



# The Continuing Significance of Local History

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IN THE CURRENT pecking order among historians, the top level of prestige is occupied by those who teach African or Asian history, or by those who do serious research in the same fields. Below these are the scholars who give themselves over to the study of various phases of European history. Then follow the Latin-American historians, with American scholars of a national specialization close behind. The next few levels are occupied, in order, by American social and cultural scholars, American economic historians, and American regional specialists. After a considerable interval, finishing a poor last, are those who plow the fields of state and local history. These are the unfortunate individuals who obtain the least prestigious positions, who carry off the fewest and smallest loans and grants, and whose pay increases and promotions come from college administrations mainly as afterthoughts. As it has so aptly been phrased by one writer: "It is perhaps no twisted figure of speech to liken local history to the smallest box in one of those old fashioned nests of boxes that years ago delighted so many children at Christmas. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

The complaints concerning the writing and studying of local history are much easier to define than those pertaining to history written on broader aspects. One noted book on historiography, written by no less than six of America's most prominent scholars, states that local history is too often in the hands of ". . . dedicated amateurs. . ." Furthermore, it continues, the field is too often lacking in fundamental research, it is plagued with a ". . . clumsiness in composition . . .," and it is overcome with too much ". . . parochialism . . ." in its approach. The whole field is then dismissed by the six scholars with the

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claim that it is filled with too many “. . . irrelevancies,” as well as with space which is given over to “. . . local figures in wars. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

One can scarcely deny that many of these complaints are quite valid, but it must be quickly asserted that the same criticisms are valid and proper when applied to any level of historical research. How often have even the best or most noted historians composed a poorly written paragraph? How many times have some of the most famous historians given themselves over to the study of some phase of history which, in the long run, amounted to only a minor aspect of a larger problem? And one may quickly add that, beginning with Homer, scores of myths have been introduced into the mainstream of history by dedicated professional historians. Did Helen of Troy really exist, and was Achilles really the child of an immortal? Lest one may think that the question is not applicable, it may be pointed out that the myths and irrelevancies created and accepted by professional historians concerning Abraham Lincoln are too numerous to mention.

Nor should the local historian cease his reply at this point. It should be hastily added that one of the six historians who was so critical of local history, Samuel Eliot Morison, later turned his many talents to the writing of local history and produced such books as *The Rope-makers of Plymouth* (1950) and *The Story of Mount Desert Island, Maine* (1960). One may presume that others of the six also dabbled occasionally in the same field.<sup>3</sup>

Needless to add, the possibilities of counterattack by the local historians are numerous indeed. How many horrible interpretations of history which are too ridiculous and ponderous to refute are made on the grand scale? One needs only to read the critical comments of *The American Historical Review* in order to gain an insight into these errors of fact or fancy. It is a simple truth that the local historian, if he is ever conscious of the pecking order in his field or the criticisms of it, must remember that a study of Hitler's "Beer Hall Putsch" in Munich in the 1920's is nothing more than local history to the German, or that the writer of American social and cultural history is merely placing local events and personalities into a larger pattern.

Without local history—that is, well-researched local history—the larger pattern could never be completed. One must inevitably search for examples of this in the story of Abraham Lincoln, whose life not only represents the great turning point in American history but also the Christ-like theme in the national tradition. Here is the poor boy

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who made good—the Kentucky born, Illinois cultured young man who lifted himself above his class and its prejudices and saved his nation. Countless analyses of Lincoln's character have been made, and there is a seemingly endless supply of biographical material about the "Great Emancipator."

