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Source: *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Spring, 1971), pp. 167-175

Published by: [Louisiana Historical Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4231186>

Accessed: 30/04/2015 05:41

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*The “Professional” Historian and Local History**

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Those of us in the history profession had better look to our image! The term “image” is rather a dirty word, bringing to mind as it does Madison Avenue types with button-down collars and buttoned-up minds. But all of us live and work in very image-conscious environments, and as a profession historians have a pretty unkempt and shaggy image. And much of it is our own fault.

The pecking order in the history profession, whether we like it or not, depends upon where each individual falls in relation to an immutable standard by which we measure ourselves and our colleagues, by which we get or change jobs, and by which we acquire “status” not only in the profession but in the academic community generally. This standard is publication.

“Publish or perish” is certainly a familiar and overworked cliché, and on many campuses it is also a truism. It seems to be an integral part of our image-making process. We give lip service to the contrary—we are all familiar with the bromides about stressing “good teaching” (whatever that is) over “scholarship” (meaning publication, whether it has any scholarly merit or not), but we also know that Clio’s fondest caresses are reserved for those with the longest bibliographies.

The irony of the publish-or-perish syndrome is that it is perfectly valid, although misapplied. Those of us who work and teach in what the Ivy League snobs have labeled “academic

* Revision of a paper presented at a regional meeting of the American Studies Association in Memphis, Tennessee, April 1, 1971.

Siberia" know the impact of the administrator's interpretation of this formula. Many of us staff "emerging" universities which are on the make academically and anxious to impress accreditors with credentials to justify a proliferation of graduate courses and degrees. Even those of us in the traditional haven, the liberal arts college, find our deans most pleased with those of us who publish, while those with no publications get no raises.

It used to be that the state teachers' college, the private liberal arts college, the junior college or even the high school, could be the haven for the research dropout, the dedicated teacher who felt that his calling was the classroom, not the carrel, and the gradebook rather than the galley proof. But this "ideal" was phony. The cliché was right—you have got to publish, or at least research, or you run the risk of intellectual atrophication and professional sterility.

How many people use the community where they live as an excuse for not working? I can not begin to count the times I have heard some historian say something like: "Well, I would like to research and write, but this hick campus (or town) doesn't have any facilities, and I can't afford to go to Washington or New York." They look with disdain at the community and area, they talk about the "boondocks," and then they wonder why the people of the community seem remote and sometimes hostile toward all collegiate functions except athletics. For the faculty member with these ideas, his relations with the community in which he lives are almost medieval in the town *vs.* gown confrontation.

The irony of this situation for faculty members interested in American history is that there are a lot of people out there who like us. History is unique among the academic disciplines in that people study it for fun. I know of many physicians, lawyers and professional men whose hobby is history. In every town in the nation there exist what we might call "history-minded" organizations, groups whose interests can be utilized by the student of American history to great advantage. They range from the genealogists and patriots of the D.A.R. and U.D.C. through the often very active parish history groups, to

specialized and learned experts in specific fields, such as the Civil War Round Tables or the local chapters of the National Railway Historical Society.

Frequently these "hobby-historians" operate in a very efficient and professional manner. They collect information and source materials dealing with the areas of their interest. They serve as the guiding forces in many a local library study group, actively supporting projects such as the microfilming of newspapers and court records. State historical societies throughout the country depend upon these interested laymen for their membership, and they are effective lobbyists in state legislative corridors for appropriations for the operation of state historical commissions. They work to preserve historical sites and landmarks, and play an active role in preserving the heritage of the area in which they live. More importantly, perhaps, they condition their friends and neighbors to an historical consciousness. They make thinking in historical perspectives and about historical subjects a socially acceptable activity.

Too often we in the academic world look down with scorn at the hobby-historian and "locals." The wealth of history, music, folklore, reminiscences and related Americana that is lying literally at our doorsteps is virtually without measure, yet as professionals we have for years neglected it, and repudiated those of our colleagues who have attempted to encourage us to look at the potential around us.

In our fear of being labeled "provincial" we have taken an artificial perspective. Many of us have operated on the theory that to have value, a research subject must be national in scope—a great "contribution" to knowledge. As the old saying goes, we have been so busy studying the forest that we have lost sight of the trees.

Any good architect will tell you that a successful building is only as good as the sum total of the parts which comprise it—to achieve the total concept of the building it must be constructed literally brick by brick. The same is true with the whole subject of American history. We can only achieve knowledge of the total structure and development of American history, literature, folklore, folk music, or similar subjects,

by building from the foundation of local development. Too long we have looked at American history from the perspective of Washington or New York. It is time that we sharpened our focus by seeing it from the point of view of the foundations upon which the whole structure rests, and these foundations are set deep in local history.

