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LOCAL HISTORY and WORLD UPHEAVAL

RUSSELL W. FRIDLEY

ON September 26, 1968, Mr. Fridley, the first Minnesotan to head the American Association for State and Local History, completed his two-year term as president of the organization. The following article is adapted from his speech at the twenty-eighth annual meeting of AASLH in Washington, D.C. It presents "one man's view of the condition and uses of state and local history in an era of social upheaval."

WE ARE today witnessing a constant acceleration in the velocity of history. Lives alter with startling rapidity; inherited ideas and institutions are in constant jeopardy of becoming obsolete. For an older generation, change was something of a historical abstraction, occasionally breaking through the social fabric with spectacular innovations like the telegraph, the locomotive, the automobile, or the airplane. It was not a daily threat to values and institutions. For our children, change is the vivid, continuous, overpowering fact of everyday life, saturating each moment with tension, intensifying the individual's search for identity.

New realities demand new values, or the reinterpretation of old ones, and when a

change of assumptions takes place within a generation, children often find their parents voicing one creed and living by another. As Kenneth Keniston points out, "no society ever fully lives up to its own professed ideals."¹ But a rapid rate of social change reveals this age-old gap in all its naked hypocrisy. Sensitive and thoughtful young people react with scorn.

Others, like the agricultural workers of the South, feel the impact of change mainly in terms of technology. Their skills superseded, they find themselves literally without a place to go. A recent issue of *Fortune*, for example, described a Mississippi plantation which now hires only nine full-time hands to operate three thousand acres. Twenty years ago, a hundred Negro families lived and worked there.²

There are also those for whom change brings a new awareness of injustice but no comparable shift in the attitudes and institutions responsible. These people boil with indignation. And above all, there are men and women who find cherished beliefs and ways of life consigned to the scrap heap of history and are filled with baffled fury. Thus we live in an angry society. The recent presidential campaign daily reminded us of the negative assumptions that dominated it. A visitor might conclude we were electing a sheriff instead of a president.

¹ Kenneth Keniston, "Youth, Change and Violence," in *American Scholar*, 37:239 (Spring, 1968).

² Roger Beardwood, "The Southern Roots of Urban Crisis," in *Fortune*, August, 1968, p. 84.

It is difficult not to concede at least one argument to Marshall McLuhan. He points out that today's generation is the first to have grown up in the electronic age. Television affects children by its rapid and early communication to them of styles and possibilities of life, as well as by its horrid relish of crime and cruelty. But it affects the young far more fundamentally by creating new modes of perception. What Mr. McLuhan calls "the instantaneous world of electric informational media" alters basically the way people perceive their experience. Where the printed page gave experience a frame, providing it with a logical sequence and a sense of distance, electronic communication is simultaneous and collective; it "involves all of us all at once." Thus, Mr. McLuhan argues, children of the television age differ more from their parents than their parents differed from their own fathers and mothers. Both older generations, after all, were nurtured in the same typographical culture. The implications for those who explore the past are clear. The moorings of historical study, so long anchored to the written word and printed page, have been irrevocably loosened.³

AS TECHNOLOGY diverts us from the printed frame of reference, it also profoundly transforms the physical character of our lives. The increasing tempo of urbanization has deprived millions of Americans of decent surroundings. Mere existence in many areas of the largest cities is becoming almost unendurable. People move out to get closer to nature, only to find that nature moves farther from them. Kenneth Boulding assesses the consequences: "Engineers, because of their insensitivity to the importance of social systems, are constantly devoting their lives to finding out the best way of doing something which should not be done at all. Planning that is done by engineers in the absence of any conscious appreciation of the social system within which it operates is frequently disastrous. One could cite water policy, flood control, urban

renewal, highway construction, and a good many other cases in which physical planning turns out to be socially costly."⁴

Compounding such problems are the accelerating specialization and consequent fragmentation of our society. An engineer or management expert may move across the country half a dozen times in as many years. His community is the company for which he works, not the place in which he lives or grew up. Scholars increasingly regard themselves as members of a professional discipline, not of any particular faculty or institution. America has always been a mobile society, but roots often torn up in the past now scarcely exist at all for a great number of people. As community ties dissolve, family ties weaken. All too often the result is isolated individuals vainly seeking some identity in a lonely crowd of similar figures. How many of us know who or what our great-grandparents were? How many of us live and work in the community where we played and went to school as children? How many can name a truly lifelong friend — one from childhood with whom we still share more than a Christmas card? Irving S. Cooper, a New York physician, writes that the "condition of Western man has so rapidly become one of increased loneliness and estrangement, in a world that changed too quickly to enable him to find stable values within it, that man has to a large extent lost the feeling and significance of the ultimate reality of being human."⁵

It is popular today to warn of damage that man is inflicting upon his inner self and outward surroundings. Many also share the following: (1) anxiety over the dehumanization of life, (2) concern regarding the fragmentation of man's collective existence — or culture, (3) skepticism about specialization ever solving the staggering social prob-

³ Quoted by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Joe College Is Dead," in *Saturday Evening Post*, September 21, 1968, p. 25.

