



Two Years of *American Heritage*

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: An academic historian and an interested layman evaluate the success of the historical “book magazine” revitalized in 1954. Dr. Land concludes that *American Heritage* “has seen a job and has done it with style and imagination.” Holmes compliments the publication for “breathing life into history.”

TWO YEARS OF AMERICAN HERITAGE

BY AUBREY C. LAND AND LOUIS A. HOLMES

In the past two years it has been apparent that the magazine *American Heritage* has become a major quantitative factor in the dissemination of historical information in America. The magazine, first started in 1947, made a new start in 1949, and struggled against high costs of production and inadequate revenues for five years. In 1954 it was revitalized and revolutionized when the originators, the American Association for State and Local History, entered into an agreement with a new publisher, James Parton. Mr. Parton acquired the services of Bruce Catton, former journalist and well-known Civil War historian, as editor, and the new management came out with the revolutionary idea they called a book magazine. The subscription price was set at \$12.00 a year or \$2.95 a single copy, with the magazine appearing six times a year. The binding of the book was handsome and colorful, the book was well

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and strikingly illustrated, and the organization did a large scale and successful job of advertising. From the start *American Heritage* surprised even its most optimistic supporters with its success. By the end of its second year of publication under the new regime (October 1956) it was publishing nearly 175,000 copies an issue. After its Christmas expansion it expected to have 200,000 subscribers.

The spectacular growth of this magazine is an important development in modern historical interest, especially in regional and local history. To evaluate this development on the occasion of the magazine's second anniversary in its present format, we asked a professional or academic historian, Dr. Aubrey C. Land, and an interested layman, Louis A. Holmes, who makes history an active hobby, to write their comments for us.

AMERICAN HERITAGE ANALYZED

BY AUBREY C. LAND

Traditionally at least, the professors of philosophy have always taken first place as disputants, splitters of hairs, posers of insoluble dilemmas, and the like. But if the record is scrutinized historians will surely get a high score for doing battle among themselves with the special weapons of their craft. After two and one-third millennia of producing formal histories, professionals are still in notable disagreement on several basic questions. A few years ago when Henri Berr and Lucien Febvre sat down to write the section on "History" for the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* they described with commendable accuracy the long history of the subject in this opening sentence: "There is no branch of knowledge which in the course of intellectual evolution has exhibited more varied modalities and answered to more contradictory conceptions than has history." In the very next sentence they cast doubt on any immediate

improvement. "There is none which has had and continues to have more difficulty in discovering its definitive status."

This is anything but a satisfactory state of affairs. Unfortunately the end is not yet in sight. Yet every year historians offer the public the most varied fare in mountainous quantities, everything from the most recondite treatises on the Babylonian calendar to impressionistic biographies of Johnny Appleseed. Disagreement about "modalities" and "conceptions" has not paralyzed the writing hand whatever it may have done to readers.

Often in the historian's reckoning the reader has been the forgotten man, at least those that go by the name "general reader" or sometimes the "average intelligent layman." Such forgetfulness is a cardinal sin, for if we can agree on nothing else about history, we can assuredly say that it is designed to be read.

But read by whom? Carl Becker once remarked that history does not repeat itself, but historians repeat each other. He might have added that many of them also write for each other. Granting every profession its trade journals for initiates, we still demand some other justification for the existence of that calling, some operation or function that mankind approves. Mankind seldom shows hospitality to any profession that attempts to exist for itself alone.

This is the appropriate place to introduce the the chief character of this piece, the journal, *American Heritage*. The editors wasted few words on such questions as the purpose of history, or any of the other questions over which so much ink has been shed. In the initial issue they began serving up a varied and attractive bill of fare. Perhaps they bore in mind the Biblical precept, "By their fruits ye shall know them." At least *American Heritage* has come to be known by its fruits and from the beginning they have been tasty.

Take the very first issue of the new series, which in September 1949 appeared—among other places—on the newsstands. In sixty pages devoted mainly to the northeastern United States, eleven main pieces comprise the offering. Every one of them bears a distinguished by-line. Carl Carmer writes with gusto of “The Great Onondaga Eat-All Dinner,” one of America’s earliest believe-it-or-nots. Allan Nevins, twice a Pulitzer Prize Winner, follows with “The American States.” Colton Storm shows how “Maps are Strategy” and Howard Peckham relates the fate of unfortunates “Captured by Indians.” Seven others range the stretch of country from Aaronsburg, Pennsylvania to Middlebury, Vermont and embrace in subject matter items as diverse as religious toleration, sidewheel steamers, and liberal arts education. Some are exciting, others provocative. But two adjectives characterize them all—every one is interesting and well written. Accordingly, they were read.