Yet, how much would be known about this great President were it not for a little, almost insignificant, lawyer by the name of William Herndon, Lincoln's law partner from 1844 until the President's death. Herndon, as it has been told by several professional historians, became a self-appointed local historian who literally leaped onto a horse and rode off into all the areas in which Lincoln had traveled. He eventually gathered what is now considered one of the best of all available manuscripts on Lincoln's early life. Did he put the material together well? One can hardly criticize Herndon's style—in fact it is considerably better than many of those who place scorn upon the study of local history. Did the Herndon papers contain a few well contrived myths? Yes, they did, the Ann Rutledge story for example. Yet, for almost ninety years, professional historians eagerly included this romantic tale in their Lincoln biographical studies. Surely Herndon, in the far reaches of eternity, must have immensely enjoyed the sight of so much gullibility among supposedly learned scholars.

Actually, as in the case of Herndon, many of the early, significant American historians were of the local or regional variety. An excellent prototype of these ardent scholars was Hubert Howe Bancroft (to be distinguished from George Bancroft). Bancroft actually was a bookseller by profession, though in 1858 he managed to open his own publishing firm in San Francisco. Slowly, and almost intuitively, he began to gather an important collection of materials relevant to the western half of the United States. After spending some time at this, he began to publish a series of volumes concerning the history of the Pacific coast line. By 1875 he had published the first of an additional set of volumes dealing with the native races of the western states of the nation. Over the next fifteen years, he wrote numerous volumes on Central America, Mexico, Texas, California, Oregon, and other such states and areas. By the time he had finished his writing on the West, he had produced twenty-eight volumes.<sup>4</sup>

There is little doubt about the value of Bancroft's works. Although plodding in style, he was a prolific writer, and he gave posterity a picture of the Great West as he knew it. One may well question whether Frederick Jackson Turner could have written his influential

studies of the American frontier without such sources as those presented by Bancroft. Thus does the local historian achieve a place of immortality.

While Bancroft was gathering material for his studies of the West, other writers, once again of the local or regional variety, were presenting relevant articles on other subjects. One, Richard Frothingham, an eastern lawyer and businessman, applied his apparently limitless energies to a professional study of the Boston phases of the American Revolution. Treating the Battle of Bunker Hill in particular, Frothingham gave that brief but bloody encounter the benefit of his keen, legal eye. He was quick to find numerous and flagrant errors which bloomed free within the mystique which surrounded the battle. When Frothingham finally published his work, he launched the whole study of American history on a road far removed from the filiopietistic writings of previous decades. American historical interpretation was, to say the least, never quite the same.<sup>5</sup> In fact, even when reading Frothingham's skillfully-handled treatment with the critical, modern eye, one is reminded of that succinct little remark made by Georges Clemenceau concerning Claude Monet. He was not so sure about the eternal verity of Monet's paintings, Clemenceau implied, but "what an eye" the artist had.

Thus did the impact of the study of local history grow in significance. Soon, in the Midwest, there emerged a whole admixture of state and local historical societies. In Wisconsin, in particular, Lyman C. Draper helped to organize an amazingly vital local history movement. Other state and local societies vied to equal the activity and output of this organization. It may be emphasized that much of the work of the newly-born state and local publications was highly professional in quality, and invaluable in terms of long-range effect. John Gilmary Shea, for example, contributed numerous items dealing with the settlement of the Mississippi Valley and with the activity of early French missionaries in the same region. In Illinois, C. W. Alvord and Theodore C. Pease, both nationally recognized scholars, gave their support and time to the production of materials on the history of that state.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most important influence upon the development of local history in the mid-nineteenth century was the Civil War. There are, of course, numerous reasons for this. First, the war was essentially one which brought about the emergence of personality. The American newspaper, being itself a cultural development undergoing transi-

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tion, produced endless columns of information concerning Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, U. S. Grant, John A. Logan, William T. Sherman, and others. All of these luminaries, as they appeared in print, drew an understandable emotional response from the people who knew them best, the folks back home, so to speak. The previously mentioned example of William Herndon, who felt a special kinship to Lincoln, has already been well explained.

After the end of the war, local presses worked overtime to produce little volumes presenting aspects of the lives of these important men. It may be taken for granted, of course, that much of the information included in these biographical treatments was fallacious. But then again, it must also be added that good or bad, the material found a ready market not only with the general public, but with the professional historian as well.

