



Opportunities in Local History

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OPPORTUNITIES IN LOCAL HISTORY

BY HOWARD H. PECKHAM

SINCE I am no longer directly charged with state historical society work, I should like to speak to you as president of the American Association for State and Local History. You should know, first of all, that this national organization is deeply concerned for the health of county historical societies because in them are to be found the grass roots of our historical consciousness. This Association has no political or patriotic program to sell, no "ism" to promote; it hopes only to find and publicize helpful means by which you can carry on your particular educational program more effectively.

For you are an educational force. We have outgrown the era of the old settlers' picnic, the antiquarian society of edited reminiscences, or the exclusive social lodge. We are in a sense explorers, seeking to summarize as carefully as possible the route which we have taken to arrive at 1956 in Nebraska, U. S. A. As that road your ancestors and mine have traveled lengthens out behind us each year, we want to be able to survey our surroundings and say, "Well, in this region it came about this way." We seek perspective and balance, the satisfaction of understanding, and the sharpening of judgment.

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At the county level some of us suspect that American history is most enjoyable. What on the national level is called a policy, a movement, or vague, formless pressure, is on the local level your ancestor meeting a need or your neighbor speaking to his friends. On the local level, history has a face, a name, and a voice. The Westward Movement is a pioneer or two who turned off the Oregon Trail and settled down. The Civil War is not great campaigns and casualty reports, but the First Nebraska Cavalry at Shiloh, the Second on the frontier, and so on. The Pure Food and Drug Act, whose fiftieth anniversary we have observed this year, was the culmination of the irritations of countless persons in Lincoln, Hastings, Grand Island, North Platte, Scottsbluff, and elsewhere over patent medicines that would not cure, spoiled foods, and unlabeled adulterations. Arbor Day is one aspect of a growing interest in natural conservation earlier in this century, but it was first of all a Nebraska idea honoring J. Sterling Morton, and other states imitated it. The Granger Movement began with farmers and ranchers who were dissatisfied with freight rates and elevator practices, and ended with railroads under government regulation and co-operatives established. The Progressive Movement of the early Twentieth century rose from the Populist revolt of the People's Party, which held its first convention at Omaha in 1892. These events make up our national history, but you see them taking shape at the local level, and at that level you can see them more clearly. Local history intrigues us instead of overwhelming us.

It forms part of the pattern of our national history, and we will understand our country better today for knowing how its various localities were founded and developed. Most of our national virtues arise from the fusion of local viewpoints deriving from variant backgrounds. Local history is not an isolated interest for which anyone needs to apologize; it is sometimes our national history in miniature; it is always a chapter in the story of our national growth. Sometimes I think of it as the pattern in a roll of wallpaper, the small design that is endlessly repeated

or re-enacted around the four walls of our national room.

Local history does something *for* us, too. It sparks us with an aliveness to our surroundings. The hills and valleys, the houses and buildings in our own community take on new and colorful meaning. We know that a river turned a mill wheel, watered a canal or some livestock, provided a highway for explorers or fur traders. We learn where the old fort stood, or the first sod house, or the old Indian village. We can point out the battlefield or the treaty ground. We find out why our town has long had a reputation for music, why it manufactures ax handles or door knobs, why one church is dominant and another failed, why the streets are laid out as they are, who the eminent citizens were, and who were the rascals. At last we grow truly at home in our community, putting down roots and enriching our lives. We have a sense of belonging, which the psychiatrists think so important to a stable personality. There is a deep satisfaction in knowing all we can about where we live. We understand what Thoreau meant when he said, "I have traveled a good deal in Concord."

Local history demonstrates a faith of which we need to be reminded today. I have mentioned that here we see events taking shape because of the activity of certain individuals. Personalities started things moving, whether it was a political protest, a new technique in farming, a manufactured invention, an art gallery, or a college. Suddenly the spirit of democracy comes alive. We behold the individual making his contribution and actually shaping the events around him, in other words, making history. This is important in our world, because, as Dr. Clifford L. Lord has pointed out in one of our Association *Bulletins*, the Marxist idea denies that the individual is of any importance: he is the victim of his environment; he is at the mercy of forces too big for him to oppose alone; therefore he must transfer his effort and authority to the state. Can you imagine telling one of your Nebraska ancestors of the 1850's that he was a "victim" of the plains? or later of the railroads? Yet Communists argue that nations and economic systems move toward their predetermined end, and

the only control possible will come from allowing the state, benevolently of course, to take over direction of the individual's activities. Nothing is more untrue, and nothing more dangerously absurd.

Basic to our western civilization is the conviction that the individual can *do* things and can *change* things. He walks with dignity, and his life is precious. Think what a powerful antidote that is to the feeling of mass helplessness which a dictator likes to cultivate, because it leads to mass movements and then to the police state. There's a job for you, to show your neighbors and your children through your local history how much individuals have counted.

