Clio's Cadres

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: Dr. Lord recommends the expansion of local historical societies. Local historians can explain in detail why things happened and who made them happen.

CLIO'S CADRES

BY CLIFFORD L. LORD

THE very broad and challenging responsibilities of all our historical societies—state, county and local—can be grouped into three basic categories. The first of these is *conservation*—the conservation of the basic sources, the raw materials of our heritage. These raw materials are the manuscripts, public and private, which bear significant testimony: the diary of the articulate observer; the letters of the critical recorder, the correspondence of the observant participant in a business, a union, an organization, a political party, a movement. They are the historically significant archives of democratic government, from the level of the school district to that of the state. They are the artifacts of local life which, properly used, bring, as nothing else can do, to vivid, visual reality the standards, the sweat, the aspirations, the ingenuity, the life of yesterday—and the day before, and the day before that. They are the newspapers, those invaluable, although incomplete and not always impartial, diaries of our communities. They are the dauguerreotypes and etchings, the lithographs, paintings, and photographs, the explorer's sketches which do so much to recapture the look of the past—red and white—and the tempo and spaciousness of living in the days before cliff-dwellers' apartments and skyscraper capitols and common stanchions for rotating herds of cows. They are the recorded reminiscences—written, taped or wired—of the early settler or his son or daughter; of the pioneer of today—the immigrant who, like all our forbears, tore up roots in the old country to breast the adventures of a new

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land, usually a strange tongue, new laws and customs, and an increasingly competitive economy. They are the sites where history happened and where restoration can revitalize the aura of an age and a way of life gone almost beyond our grasp. As important to the ultimate welfare of our people as the conservation of soil and water and of human resources, is the conservation and preservation of the resources of heritage.

The second category of historical society activity can be labelled *dissemination.* This is the making available to the general public of the knowledge and the values of localized history. The vehicles are legion. Publication of the fruits of research is one. The magazines that a few local societies can afford, with or without advertising; the more common weekly local column; the special monthly page in the newspaper; the item in the newsletter to members; the pamphlet; the occasional book, are avenues of dissemination. The museum exhibit is another, whether staged in the society's museum, in the school corridor, in the vacant store window, in a travelling display, or in a circulating unit available to the local schools. School projects, in which the local society works up the program; or pageants; or tours to historic sites; or visits to the local museum; or talks or research programs entered into jointly with the local schools are others. At a different level, historical programs of many types are usually welcomed by the local radio station. Television offers major opportunities to take history to the people, particularly in the less expensive master-teacher, or panel or quiz-type show. An offer to the community of good speakers on various aspects of local history will quickly reach the knife and fork circuit. Historic sites will teach a lesson to, and whet an interest in, many whose minds might otherwise be closed.

The third category is what I would call the *advancement* of knowledge in our respective localized histories—research and writing in the history of our communities and local regions. And here I would plead not only for *more* but most emphatically for *better* local history. To a very considerable degree this field for three generations has been the plaything of the local antiquarian, the chronicler and calenderer of local events. It has become the barebones record

of when the first store was built at the corner of First and Main, of who was alderman from the Third Ward in 1872, of who was pastor of the First Congregational Church when the town burned down. We should be doing our research and writing in localized history with some attention to the impact of local leadership and local events on the larger scene, and to the relationship of outside developments to what happens within our communities. We should be doing our research and writing not just in terms of what happened, but of why it happened and, above all, who made it happen. We should appreciate and capitalize on the opportunity which is ours to study the American experiment where it can best be seen and understood—at the local level. For it is here that we see the individual initiative that builds the idea into the shop which becomes the local factory (or the local mistake which destroys an enterprise of promise); that takes an ordinary local newspaper and builds it into a force that makes greatly for civic improvement and public morality (or mayhap transforms it into a roadblock to anything but acceptable mediocrity); that with imaginative leadership solves a local impasse (or thwarts a determined majority), cleans up a slum, or introduces an improved farm practice that brings new prosperity to the area and ultimately transforms the agricultural habits of a generation; that invents a new device or gadget that hugely increases the productivity of a man-hour of labor or eases the burden of the housewife.

