milieu out of which they had grown, provided a path to understanding. All of the sciences — physical as well as social — exist in history, partake of it, and help to shape it. A clear sense of the past is one way to perceive the relationships among them as well as their implications for human experience. In this respect history is the most basic of all subjects.

This broad view, of course, implies a challenge for history also. A study of the past that incorporates the mainstream of human culture cannot be conceived along narrow political or national or disciplinary lines. The revitalization of history teaching for a generation of students who learn by computer and cannot remember the moon without human footprints will not be a simple case of more requirements and tighter certification.

THE DRAWINGS for this editorial were done by Patrick N. Cannon, a free-lance Minneapolis cartoonist.



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