Another important reason for the impact of the war upon local history was rooted in the very system by which the conflict was fought. States were asked to raise volunteer units. The states in turn passed the request for volunteers to either congressional districts, counties, or towns. Companies in each regiment were raised in specific localities and, as they were forwarded to the front, some of them played significant roles in battles of major importance. The same would be applied to regiments themselves. One may be reminded, for instance, of the 55th Illinois Infantry, which was raised in western Illinois, which had a most decisive part in the Battle of Shiloh. No less could be written about the actions of forty or fifty other western regiments in the war.

Invariably, at the end of the conflict, regimental associations were quickly formed in order to keep alive a semblance of the comradeship of the previous four years. In almost every instance, these regimental organizations eventually sponsored the publication of unit histories. Such books, usually put together by a committee of the regiment, were published in great profusion by local presses in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, New York, and Massachusetts. As one would suspect, some were excellently written and became, in time, classics of their type; others were unbelievably bad. In almost every instance, however, there was a liberal recounting of local history—the origins of the men who composed the regiment, life stories of the men who raised the regiment, and a prideful narration of the accomplishments of the regiment.

The total result of the impact of the war was that during the remainder of the nineteenth century there was a veritable deluge of reminiscences. Through state and local societies, these found ready

publishers as well as markets for their dissemination. Men and women who were early pioneers in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Indiana rushed memoirs of their early years into print. Many of the same people coupled the story of these experiences with the events of the war to present individualistic interpretations of nineteenth century America. And, as in the case of the regimental histories, some of these productions were landmarks of their type; others were worthless. One of the former is Leander Stillwell's *The Story of a Common Soldier*. Here is a masterfully-written account of the author's life from childhood on a farm near Carrollton, Illinois, his service in the army, and his return home at the end of the conflict. One would be hard put to find anywhere in print a more vivid description of the emotions and sentiments of the time.<sup>7</sup>

How valuable were these works to later historians? Extremely so! One finds time and again a liberal (and sometimes unannotated) recounting of Stillwell's experiences in the uniform of his country. Bruce Catton and Bell Wiley, as examples, both turned to regimental histories for colorful and vivid descriptions of the conduct of the war.

Around the turn of the century, the various small publishers, plus an occasional large one, turned to the publication of the so-called "mug books." These were county or local histories, ponderous in size and bound in such a way as to last for eternity, and which contained the pictures or "mugs" of locally-prominent citizens. They sold extremely well; in fact, it is not at all difficult to produce large numbers of these in almost every small town in the Midwest. Needless to say, they were very profitable to the publishers, for the drawings of farms and pictures of local citizens inspired a ready sale.

Depending upon the publisher responsible for the volume, these county histories usually followed an almost invariable pattern. The first four or five chapters of each book, no matter which county was under description, related the early history of the nation, the settlement of the state involved, and the climatic and geographic features of the specific region. Then the book got down to the necessary essentials. There were descriptions of each town or hamlet in the county, plus liberal dosages of information about the more substantial people who lived in them. The last was never served raw, or even flavorfully presented. It was almost always on the overdone side, for this was what sold the books.

Despite their faults, these oversize volumes have a continuing value in many ways. Any good small town lawyer should have one, for they

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have a certain handiness in land cases. Nor should the high school instructor be unaware of their existence. Not only do they prove interesting reading for social science or English classes, but they often prove important in understanding the true physical and social structure of each town. Lastly, the historian of all levels may find them of occasional use; for not only do they give a real insight into the times in which they were published, but they contain valuable references to climatic or geographic conditions of the same period.