I am not suggesting that we should abandon our traditional national perspectives for a *purely* provincial outlook. But I believe that as professionals we need to keep in mind the necessity of both perspectives if we are going to get an accurate focus. Each is equally important, despite the fact that graduate schools and faculty personnel committees seem to place so much stress upon the national view and so little on the local. For every tower that is raised a foundation must be dug, and in the field of American history we have the opportunity, indeed the obligation, to do a lot of digging.

The really rewarding feature of this is that we do not have to dig alone. The laymen's groups, the societies, the clubs and organizations, are more than happy to assist the researcher in ferreting out information about his chosen subject. The person interested in local history, culture, folklore, music, story-telling and other such areas will find a willing corps of research assistants and volunteer helpers not only ready to work but flattered and pleased at being invited. All that they will ask in return is that you be sincere, and not seek to denigrate them, their locale or their institutions.

One requirement, however, is to make yourself known. It helps to be acquainted, and if you are not a "native" or are without ties in the area, it is a good idea to have a "contact man" make your introductions. The local history arena is somewhat like one of the special discount houses that you can get admitted to only if you have a membership card or pass. Once you have established the necessary credentials you can then begin shopping for all kinds of goodies. And here the clubs and organizations play another important role, for they frequently have already established the contacts that you can then exploit.

The necessity of a proper introduction cannot be overem-

phasized because, unless you are known by the people in the "hills and hollers," you are certainly as suspect as a "revenooer" at a moonshiner's convention. But once they are sure you are who you claim to be, and that your purposes are legitimate, you will be as welcome as a sinner at a tent revival.

The research possibilities in the area of local history are limited only by your imagination and the availability of sources. In Louisiana there are hundreds of articles just waiting to be written about the economic development of the state. Consider the railroad industry (which is my main field of interest). No state has a richer or more varied transportation history than does Louisiana. Several good studies have already been done dealing with the building and consolidating of the primary railroad system, but what about the rest? There is a real need for in-depth studies of the logging railroads and the role they played in the development of the timber industry. Included in this are the narrow-gauge railroads, the tap lines and the beginnings of several of the state's independent short lines. These latter railroads are each worth investigating, certainly at least worthy of a master's thesis or small monograph. The economic history of specific areas, or the development of various industries in the state should furnish the raw material for dozens of needed articles and make a genuine contribution to our knowledge of economic history.

How many articles and theses can be written about political figures on the state and national level? Every Member of Congress who has served his district for several terms can be the subject of a study relating to a comparison of his voting record with the interests of political, economic, racial or other pressure groups within his district. Religious history is also a wide-open field, and although there have been a number of good state and denominational studies, much remains to be done, especially on the impact of religion in the development of cultural traits, social institutions and economic activities. Much has been made in American history of the impact of the forces of righteousness and evil in colonial Salem, Massachusetts, or the Dayton, Tennessee, of the 1920s. Surely this elemental metaphysical drama was played on other stages as well.

In the last analysis, the only real factor limiting research in local history is the availability of source materials. Here we have, by our neglect, been parties to a great national tragedy of immeasurable proportions. Today, valuable historical source materials are being destroyed. Perhaps they are the records of a pioneering farmer, the diaries of an old settler, the files of a smalltown newspaper, the faded letters packed in an old attic trunk being burned in an orgy of "spring cleaning."

A couple of years ago I had a graduate student who wanted to do a thesis on a short-line railroad in Arkansas. Much of the basic information she needed was contained in the files of the local newspaper. In 1916 the paper had been sold, and the former owners had retained the files up to that date. By some diligent detective work we traced the files up to the grandson of the editor, who was by then living in Little Rock. We contacted him by telephone to see if he had the files and to tell him that the Arkansas Historical Commission had agreed to microfilm them. He told us that he had burned them all the year before, because they were "in the way" in his garage.

Last year I heard of a railroad depot in Kentucky which had an attic full of old freight and passenger ledgers. The former agent who had served the depot for forty or more years had saved all of his records, ignoring the railroad's destruction orders. I called the depot. The new agent proudly informed me that he had cleaned up "all that junk in the attic." "It took me two trips in my pick-up to haul all that stuff off to be burned," he added. Unknowingly, this naive man had destroyed a complete record of the economic history of his community.