These are the challenges. Meeting them provokes problems. Sometimes local societies complain that there is not widespread enough interest to maintain the group. Or there is not enough money for them to operate as they should like to do. Again, they may question whether there is enough for them to do. These, I submit, are related disabilities, in the sense that if one can be cured all will be cured. Once I tried to classify and summarize all the activities possible for a local historical society in order to make suggestions to those that seemed anemic. I have been asked to be practical; therefore may I review these collected ideas for you in the hope that some of them may prove helpful.

First of all, what are the likeliest activities? How may a historical society function? I think it pursues three courses. It collects historical information and objects; it records historical data; and it interprets and educates. At least these are the heart of any society program. In addition, almost every society needs to advertise itself with publicity or promotional activity. Let us examine these in turn.

Collecting is associated with libraries and museums. You may well have a historical museum, but I have come slowly to the conclusion that if a society does not have a well established library it would do better to co-operate with the local public library in building up a local history

section. The society can be significantly helpful in assisting the local library to obtain all the records of the community. You are the persons best qualified to find the old books and newspapers, the old letters and diaries that illuminate your local past. You may wish to establish and maintain a scrapbook of local history. In collecting for your local museum, I hope you will seek professional guidance, or at least become familiar with L. C. Coleman's *Manual for Small Museums*. Dr. Coleman warns against taking lightly the responsibility of administering a museum, against becoming involved with natural history, geology, and souvenirs, against accepting everything offered or showing everything owned.

The recording function includes a variety of activities that permits every member to be assigned a task. You may wish to interview the oldest inhabitants and write up their reminiscences. In this technical age, such interviews are sometimes recorded on tape. If you are genealogically minded, you may prefer to record burial inscriptions in old cemeteries; I am sure that the genealogical division of your state library would welcome this data, just as it would be glad to file genealogies of your society members. Another genealogical service is to copy in brief form old wills, marriage registers, and probate records.

Have you considered the origins of place names in your communities? How did a river, creek, hill, valley, cross-road, town, or township get its name, and what does it mean? Did some famous or passing individual leave his name on the landscape, was a geographical feature noted, was some place back east or in the homeland commemorated, or was the name simply made up? Information of this kind is quickly lost with the passing generations, and what was once common knowledge does not for that reason get written down and then is gone. Similarly, the appearance of the township or county was not commonly recorded on maps in the early days, and a fascinating investigation is the effort you might make today to map your locality as it was before the first settlers came and as it was at various stages in its development. If you have a museum,

probably nothing will attract so much attention as dioramas of high points in your history: three-dimensional figures in miniature set amid lifelike scenes. Admittedly this is work for persons with artistic talent who should first examine some good dioramas and discuss the tricks of the trade.

Markers erected at historic sites are another form of recording, on metal or stone instead of paper. Please do not think of these markers as limited to the tourist; they are informative to local residents and especially to young people. They impress on all of us that some event we have read about or have heard about took place precisely here. As a concession to the motorcar age, however, I recommend that a second marker—and even the one if there can be but one—be set along the nearest main road to catch the eye and direct the attention of the fast moving American. Obviously the out-of-the-way site must be advertised on the main right-of-way if it is to be made known to the public. Your state society has marked some sites of statewide importance, but it cannot undertake to touch all those of local significance; this is your job.

In this connection, you may have some historic buildings in your vicinity. I am not going to suggest that you buy them, even the neglected and vacant ones, because real estate has a way of being continually costly. Preservation of an old building involves problems that you will want to take up with your state society or some unit of government, but again as a recording activity you can photograph the building, take its measurements and make a plan of it that will remain a historical document after the original has tumbled down or given way to a supermarket or gas station.

I wonder if in your locality you have compiled an adequate record of the young men and women who lost their lives in our last war. Certainly as a tribute to their sacrifice, some biographical account should remain on permanent file not merely to keep their memory green but also to illustrate with pride what manner of man this was that went forth from Nebraska to defend our country. This research and writing activity extends to other fields. What

about other important persons in your county? Is there a biographical sketch of them any place? I mean the living as well as the early settlers, men and women who have left their marks on your communities. Perhaps the newspaper published a long obituary, perhaps not; in any event it is likely to be printed on woodpulp paper that is already crumbling away. At the least, the printed information needs to be transferred to good rag paper and filed by the name of the individual.

Reference to newspapers suggests another job that is all too rarely undertaken. There is much local history buried in those papers; the problem is to locate it. Indexing is a tedious but not a complicated task, and the result is a tool of great usefulness.

As a kind of climax to all recording activities, you may assemble enough facts and figures, enough narratives and stories to justify putting them together into a pamphlet of local history, or at least a historical map. In this way you make sure that the raw material you have gathered is refined and polished into a form that remains permanent and popular. However, when such a step is taken, we pass into the interpretive activities of a historical society, those that primarily affect others.