May I offer a bill of particulars? A teacher of California history was in my office within the month. His complaint was that California history was all gold rush and Spanish missions. To this man, one new dam was more important than one old mission. His point was that with the exception of a few excellent books like George Mowry's *The California Progressives,* California history from about 1851 to date was a comparative no-man's land. Certainly that is true in most of our states. Assuredly it is true in Wisconsin, where the Frenchmen, Indians, territorial history and LaFollette era are well covered, the gaps between enormous. In Nebraska—I hesitate in the presence of a recent textbook writer—I daresay that the gaps are also enormous. We need localized histories of agriculture and the individual farmer, of organized unions and the individual worker, of

the effect of farm to market roads and R. F. D. We need localized studies of the development of consolidated yet distant market places as the automobile lessened distances once measured in terms of the horse; of the impact of World Wars I and II on our cities as well as our farms (other than sociologists' studies, helpful as the latter may be); of politics outside of the George Norris or Robert La Follette eras—studies which might be far more revealing of American democracy at work—in days of "normalcy" rather than dramatic crisis. We need localized works on the historical problems created by the advent of migratory labor, the transient visitor, the luring of the tourist trade; of the impact of the consolidated school on the social life of the district once dependent for its meeting place on the one-room rural school; of the effect of parity payments on rural standards of living and political habits; of the results of sprays on the corn-borer and blight and rot—not in a technical or scientific sense, but in terms of economic meaning to the individual farm and the individual locality. We should be students of the effect on the community of wide spread higher education and the migration from (or to) the farm; of the impact of better farm management practices; of the implications of television for popular thinking, political action, and the social habits of the rural area. We need more knowledge of the epic stories of the men and women who made Lincoln, or Hastings, Cobb, Seward, or Asylum and left these cities and towns as their monuments.

From such studies of our particular and chosen localized approach, we see that it is people who make history—individual people like you and me: some of them prominent and often respected leaders in farm groups, political parties, business or labor; some of them people of little means and less prominence who, given opportunity, prove to have the particular combination of initiative, ability, imagination or personality to change the course of events, at least at the localized level and perhaps on a far more prominent stage.

This is so commonplace to all who stop to think of it that paradoxically we consistently overlook it, and talk instead of American history in terms of great generalizations, of trends and developments, wars and depressions, national administrations and Congressional legislation. By contrast, those

of us doing research and writing at the state and local level find ourselves in direct touch with the dynamics of the American economy, the remarkable equalizing forces of the American society, the genuine effectiveness of American democracy. We can see and isolate the developments, factors, and individuals advancing or retarding the evolution of a community, and in so doing we come into immediate, personal contact with the source springs of American greatness.

Furthermore we can not only show our Communist visitors the fabulous results of American scientific, mechanized farming, but we can refute the basic tenets of that ideology alike to the foreigner and the fellow-traveller by the demonstrable, historic results of individual initiative in a reasonably free economy. In the days of our opportunity, offered by military leadership of the free half of the world, the contribution we can make to the world—wider understanding of the nature and lineage of the truly classless society we are developing in these United States—is emphatically of cardinal importance.

Within our own society, the intellectual defense of dynamic individualism is coupled with an appreciation of the values of perspective that only history can give. None can appreciate as well as the localized historian how far we have come in how short a time, historically speaking. None can better recall the days of wider spaces and fewer people, in urban and rural areas alike, and what that means in terms of the life of the people, then and today. None can better stimulate our appreciation of what farming was like in the relatively recent days before electricity, automobile and truck, or the advent of motorized farm machinery. None can more effectively demolish the nostalgic hankering for the horse and buggy days or those of hard money. Few admirers of the craftsmanship of a Duncan Phyfe or a Paul Revere would, I suspect, be willing to translate their lamentations at the passing of the craftsman into the prices such craftsmanship would command today if substituted for Grand Rapids and the Rogers Company. And fewer still would go back to the hat bathtub and water-heated-on-the-stove, or to the shoe-shaped tub where the bather was seated directly over the charcoal fire, in preference to the fixtures of Crane or Kohler and our modern water-heating systems.

My emphasis today is therefore on this third category of historical society activity—research and writing in localized history, with its contribution to present citizenship through perspective on present problems and material progress, and with its contribution to the wider understanding at home and abroad of the nature of the American experience. And I insist that what I am talking about is neither provincial nor antiquarian. It is intellectual exercise sufficiently stimulating, challenging and practical to attract the best brains and the busiest people in Nebraska or Wisconsin, in Maine or California, in Seattle or Miami.

