

MINNESOTA HISTORY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM¹

Advocates of additional subjects for our high school curricula receive a lukewarm response these days when the cost of school support is higher than at any time in the history of the state. In many cases Minnesota high schools have reduced the number of subjects taught and cut down their faculties in order to check the mounting costs. Nevertheless, if we are to make progress in secondary education certain changes must take place.

In the programs of Minnesota high schools the subject of state history has been until recently a minus quantity. Today it is in the experimental stage. In a considerable number of schools some attempt is made to correlate state with national history, but the high school which offers state history for credit, in its regular program of studies, is the rare exception. This neglect of the study of Minnesota history is mainly due to the following reasons: first, it is feared by some that the intensive study of state history may result in an undue emphasis upon the state at the expense of the nation and thus promote provincialism; second, many believe that, although Minnesota history should be correlated with national history in high school study, state history does not merit the dignity of a separate course; third, the high school programs are already overcrowded, and, in fact, school superintendents have tried so many new courses that some of them have had to be discarded and relegated to the limbo of forgotten things; and

¹ A paper read on June 21 in Detroit, Minnesota, at the third annual state historical convention. A somewhat similar paper by Mr. White, entitled "A High School Course in Minnesota History," was read on April 15 at a meeting in Minneapolis of the social studies section of the eighth annual conference of Minnesota high school teachers. *Ed.*

finally, no text has yet been written which meets the demands of a state history course, nor are there teachers available who are adequately prepared for the work.

Perhaps my experience with a course in Minnesota history which was offered in the Frazee High School in the fall of 1923 enables me to meet some of these objections to state history courses. In the first place, it is certain that state history need make no student provincial. Obviously our national history and state history are closely related. Neither stands alone and therefore it is important to understand their correlation. The history of this commonwealth sheds light upon national history. Furthermore, a better understanding of certain epochs of our national history will be secured by getting a view from a western standpoint as well as from that of the New England historian. Let easterners use the term "provincial," for they know more about it.

No curriculum should be overcrowded but in any curriculum the best should be welcome, always. If the study of Minnesota history helps to develop better citizens, — and I maintain that it does, — it justifies itself. Much may be said for the idea of subordinating Minnesota history to national history and of correlating the two in the high school course in American history. The danger is that in this general course, which in most Minnesota high schools is crowded into the space of one semester, the general demands are so heavy that Minnesota history is practically eliminated. The study of state history should be sufficiently distinct to throw light upon the story of our country.

Judging from past experience with other subjects we may conclude that suitable texts and adequately trained teachers will become available as soon as educators give to Minnesota history the attention which it merits. In his introduction to the first volume of Dr. William W. Folwell's *History of Minnesota*, Dr. Solon J. Buck, the superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, writes, "For over seventy years the Min-

nesota Historical Society has been garnering the materials for the history of the state." Dr. Folwell's history, two volumes of which have already appeared, is "based in large part on those materials" and is in itself a veritable treasure house of historical material for teachers and students. The state historical society publishes a quarterly magazine known as the MINNESOTA HISTORY BULLETIN, a series of volumes of *Collections*, and other materials, which are all useful.² The fact that no textbook has been published which contains enough material for a high school class of seniors need not deter a superintendent or a teacher from offering the course. The assistant superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, Mr. Theodore C. Blegen, has prepared outlines of the subject which I found to be of great help in organizing material for presentation to the class and for class reading and study.³ The use of these outlines involves considerable reading on the part of the student. Such gathering of material by the student serves as a modest introduction to the reading methods of the college student and indeed it tends to develop a habit of independent and careful reading which will be very useful even if the student should not go to college.

High school students should be given the opportunity to study Minnesota history for the pleasure which it affords. In gamboling over the wide field of Minnesota's past, the student travels far, sees strange sights, goes back to the earliest days of our colonial as well as of our national history, meets many

² The current publications of the society are made available to any school or library in the state which becomes a subscriber at the nominal rate of two dollars a year. To any subscribing library the earlier publications of the society are available at a very small cost.

³ "The Correlation of American and Minnesota History: A Syllabus of Minnesota History for High School Teachers, with a Plan for Coordinating National and State History." This syllabus, which is available in the form of mimeographed copies, contains outlines, questions, and references for twenty-one topics in Minnesota history. There is also a general bibliography. Suggestions are made for the correlation of each state history topic with a broader general topic in American history.

companionable characters, and experiences the fascination of a rapidly changing drama. In the selection of optional subjects in the high school curriculum most students follow the line of their tastes and their pleasures. The subject of Minnesota history is assuredly wholesome and good and hence the reason for teaching it is good.

One of the most common reasons assigned for the study of history is that it makes clear the background of present conditions and thus helps us to understand the complexities of our environment, socially, economically, and in other respects. The majority of the high school students in this state were born here and will spend the remainder of their lives here. Minnesota history will supply them with a knowledge of facts and events which have had a part in shaping the conditions which surround them today. They will read newspapers published in Minnesota and they will vote as citizens of Minnesota. Will they not do these things more intelligently if they are familiar with the history of this state?