Accepting the value of all such publications, one may well wonder about the sources for descriptive material on the mid-twentieth century. Radio and television have blunted the publication of much possibly valuable material about the last two world wars. Small town publishers no longer turn their talents to contemporary reminiscence. Who, for example, has written or published a volume on the rise and fall of the coal mining industry in Illinois? Who has an "eyewitness" account of such events as the "Herrin Massacre" in Illinois, or of what it was like to live in a small midwestern town during the Great Depression? It is fortunately true that some libraries, the Illinois Historical Library for example, have begun the collection of some of these materials, particularly of World War II personal correspondence.

In fact, for the present, local history has been shoved into the background. This is not the wish of the numerous and vigorous local historical societies, it is the result of school policy on the study of history in general. The ordinary small-town midwestern high school still clings to an outmoded and unpalatable course of study called social studies in which even national history is mixed with other subjects, such as economics and government. If local history is taught at all, it is because of the initiative of the individual teacher. Frequently, however, the teaching assignment is given to men and women who have little knowledge of state or local history and who, therefore, cannot supplement the prescribed social studies courses without extensive research during their off-duty hours. Too often, even if the inclination to pursue local history exists, the teacher is inadequately prepared to undertake the search.

But the blame does not rest entirely upon the high schools. The colleges must also bear their share. And this leads back to the discussion of the pecking order of historical research. A few years ago this writer, while doing a small article on the general area of local history, conducted a survey among the colleges and universities of Illinois relative to the teaching of local history. The results were both

surprising and revealing. In the publicly supported institutions such as the University of Illinois and Southern Illinois University, state and local history are given what may be considered adequate emphasis. In the smaller liberal arts colleges, however, the courses had all but disappeared. One liberal arts college responded that the courses had been dropped because of insufficient demand, a poor excuse because a month later a state college local history course in the same area drew an amazing number of students. Not only did some sixty students enroll in that particular class, but the same people have since organized an exceedingly prosperous and vital local history society.<sup>8</sup>

It is entirely possible that many privately supported liberal arts colleges are making a serious mistake in treating the study of local history in such an offhand manner. In the case of the example cited above, the college very likely lost a rather substantial bequest which may have fallen in its direction had the college acted differently. Instead, the local history enthusiast willed his donation to a nearby town.

Monetary considerations aside, however, there are a multitude of reasons why local history should reach a higher status among the history faculties of colleges and universities. For example, the historian must admit to the possibilities for training which lie in the writing of local history books. As has been pointed out, Samuel Eliot Morison was given a good start to fame and, one may add, fortune, with his various studies of local history. Allan Nevins was another who launched his career in the field of history with such research, in his case a history of the University of Illinois. Paul Angle, the Lincoln historian, has written a good deal of what would be considered local history; and Benjamin Thomas, writing within the Lincoln context, produced an excellent little volume upon the early Illinois town of New Salem. Others, also of national importance, have either obtained their start by writing local history, or by examining it later in their careers.<sup>9</sup>

Bringing the problem of local history down to the simpler approaches, one inevitably reaches a conclusion that the subject allows for a good deal of down-to-earth understanding of the broader phases of national history. Down the street from any high school is part of the history of the nation. It may be in the form of an old house, a remnant of the Underground Railroad. The very road which passes by an eighth grade classroom may have been the pathway for pioneers moving westward. An abandoned local cemetery may tell the

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story of cholera epidemics of the nineteenth century, or of immigration patterns of the past. A nearby street may tell the tale of Victorian fads and fashions through its architecture—the gingerbreading on the front porch roof, or the Turkish “minaret” tower which anchors one corner of a building.

But local history should be far more encompassing than this. One may need to be reminded that local mannerisms, modes and manners of speech, and traditions are all part of the larger pattern. This writer is aware of one small town which rests squarely upon the joining point of the southern and northern cultures which settled the area over one hundred years ago. South of the city one finds distinct tonal inflections which had their roots in Kentucky and Tennessee. The word “tired,” for example, emerges as “tord”; the words “fire” and “for” are pronounced exactly alike; and the use of “tote” for “carry” is not uncommon. North of the same town, habits, customs, and, indeed, the general outlook of the population are entirely different.

