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Author(s): Don McNeil

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The Why of Local History

by Don McNeil*

Here the writer asks, what is the value of history? He believes that in trying to make history meaningful to people, we think too much in generalizations. "We mine the surface layers of human experiences and fail to get down to bedrock. Each person, when all is said and done, must dig his own mine, must search out the meaning of history for himself." Perhaps this exposition will clarify your thinking on the importance of local history.

For several years now our stepped up field program has resulted in a closer link between state and local societies in our State. The fall Caravans, extensive field trips, speaking engagements, cooperation with local societies—all have given us an opportunity to talk with each other a great deal about what's going on around the State historically speaking.

Yet sometimes during the course of our frequent travels we feel we are too close to the problem of local history, that our projects and your projects—the lifeblood of any energetic historical agency—become ends in themselves, instead of the means to an end.

In Wisconsin we certainly have the makings of strong means to achieve our purposes and objectives. The broad programs of both local and state societies reach into the homes, the offices and, most importantly, the minds of thousands of Wisconsinites each year.

But what of the ends we seek? How many of us have asked ourselves, half in wonderment and half in confusion: what is the value of history? Perhaps it is time to think out our position. Underlying all our programs and projects, there must be a clear cut philosophy;

*DON MCNEIL is assistant director of the State Historical Society. His "Circuit Rider," for some time a feature of the *Magazine*, is an account of his varied activities in the local history field.

a sharp concept of what we are trying to do and a clear realization of why it is important that we continue this work in local history.

In our headquarters at Madison, there is a mythical inhabitant always looking over our shoulders. What, our colleagues on the staff frequently ask concerning new programs, projects, and ideas, would this mean to the plumber in Kenosha? The plumber in Kenosha, first conceived by Producer Dallas Jones when he tried to grasp the significance of historical societies for our movie, *The Presence of Our Past*, has his counterpart in every community in the nation. He could as well be a young executive in an industrial firm in Appleton, a librarian in Janesville, a factory hand in Eau Claire, or a county official in Waupaca. He is the epitome of all those who have scarcely a passing interest in history—all those who have not been exposed to the values of history as an integral part of their lives. In our zeal for programs designed to teach history and to make it meaningful to people, we sometimes think too much either in terms of generalizations and platitudes or of immediate objectives. We mine the surface layers of human experience and fail to get down to bedrock. Each person, when all is said and done, must dig his own mine, must search out the meaning of history for himself. For the benefit of our Kenosha plumber may I suggest three very concrete contributions which history can make to his life or the life of any individual.

A professor once wrote that economics is the study of man's attempt to put jelly on his bread. Certainly the need for providing sustenance for one's family, plus an embellishment now and then, marks one of the great areas of human endeavor. Most people are striving constantly to improve their take home pay, their living conditions, and their status in the economic society. But the urge to improve their economic positions must be combined with an understanding of the problems that beset them.

To understand their present-day economic problems, they must turn to the past. The problems of today, as well as the solutions,

usually stem from generations of human experience. A conception of the growth of capitalism, for example, must come from an understanding of how men built this capitalistic society. Our present-day standard of living makes sense only in terms of the millions of individuals who hammered out solutions to their problems in bygone eras. The opportunity to pose a new theory, invent a new gadget, or move up the economic ladder is not lost upon those who perceive through their history (be it of their company or community) that there always has been opportunity for those who will make the most of it. Pride in efficiency and proficiency today will not diminish among those who understand that generations of craftsmanship lay behind the present standards of excellence. An understanding of our economic society can promote initiative, a feeling of opportunity and an awareness of the responsibilities of each individual within the larger framework of economic development.

While man's quest for a livelihood takes up a large share of his waking hours, he has other responsibilities. As a member of the body politic, he has certain rights and privileges under our constitution and laws. His conduct is proscribed only to the extent of preserving order in change. How best, then, can he approach the political problems which face him? How can he live up to this thing we teach in the schools called, "Good Citizenship"? History, we believe, offers the perspective necessary to judge the issues and the candidates honestly and intelligently. The study of our political institutions, of the particular contributions made by individuals, again working within the spirit of our democratic framework, certainly brings understanding. An exploration of the issues involved in a contemporary school building program, for example, must surely lead the investigator to a study of the background of that and related problems and must lead to a thoroughgoing analysis of how people, working in a former era, solved similar problems. Out of these studies in the political realm, whether it be of voting patterns, of the impact of a politician upon his community or state, of the economic grievances which lay behind a change in political strategy or events, or of the legislation designed to meet the needs of the people of that day . . . out of these studies, one gains perspective and judg-

ment which make him better qualified to exercise his right of citizenship. The laws under which he lives and the representatives who speak for him in the local, state, and national councils, are the products of generations of experience. The individual's realizations that political institutions are built by men, drawing upon the experience of their forebears, will encourage belief in the democratic process; will foster a sympathy for minority rights and factions, and will instill in the individual that perspective which is needed to meet the problems of today.