How many old timers are dying today? How many men and women will not have the opportunities to tell their stories or sing their songs or play their instruments for posterity because we were not there with a tape recorder before it was too late. How many old photographs are being destroyed. I spent most of an afternoon one day in an old lady's house in Monette, Arkansas, trying to find some pictures for a book I was doing on a short-line railroad. My companion, a local man, had known her husband, and he kept saying, "But Mrs. Anderson, I know

Carl had a lot of pictures of the railroad." Finally, exasperated, the old lady said something to the effect of "well, they ain't none there, but if you don't believe me look for yourself. His trunk is on the porch." We looked, and down in the bottom, in an old cigar box, were about fifteen perfectly preserved photographs of locomotives, cars and trackside scenes. The lady was amazed. She honestly did not know the photos existed.

Because of its many opportunities for research and publication, the area of local history is an ideal subject for the historian who does not want to envelope himself completely in research, yet who realizes his need for the continuing intellectual stimulation that only research can provide. Local history is an area in which you can work on a limited budget and with limited time at your disposal. You don't have to devote a sabbatical year to acquire the basic materials. A few productive weekends of work may give you a significant article. The journals published by the various state historical societies, such as *Louisiana History*, are not only anxious to receive worthwhile contributions, but are publishing some of the most readable, enjoyable and important papers being written today in the field of American history.

Naturally even this type of research takes money, and in the straited circumstances of today's economy, this problem assumes even greater proportions. The large foundations are seldom interested in projects of a local nature unless they are of major scope, beyond the time resources of a full-time teacher, and open only to those who have already demonstrated competence in the field through publication. But there is plenty of money available for the study of local history, although it is necessary to scrounge it.

The best place for college teachers to look for money is in the institutional budget of their schools. Many universities, especially the "emerging" variety, have research funds available for faculty members as a means of encouraging productivity. These funds are usually considered as the "seed corn" variety, to be used as a basis for attracting money from other sources.

One of the most productive areas in the past for research funds in local history has been the American Association for

State and Local History. This group unhappily terminated its grants program in 1969, but it is hoped that with improving economic conditions the AASLH can resume its program of stimulating research.

Many other foundations exist that have money available for specific projects. The current *Foundation Directory* lists forty-three foundations in Louisiana and nine in Mississippi which are in the business of giving away money for worthwhile projects. While many foundations set rigid restrictions on the types of studies which they will consider, others are open to any reasonable proposal. Most numerous are agencies dealing with support for religious denominations or sects, and a scholar interested in religious development in a given area might appeal successfully here. Others stipulate a particular area, subject matter interest, or similar restriction.

The most successful source of funds in my experience has been the private patron. Local historians can, in good conscience, emulate the scholars of the Renaissance in appealing for patronage to individuals interested in specific regions or subjects. The amounts involved may be small, but a grant of even a few hundred dollars can do much toward the completion of a project. Here the contacts made through state and local organizations can be of great help in locating sympathetic donors.

Even if the impecunious historian has to dig into his own pocket to finance his research the long-term gains can be rewarding. Not only will he achieve the ego-gratifying satisfaction of finding a rich scholarly reward for his labors, and the pleasure of seeing his efforts in print, he also will receive the professional plaudits which come to the successful worker in the publish-or-perish vineyard.

Ironically, in the area of local history, the ancillary advantages of a scholar's work may be more important to the institution he represents than are the direct rewards to the researcher. Local history activity accrues greatly to the public relations image of your campus in improved rapport between town and gown. This can have several tangible benefits; the most obvious may be increased interest in funding such activi-

ties. Other peripheral benefits can be realized in grants and gifts from interested "locals" for additional research projects, for library improvement grants and for similar gifts. In one case I know of, a county centennial committee in Arkansas, working with a couple of dedicated local historians, was able to get the entire file of their city's newspaper microfilmed and stored in a college library without cost to the institution.

One of the greatest institutional rewards accruing to colleges from the study of local history is the impetus it gives to graduate student interest. This is an area in which graduate students can work with great profit, relatively easy publishability, and great promise of doing something really worthwhile.

In sum, I am convinced that historians specifically, and members of many related disciplines concurrently, have suffered long enough our neglect of our local "image" and that it is now time for us to re-examine the attitudes and values upon which we have traditionally measured the "worth" of research topics and publications. I call now for a new spirit of localism, or at most regionalism, in our outlook, and to demand a new pride in those heritages from our past which have made up much of what is the best of today's America and which we had better look to if we hope to have an even better tomorrow.

It is time to re-echo the message of the Vanderbilt fugitives of forty years ago, and to call upon historians, political scientists, sociologists, demographers, folklorists, musicologists and other fellow travelers to join in this rededication to the values and dignity of localism to the mutual benefit of us all.