Such research and writing can, of course, be performed in the traditional individual pattern. Or it can be pursued in the newer co-operative, group-participation pattern, where a group within the local historical society takes on a project, divides the labor, compares notes regularly and frequently, each member helping the others with suggestions, criticisms and solutions to the seemingly dead-end streets up which others' research may apparently have led.

But how to go about it? I dare say there are not as many communities as one might guess that do not have someone familiar to a useful degree with the methodology of research and the proper use of often conflicting source materials—the person who took several history courses in college and wrote a few papers; the high school history teacher; the attorney who, quite typically, took quite a bit of history in his earlier training; the minister whose approach is sometimes historical. Such persons clearly can help their willing and usually eager colleagues in the use and weighing of local historical evidence. If such talent is not available locally, it is surely the duty of the state society and particularly of the college and university teachers of history to give all possible aid and comfort, guidance and counsel to such practitioners, amateur but competent, and frequently more gifted in understanding of the processes of history-making than their academic brethren.

If anything in this world can lead us to an intelligent rededication to the basic principles which have made America great, it is the serious study of the lives and interests and activities of our American communities, and of the men and women who left our towns as their testaments.

If anything in the world can sober the brash reformer who would upset the applecart to rid society of one rotten apple or amputate the torso to cure an infected hangnail, it is the study — and the resulting appreciation — *firstly* of the dynamics and the accomplishments, past and present, of our economy, society and polity; and *secondly,* of the flexibility of that economy, society, and polity at the hands of individual men and women of vision, guts, and ability.

So my plea today is for more strong, active local societies with broad, well-rounded programs. They collect the records of history—in writing, image or artifact—and build the heritage resources of city or county or state. They encourage or develop local museums or, lacking that, start local displays. They co-operate with the schoolmen to bring alive to the children the historical resources of the community. They give leadership to intelligent community research groups or committees. They publish their best writings through the local newspapers or the society's own publications. They take history to the people over the airways, through the printed word, group spectacles such as community pageants, the preservation and development of historic sites, and effective use of the public platform.

The appeal of history is seemingly universal. The appeal of a dynamic, broadly-gauged program of diverse activities can attract and utilize people, who today would not be caught dead in a local historical society meeting. An intelligent program of collecting and research, of writing and publication, of taking history to the people, has an appeal which can transform the whole movement of which we are all a part, and make of the local historical society the vital agency it should be. This, of course, demands dynamic local leadership.

But people are too busy, some will say. I cite the president of one county society, a versatile young real estate and insurance man who to this very question three years ago replied with the force and prestige of truth, "In Sawyer County [Wisconsin], we keep people so busy with history they don't have time for more trivial things."

But strong local societies will be competitors of the state society—and indeed in some cases they have proved in

the past to be. But there exists no excuse for permitting the relationships of state and county historical societies to degenerate into competition instead of co-operation. We may need to rethink a bit our formal relationships, but co-operation is undeniably a two-way proposition, and rivalry is most apt to develop where one road or the other is blocked. Co-operation requires strong support, help, encouragement, friendly assistance and data on techniques from the state group—and perhaps just a bit of self-denial. From the local groups it requires understanding and a willingness to divide the spoils in the common interest and in order to realize the advantages to local effort of a strong state program.

The county and local society should be the workhorse of the historical society movement. What better can one say to the out-of-towner who comes into the office in Lincoln or Madison wanting to work at Nebraska or Wisconsin history than to suggest joining the local society where the research group, where the collecting activities, where the writing and the speaking and perhaps the acting can best be centered? Yet to justify that reply, the local society must be an active and able group in which the volunteer will be welcomed even though an outlander or "furriner," and where a challenge to his or her capacity must be present. On the other hand, when the occasion arises, the local society must be willing to reciprocate and to help the state organization with a legislative program, a membership drive, a research program.

My call today is for a generation of devoted missionaries who will join the substantial bands which already envision what localized historical activity can and should be, who have the willingness to devote the time and energy necessary to the achievement of the goal, who will forward the transformation of the vision into the reality.

These are Clio's Cadres—bodies of devoted men and women, organized in effective local societies with broad-gauged programs of real significance—*collecting, advancing* and *disseminating,* with *conviction, application* and *dedication,* the materials and the principles of our heritage so abundantly and peculiarly available to each of us in our own localities.

The goal is high. It is attainable. It is well worth the striving-for.