Not only did *American Heritage* articles find readers. It is a certainty that many persons looked through the issue for the superb illustrations. Whether the editors were moved by the immense success of popular illustrated journals does not appear, but the decision to include pictures followed a sure instinct. From the first issue they have been a delight. Not only do they adorn the pages; they are often integral to the piece they illustrate. In the second issue—Winter, 1950—half a dozen photographs drive home the point of the article, “Remove not the Ancient Landmark,” by U. S. Grant, president of the National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings. Illustrations have since been as much a part of the format as the American eagle on the cover. Over the few years of publishing experience the pictorial technique has been reduced to a fine art. One additional observation on the illustrations cannot certainly be proved any more than it can be denied—that many persons have entered the domain of Clio through them.

Altogether, *American Heritage* is a maverick among periodicals in the United States. Quite naturally it has

provoked comment and a fair amount of criticism, both just and unjust. Perhaps the most persistent accusation levelled by critics is that *American Heritage* is sensational. But then, so is history sensational, or a very significant part anyway. And, fortunately or not, most people remember the sensational far longer than they remember the great movements and slow trends treasured by the simon-pure scholar. Perhaps the charge of sensationalism amounts in the end to a comment on human nature. Who does not recall from schoolboy days Caesar's remark at the Rubicon? How many adults in middle life can give an account of the conquest of Gaul just behind Caesar or the death anguish of Republican Rome to which he was returning? Again, nearly every battle in history comes under the heading of sensational—battles were big news then and today the retelling has wide appeal. The Battle of San Jacinto (*American Heritage*, Spring 1951) was fought in eighteen minutes, first to last. Those eighteen minutes of fighting settled the fate of the Lone Star Republic. We know that because the textbooks say so. The critics ought in fairness to tell us why an illustrated article on the Battle of San Jacinto is sensational while textbook treatment of its "significance" is not.

Any periodical is to a degree dependent on its contributors. Every editor in the nation has yarns to tell of weird manuscripts sent in by insistent hopefuls. Possibly an editorial tradition has developed that contributions should not be solicited save in exceptional circumstances. At any rate some speculation must be introduced to account for the strikingly small number of pieces by the academic historians. To be sure in the issues since September 1949 several notable names have graced the pages of *American Heritage*—Arthur M. Schlesinger, Theodore G. Blegen, Charles S. Sydnor, Richard B. Morris, Allan Nevins, Shepard B. Clough, Paul H. Giddens, Bell I. Wiley, Thomas. D. Clark. These names do not quite call the entire roll of professorial contributors. But there are far more ivory-

tower experts than these, who write with the verve demanded by the editors. Where are the Richard Hofstadters, the Eric Goldmans, the Kenneth Stampps, the Philip Jordans, the Walter P. Webbs—to mention only a few of a brilliant company that writes popular history in the very best sense? Two dozen more names could easily be added without exhausting the list.

This is not to be construed as direct or implied criticism of the authors represented in *American Heritage*. The journal is the organ of the American Association for State and Local History. In the past, state and local historians have figured rather rarely in the professional publications of academic historians, certainly not to the extent they should have. Their own outlet has shown how much they have to offer and what a reservoir of excellent writing has not hitherto been adequately tapped. Indeed, the list of superintendents, curators, and research assistants is amazing and has opened many an eye to the size of Clio's battalions. But the academicians had already come, or were coming, to recognize the virtues of intensive research at the local level and to exploit some of its possibilities, even to the extent of writing for Sunday supplements of the metropolitan newspapers.

Speaking of contributors, it ought to be mentioned that the editors of *American Heritage* have taken advantage of a resource almost unknown to professional journals—the civic leader, the intelligent layman. On the supposition that everyman is his own historian, the intelligent layman can make a contribution respectable by any standard. Such are the articles by Victor G. Reuther, Educational Director of the UAW-CIO, and General Carl Spaatz of World War II fame. Among others, T. C. Richardson, editor of *Farm and Ranch*, and Ralph N. Hill, president, Shelburne Steamboat Company, Incorporated, are especially notable.