In this category there are several kinds of undertakings to sponsor. If your society cannot afford to publish a quarterly magazine, it ought at least to issue a news bulletin quarterly or monthly. This is the mortar that helps hold an organization together; it is a regular reminder that the society exists and does things; and it is something tangible that is given the members in exchange for their dues. I cannot speak too emphatically of the value of some regular, written communication with the membership. If you dare think of a magazine, our Association has a helpful *Bulletin* on solving the problems involved. We have already demonstrated by starting publication of *American Heritage* magazine that a widespread appetite for American history exists.

There are other possibilities, to be sure, in the area of

publications. I have mentioned a local history, in pamphlet or book size. It establishes the authority of the society in its chosen field of activity; certainly the history you prepare should be superior to any other that might be compiled. Your public schools might prize a book of source readings in local history. This kind of work is put together by gathering miscellaneous writings about the community from old newspapers, old county histories, speeches, travel accounts, diaries, letters, etc., which can then be used in class assignments. Our national history is thus illuminated by examples in local history. There is fun and excitement in compiling such a book of source material, and I think you will find that teachers would welcome it. Where it has been done, the schools find it useful.

Since you are an educational society, your connections with schools in the community and county should be close, smooth and frequent. If you have a museum, visits from school classes should be planned with the teachers so as to make the excursions tie in with class assignments. Your society may wish to sponsor an essay or speaking contest in the schools on some topic of local history, with cash prizes. Some county historical societies elect two or four seniors recommended by the faculty to honorary membership in the society for one year. This furnishes the young people recognition and an opportunity to benefit from your program meetings. In another area the local historical society can serve the schools by supervising or sponsoring a history club, either at the junior high or senior high level. Most of our teachers are loaded with extra-curricular responsibilities, and to start a history club is simply an extra burden. Therefore, the help of the local historical society in inaugurating and planning a year of activities for a student history club is a distinct contribution to the school. In some states the state historical society assumes leadership in stimulating school history clubs, and where a field worker is provided this arrangement is satisfactory. In many other states, however, the state society can only recommend and hope that young people will be organized into school history clubs, but is unable to implement its desire.

The local history association can step into the breach and become the spark plug that energizes the school to fulfill the recommendation of the state society.

But you are primarily an adult education society, and you face other opportunities. You can work with newly naturalized citizens and newcomers to your community in acquainting them with the origin and development of your county. Not only will such a program make them feel at home in the community, but will give them a stake in its future development. You can work with other clubs on community enterprises, because you are out to make history as well as to recall the past. If there are a few historic spots or houses in your county, you can develop a tour or pilgrimage to these places. I am sure you are familiar with spring garden tours; historic places properly interpreted at each stop provide an equally attractive circuit.

Does your community have a means of selecting and recognizing an outstanding citizen each year? Not the person who is mentioned most frequently in the newspaper, but the quiet, responsible, man or woman who is reliable and capable in taking on community jobs that ought to be done? What is more appropriate than that the historical society should discover and call attention to such a superior citizen each year with a luncheon and award? I know of one county where this single activity seems to justify the existence of the historical society.

Somewhat more frequently the local historical society sponsors a kind of pioneer week each year, coinciding with a local anniversary. Store windows are decorated with antiques and other borrowed historical objects; luncheon clubs arrange historical programs; the newspapers feature stories on the oldest inhabitants or oldest buildings; the schools and churches join in the observance; and for a few days people recall their origins, changes in dress and domestic life, the beginnings of self-government, and other aspects of community growth.

The local historical society is almost always charged with the community memory. Where was the vanished In-

dian village or the old fort? Where was the first school or trading post? Where was the Indian trail or emigrants' road? It is indeed proper that the historical society know the answers to these questions. I have already suggested marker signs, a map, or a pamphlet as a means of disseminating this information as an educational service.

If your newspaper editors are historically minded, they may be happy to have from you once a week a feature article on some aspect of local history. I do not necessarily mean an excerpt from the files of fifty years ago or one hundred years ago, but a more generalized treatment of some event, person, or place in local history that will be a contribution to the general education of the community. If you have a radio or TV station in your county, you should discuss the possibilities of programs utilizing the library or museum of your society.

I have said nothing so far about the program meetings of your society members. Of course, many of the activities sketched above will produce fruits for presentation at meetings, and obviously your meetings will be the planning sessions for inaugurating many of these projects. But I recognize that the membership wishes to hear a formal program of information entertainingly presented.

First of all, how often should a society meet? In my experience I have observed that a meeting once or twice a year is too infrequent for the accomplishment of much of anything beyond a social gathering. On the other hand, monthly meetings may be too often, conflicting with other clubs, straining the program committee, and generally encouraging sparse attendance. Perhaps quarterly meetings are frequent enough to check on activities and encourage full attendance. The climate of acceptance will vary in different areas.