A word should probably be said here regarding local history. It must be evident that a perceptive analysis of political behavior in America will show a variability between and within states, regions, communities, and neighborhoods. People are different. Each individual brings to bear upon the solution of a particular problem his individual outlook, background, and experience. All of us are pulled in many directions by divided loyalties. In the political sphere of our lives loyalty to party, to state, to friends, and to issues are all compounded in the great concoction of political behavior and emerge as the decision of the individual. In the study of local institutions and local politics the stage is small enough, the players close enough, to analyze the problems facing all our people—and at first hand. While a person may not know the intricacies surrounding the appointment, policies, and objectives of, let's say, the Atomic Energy Commission, he may well understand the forces working in his own community which make for political success, for a change in laws, or for a better administration of justice. Personal experience, buttressed by a study of the history and background of the political problems, add up to a sensible approach to that often bewildering world of government. The person who takes the long view, the one who gains insight from the mistakes and successes of the past, will surely become the good citizen.

Man's search for bread and the jelly to go on that bread, plus his strivings for responsible citizenship, leaves one other great area of human activity to be considered. Man's relationship to his job and his attitude toward his government are vital forces in the unfolding pattern of human development. Yet it is, in

the final analysis, man's relationship to man, which decides whether or not an individual has had a full and successful life. Here, in this area of human conduct, can be seen those attributes defined in our earlier discussion of the contributions of history to the economic and political spheres of our lives. We all cherish the hope of improving our relations with our fellow men. Because history is the study of individuals, we gain from history something which we can call insight. Insight is one of man's most desirable characteristics. History can provide insight both into the problems men face and into the workings of the human mind. The perspective one gains from history adds to the growth of insight. Perspective and

insight add up to the one thing for which we all strive—understanding.

If we believe that education should be designed for the stimulation of thought; if we believe that thought must have perspective as a cornerstone; and if we subscribe, finally, to the idea that understanding is one of the hopes of free men, then the challenge today is to promote that understanding. The intelligent study of history and a true appreciation that our free institutions and our free men have been made possible through the efforts of those who have gone before us, will help us along the road toward becoming better citizens, better workers and, finally, better people. That is the WHY of local history. END

Gold Coast Archivist

Under the auspices of the Institution of International Education Mr. Jeremias M. Akita, of Accra, Gold Coast, is studying American archival practices. He was educated in England, receiving his archival training in London, and was appointed government archivist for the Gold Coast in 1949.

The Americans find that the Gold Coast is of interest both historically and economically. The ancestors of most of the American Negroes have lived in the Gold Coast and its neighbor the Ivory Coast. One of the major world sources of cocoa, manganese, and bauxite is the Gold Coast which is a prosperous British Crown Colony. Having achieved a greater degree of self-government than any other colony in Africa, it expects to become an independent member of the British Commonwealth by 1956.

Mr. Akita spent several months at the National Archives at Washington and is now visiting leading State archival institutions. In recent years "the Gold Coast government included a plan for a mod-

ern records management program and the establishment of a progressive archival agency." Although most of the government records date back only a century, the Gold Coast had commercial relations with Western Europe, in particular with Germany, Portugal, and England, from the sixteenth century. It is the plan to gather original records in private hands in Africa, and through transcripts from European government records. "At present some 50,000 cubic feet of records are in the Gold Coast archives, with other accessions awaiting the erection of a separate archives building."

—From sketch by Margaret Norton,
History News, June, 1955.

Jeremias M. Akita, Johan Hvidtfeldt, *landsarchiver* of Jutland, Denmark, and Miss Pamela Cocks of the New Zealand Archives, all have spent several days during the spring months studying the model records system developed by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin under Mr. Boell.