The study of Minnesota history possesses a genuine human interest. The biographies of eminent men and women who have made and are making the commonwealth great abound in the elements of the human touch. The fathers and mothers of many boys and girls in Minnesota have shared the hardships of the transformation from pioneer life to the thriving life of farm, village, and city today. The grandparents of many a Minnesota boy or girl laid down their lives as victims of the lurking savage, or of the rigors of a stern climate, or of the chances of the battlefield. Minnesota has had her Daniel Boones, Grace Darlings, and Molly Pitchers. John G. Patton and Dr. O. R. Bachelder among the savages of the equatorial regions performed no harder task nor carried the banner of religion with better grace and assurance than did the early missionaries among the Dakota and Ojibway Indians of Minnesota.

Minnesota history arouses the enthusiasm and personal interest of high school students. Naturally this interest is a force which may and should be effectively utilized by the teacher. Information about local or pioneer history may be gleaned from older people in the community, people well known to the boys and girls of the school. The interest of the students is immediately reciprocated by their elders. Friendly associations are formed and the aged acquire a new attraction for the young men and women. A mutual respect is created between young and old that is lasting. In every town there are many who may be found willing to contribute personal reminiscences which will be welcome additions to the class routine. In my own class this happened on several occasions. Much interest was aroused when arrowheads were discovered on a nearby farm. A bullet which wounded a Civil War soldier in the battle of Fredericksburg, an early make of surveying instrument used in the period before Minnesota became a state, numerous Indian relics, and copies of early newspapers caught the interest of the students and created a desire for further investigation of Minnesota history. The students gained a new viewpoint concerning history and its making. It dawned on them that history after all is nothing more than that which is recorded of the experiences of individuals singly or in groups. After getting this point of view students learn to weigh more carefully the material presented in the texts dealing with the larger fields of history.

The teaching of state history has proved successful in other states. The schools in our neighbor states, North Dakota and South Dakota, both offer courses in state history, and in the former the teaching of state history has been made compulsory by law. The recent provision made for state history in the elementary school curriculum of Minnesota is an excellent forward step. The work should be extended into the high schools as a broader and deeper

subject. The quality of the work done by the pupils will of course depend upon the enthusiasm and the experience of the teacher. It is by trial that Minnesota history will win its way in the schools.

I will not attempt to outline with any degree of exactness the subject matter of a course in Minnesota history. The geological and geographical conditions should be studied with care. In fact this study should be made much more intensive than anything that the student has ever attempted before along this line. The period of discovery and exploration should be considered next. Several of the earliest explorers should receive the attention of the whole class and short biographical sketches of others should be reported individually. A description of the probable appearance of Minnesota in early days will at once stimulate the imagination and test the accuracy of the student. The great fur trade, the gradual transition to agriculture, and the efforts of the early missionaries are among the topics that are worthy of the time of the students and teachers. They help to explain the rush of white settlement that followed. The government assumed a degree of wardship for the Indian tribes settled in Minnesota. Did the Indian policy encourage or deter early settlement? What the government does is always a legitimate subject for argument. A class of high school students might profitably debate the merits of the various Indian treaties.

The period of Minnesota territorial history is one of great interest. In the fifties came the tide of sectionalism which was to lead to civil strife. But the status of Minnesota on its admission to the Union was not a bone of contention, for it had been settled by northerners imbued with the sentiments of free labor. The admission of Minnesota was delayed for several months, however. This delay calls to the mind of the student the Congressional debates of that day, all surcharged with the slavery question. The great issues of that critical period can be profitably reviewed by the student as he traces

the relation of his own state to the larger events of the nation. The Civil War may be studied so as to bring out the contributions made by Minnesota men, by the famous First Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, and other gallant regiments. The names of Sibley, Ramsey, Shields, Crooks, and others enter into the story of this period of Minnesota history.

Let the student discover how St. Paul became the capital of the state. Let him consider the plans of Little Crow for driving the white man out of Minnesota. Would not this aim have been achieved if the Chippewa and the South Dakota Indians had joined forces with him? The Sioux War ranks as perhaps the most terrible Indian outbreak in our history and its causes as well as its tragic course deserve study. The bloody tale is not one of horror only, but also one of courage and heroism.

The student should study the history of transportation in Minnesota, especially the story of the building of the railroads. He must become familiar with the relations between the railroads and the economic life of the people. In fact, the railroads have had far-reaching influences, even in the sphere of political life.

Economic conditions at various periods in the state's past should be studied with care. Some interesting projects suggest themselves in this field, for example, a comparison of the prices following the Civil War with those that prevailed after the World War.

The political history of Minnesota is a fascinating field for study. The local interest of it is heightened by the fact that much material on this phase is available through newspapers. Many of the county weekly newspapers have complete files dating back to pioneer days, in one case, back to 1854. Usually the owners of these files will be glad to allow students to make use of them.

A beginning has been made in the teaching of Minnesota history in the high schools of this state. Doubtless the ten-

dency will be more and more to correlate state with national history in high school courses and this tendency should be encouraged. It may be a matter of years before a state course in this subject is secured. More voices than mine must be raised in behalf of Minnesota history as a high school study. There are objections which must be overcome. There must be for educators a period of pioneering in this field, as once there was for settlers in the early history of our state.

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