If papers are to be presented, they should represent something more than reminiscence or opinions; they should indicate some research, a going to sources, a correction of rumors and folklore and downright falsehoods. Dull or superficial papers will not educate the membership and will

only encourage them to stay home from the next meeting. Other program fillers may be employed and should be considered: films, dramatizations, outside speakers, book reviews, refreshments, dinners, etc.

If these activities—collecting, recording, and educating—form the program of a healthy historical society, they are likely to solve the difficulties of membership and funds. However, we might take a look at these problems in particular, because a few special things can be done.

Activities and good programs at meetings are, of course, fundamental in attracting and holding members. Nevertheless, the first requisite is publicity, to let people know what the society is doing and how good its meetings are. The media open to you are newspapers, radio, and television. Your meetings should be announced in advance, and a summary of the program should be issued afterwards. Your society should have a publicity committee with responsibility for writing up the notices definitely fixed. If a finished story can be handed to a newspaper or radio station, it is much more likely to be used than if the editor is simply advised to call someone else or to send a reporter to a meeting. As a matter of practice, some member of a newspaper staff ought to be an active member of the historical society and usually one can be found. Then he may be able to take care of your publicity.

Your society should also have a membership committee that will be alert to seeking new members by personal contact. All names of prospects should be turned in to that committee; this includes old residents, younger couples who display some civic interest, and newcomers to the region. Every three or four years, some effort and expenditure should be made in a direct mail campaign, using a city directory or telephone book. This is a shotgun method, of course, and you must remember that a 2 percent return on a mailing list is considered satisfactory by advertisers. A mailing of three thousand letters of invitation to membership may bring you fifty to sixty new members.

Most societies have found that some visible recognition

of membership is a good gesture. Usually a membership card is sufficient. It also serves to remind the member when his dues are payable again. Your society will operate on its own fiscal year, and membership payments should be keyed to that year, rather than billing members exactly twelve months after they join. Such a system relieves your treasurer from sending out notices every month.

I think you will find it advisable to put new members to work—on committees, on projects, on plans. In this way you give them a feeling of importance and you draw on their fresh ideas.

Most of a society's income is derived from dues. These range in local societies from fifty cents to five dollars a year, depending largely on how much is returned to the member in publications. A few societies receive income from endowment secured from some old bequest of property or cash, and certainly encouragement and suggestion should be given to your local attorneys that in the drawing up of wills the local historical society should be a possible legatee along with such other community enterprises as hospitals, animal shelters, child care agencies, or parks. A society can administer a fund set up in memory of some person or family as well as any other agency.

If you own a house or building as your headquarters, repairs, upkeep, and insurance may well be a burden, and consequently some special money-raising activities are in order. I have already suggested the possibility of sponsoring an annual tour of old houses or historic sites for a fee. In co-operation with one of the local movie theaters, your society may sponsor a historical movie and keep a share from the tickets your members sell. Your society may also sell historical or anniversary plates, historical books or prints or calendars, or sponsor an antique show. It may hold a public tea at which offerings are received—"silver tea" is the euphonious name, I believe—or a public supper for which members furnish the food and labor. Occasionally, a historical society that owns a fine old home rents it out for weddings, receptions, meetings, teas, and luncheons.

A well furnished and charming old mansion does have enormous possibilities for income producing use.

Finally, there is no reason why the local historical society should refrain from seeking a city or county appropriation. In some states such appropriations are specifically authorized or permitted, but whether the appropriation is made depends entirely on the persuasiveness of the society. If you are working closely with the public schools, if you are preserving or marking historic sites and buildings, if you are assisting the public library or otherwise promoting adult education, you have a case to present for partial public support. Above all, you must show yourselves to be a permanent community institution, not one that waxes and wanes, with a program that is bigger than individual dues can maintain. No one is enthusiastic about trying to keep a sick organization from dying, but everyone likes to help a dynamic group do more for community benefit.

These are suggestions. Not every historical society does all of them, but each one has been carried out in some state or other. Let us not forget that the activities mentioned are all opportunities for learning, for the self education of your society members. As you prepare yourselves to conserve and disseminate your local history, you will find yourselves growing more and more familiar with your heritage. We are battling today, as we always are, for men's minds. In our local history will be found a great armory of ideas, achievements, and demonstrated truths relating to man in society as he has struggled to civilize himself that we can proudly advertise to other peoples, especially to those who are attracted by philosophies and methods we know to be false and illusory.

I don't need to assure you that history is not a study of dry facts and dates for the sake of memorizing facts and parroting them to others. History is an accounting of human life. It contributes as much to understanding and wisdom as to knowledge. Whatever your other interests or distractions, you cannot escape your responsibility for writing today's chapter. That chapter will not have much meaning unless you know what has gone before.