One of the problems faced—and solved—by the editors has never beset either the “learned” journals or the organs

of local historical societies, namely that of unity of theme. The state historical journals have theirs ready-made for them. They print matter relating to their locality. Professional journals largely ignore the problem by printing the best articles submitted in a take-it-or-leave-it miscellany. *American Heritage* has wisely emphasized colorful and historically rich areas in successive issues—in the first number, the Northeast, then Minnesota, California, Indiana, Hawaii, Detroit, Philadelphia, Texas, New York City, and so on. The device offers a long list of interesting possibilities. More rarely a theme such as Lincoln and the Civil War is called upon as a unifying device. The geographical treatment lends itself more readily to bite-size articles and it is a fair guess that this is one of the reasons why geography, rather than “trends” or “developments,” has been the basis of organization. Moreover, localities do not commit the editors exclusively to political, social, economic, military, or any other branch of historical interpretation. It might be interesting to see what could be done with such themes as, for example, the urbanization of America, or the Atlantic Migration, giving over most of a single issue to the development of one of these themes. Both are rich in color and human interest.

Armchair quarterbacking and spectator sports have occupied altogether too important a place in our life of late years. These observations are not intended as either precept or exhortation, but merely as the reflections of one historian on a journal he approves in principle and in performance. *American Heritage* has seen a job and has done it with style and imagination. From an unusually good start seven years ago, the issues have improved in a gratifying way. Illustrations are more skillfully used, the initial high quality of writing has become even better, and the format is more attractive and logical. The issues are read. It is even rumored that the business manager has tossed away his red ink bottle. In brief, *American Heritage* has apparently passed the stage of experiment and is on the list of things here to stay.

AMERICAN HERITAGE'S ACCOMPLISHMENT

BY LOUIS A. HOLMES

Today, more than ever before, we need to strengthen our convictions in our nation and our way of life. There is a need to develop pride in traditions and fully realize the struggle in the establishment and maintenance of this government as a free nation where freedom under law is a reality.

Man of today must learn to keep his bearings. He must be able to chart his own journey and as a citizen of his community, state and nation, do his part in strengthening respect for law and order. It is easy for those who live in the "ivory towers" to answer and dispose of all issues with finality. Scientific advancement in the last few decades is almost unbelievable. With this has come a social change. There is a tendency to feel that science can and will solve all. This is easy to accept and will lull many into a false sense of security. All thinking persons fully realize that the human factor is of paramount importance. History is the recording of the past events of men and women who lived and brought them about from the beginning of time up to yesterday. By close examination of the past, we can learn and profit by their mistakes and successes.

In response to this challenge, a group of men and women have joined together and from their combined efforts, have created a magazine of history entitled *American Heritage*, which is sponsored by the American Association for State and Local history and the Society of American Historians. In its present form, though only two years old, it has received a warm welcome. Wide acceptance is clearly established by the sizeable increase in subscriptions.

It is always a pleasure when the postman brings the next issue. Each new copy is filled with many varied articles about issues large and small, about strong men and weak, war and peace, diplomacy and intrigue. To many

discerning readers, this approach and presentation of our history is thought-provoking. The overcoming of difficulties and the surmounting of obstacles in the creation and maintenance of this country is more fully appreciated. We, the citizens of today, of all ages can and must renew pride in the heritage of the United States.

History to some is a dry and uninteresting subject. The fault may be in its presentation by some authors. George Macaulay Trevelyn in his essay, "The Muse of History," had this to say: "It is in narrative that modern historical writing is weakest, and to my thinking it is a very serious weakness, spinal in fact. Some writers would seem never to have studied the art of story telling. There is no flow to their events, which stand like ponds instead of running like streams. Yet, History is in its unchangeable essence, 'a tale.' Round the story, as flesh and blood round the bone, should be gathered many different things, character drawing, study of social and intellectual movements, speculations as to probable causes and effects and whatever else the historian can bring to illustrate the past."

From where this reader sits, it would appear that *American Heritage* is breathing life into history, giving it purpose and making our nation's past live again.