Knowing that such differences may exist in a community is half the victory in achieving an understanding of local history. This is particularly true in view of the fact that, through television and radio, speech patterns and traditions are gradually conforming to a national pattern. The network announcer from New York City speaks with the same inflections and uses the same pronunciations as the newscaster from New Orleans. Eventually the regional differences will disappear, just as they have already disappeared in certain sections of the country. The high school instructor or the college professor who manages to tape-record what is left of these differences may well be thankful in years to come. And furthermore, allowing students of history actually to listen to such dialects may create an understanding of their culture and their past which could not have been achieved any other way.

Thus it must be that the local historian not only has the responsibility to investigate phases of the broad pattern of the past, but to detail and to understand the slow unfolding of the present. This responsibility goes far beyond tape recording voices and events of the present, of course. The local historian who writes of the complicated agricultural problems of today serves well the national historian of tomorrow. Will the future really understand the reasons why farm populations show a steady and unchanging decline? Will the economic historian of the future emotionally comprehend the impact of the American agricultural revolution upon American foreign policy? Per-

haps not—that is, unless the local historian does his work now, and does it well.

One does not have to search hard to find other directions in which the local historian of the present should move. What are the other major problems of the day? Naturally one is the great Negro revolution of the 1960's. When one attempts to comprehend the role of the local historian here, the result is almost staggering. The researcher who enters into the task of compiling biographical material about Martin Luther King or other influential Negro leaders is serving both local and national history. The local historian who attempts to describe the emotional impact of the Birmingham, Alabama, transportation boycott will most certainly be looked upon as a valuable source a century from now. There is, as one may quickly perceive, a kind of immortality awaiting the young and able historian who wishes to tackle these great issues.

It is easy to see here that one may leave himself open to much criticism by attempting to define the limits of local history. The examples already given quickly prove the point, for most certainly there are those who will say that Martin Luther King, because of his association with the Negro revolution, and William Herndon, because of his association with Abraham Lincoln, are part of the mainstream of national history. Therefore, they will continue, the local historian should turn his talents elsewhere, leaving these figures for those who research the broader aspects of American history. There are others who would imply that the local historian who does a piece upon the Swedish settlement in Minnesota, or the German immigration into Kansas, is violating some sort of unstaked boundary marker constructed by the regional historian.

It goes without saying, almost, that this is all rubbish. Local history does not include all of those aspects of history considered to be worthless by others. When a person originally of purely local significance attains something of a national eminence, this does not mean that he graduates from the realm of the local historian to that of the national or regional researcher. Dred Scott ended his days as a porter in a St. Louis hotel. Does that mean that the local historian should devote himself only to that phase of Scott's life, and not to his role in the emergence of the slave issue? The answer in every case would be negative.

In fact local history is so significant and so vastly important that almost every literate American must give something of himself to

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its study. When one speaks of the national heritage, he is not using empty or meaningless words, for it is part of the duty of every American to pass it on to future generations. The local historian, wherever he may be—in Texas, California, or New York—must continue to promote the local historical societies to which he may belong. Local and university libraries must continue their efforts to preserve the documents and records of the present so that historians may continue to understand the pattern of history. The same institutions—the libraries, that is—must even go beyond that traditional task by actually promoting the understanding of local history. Book displays, as well as collections of historical materials, serve to accomplish this task. After all, who knows but what a future Allan Nevins or Henry Steele Commager may be the end product of this kind of effort.

There is no real hard core to an appreciation or understanding of local history. One cannot assert with authority, as a dentist may in respect to dental school, that to know local history is to open some door to economic success. There is, however, a little of something for everyone in local history, whether he is actually a dentist, or an antiquarian, or just a good citizen. If one is to say that the past is deadly, and that the study of American history is worthless, then he implies, in effect, that the American dream is without validity. If that is so, then all we have ever done, or all that we shall ever do, may be without meaning.

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