⁴ Kenneth E. Boulding, *The Impact of the Social Sciences*, 105 (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1966).

⁵ Irving S. Cooper, "Medicine of the Absurd," in *Mayo Alumnus*, January, 1967, p. 3.

lems of our age, and (4) realization of the need to attack our common problems with a blend of appreciation for their complexity and sensitivity to the human consequences resulting from the public policies pursued to eliminate them.

HOW CAN HISTORY — particularly local history — relate to the problems that beset us? In answering this question we must first examine two intense debates in progress over the nature of history itself. One of these is being carried on not only in educational institutions but also on the street. On one side it is argued that the wave of the future is rolling away from us toward other shores. History is said to have no relevance, and the old, whether in literature or in public affairs, does not count for much. Concurrently, there is a feeling among minority groups that history — written largely by more dominant sectors of society — has ignored them, thus depriving them of a vital heritage. They view this lack of representation as a form of discrimination and as a denial of their historical franchise.

The other debate is heard largely in college classrooms, historical societies, and that new but rapidly multiplying species of institution, the research center. It concerns the make-up of history as an academic subject — what it is and is not, what it can and cannot do. At least four schools of thought about history can be distinguished. The first holds the traditional concept of history as one of the humanities and one of the liberal arts of the medieval curriculum. Those who take this line do not affirm that history is either practical or useful but hold that it is essentially the story of mankind, a chronicle, a legend, a tapestry. At the other extreme is the school that approaches the study of the past as a behavioral science. It views the stuff of history as empirical in the strict scientific sense, relying upon quantitative

⁶ H. J. Perkin, quoted in Mario S. DePillis, "Trends in American Social History and the Possibilities of Behavioral Approaches," in *Journal of Social History*, 1:38 (Fall, 1967).

evidence, most often of a statistical nature. A third school sees history as a social science. It accepts the reality of historical causation, affirms that effects may be explained in terms of causes, and thus vests history with a force in the affairs of men (for if the causes can be modified, so can the effects). But the scholars who look for patterns of causation that explain events must inevitably rely upon presumptions about those events that are derived from their own time and environment. A fourth group is made up of the emerging historians who deny that history should be explained at all. It is not as much interested in explaining events of the past within an ideological framework as in demonstrating that assumptions about history and its meaning are merely the products of social forces which inevitably determine the nature of the assumptions.

These debates should be welcomed by all of us. They apply equally at all ranges of historical focus — from observation of the rise and fall of civilizations to the study of a particular community.

THERE ARE SOME writers who would "confine social history to the kitchen, the wardrobe, the sports-field, the ballroom, the garden-party, the tap-room, and the green circle around the maypole. All these are fascinating places, provided they are seen in significant relation to the wider world of which they form a part."⁶ But local history should not be confused, as it often is, with narrow history contrasted to broader history. It is not the lowest rung on a hierarchical ladder that stretches from the smallest hamlet to the entire world. Rather, as Philip D. Jordan has observed, "in local history the lens of research is directed so as to bring a detail into the foreground, while subordinating other details to a background position." Because it can be sharply focused, local history has a particular advantage. It often can be validated with a precision lacking in wider ranging subjects. This is well stated by Maurice Mandel-

baum: "historians and philosophers would be well served if the theory of historiography were to have a greater variety of concrete problems to discuss than has previously been the case." In an age of specialization, local history provides a feasible vehicle for research. Yet, its closeness to the human situation and manageable area of concentration tends to resist dehumanization—the fault of much specialization.⁷

Fort Snelling, established in 1819 at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers, provides an excellent example. This frontier outpost was enclosed by a wall, the perimeter of which measured 1,600 feet. It occupied ten acres, its buildings were few, and its garrison seldom numbered more than 250 men. Yet no account of this fort can be written exclusively in local terms. The historian reconstructing its story soon finds himself exploring the maneuvers of nations seeking control over vast reaches of territory; the jockeying for position of fur companies with headquarters in Montreal, New York, and St. Louis; the unlocking of the geographical mysteries of the upper Mississippi Valley; the tides of Indian migration and the pressures of advancing white civilization on the native cultures.

In other words, although the historian of Fort Snelling has taken up what is presumably a local and restricted subject for examination, he has been forced into political, economic, and social backgrounds and has been obliged not only to travel wilderness paths and canoe routes but also the pavements of Washington and the streets of foreign capitals. He finds his area of research broadening to round out his subject. If it did not do so, he would miss the very meaning of Fort Snelling's existence.

One of the commonest errors about local history assumes that life in America was similar to life in Europe where local history was in many cases truly isolated. For centuries, Old World villages and provinces saw little change in population, architecture, traditions, or economic base. Graveyards included headstones inscribed with

names of several generations, and local ways possessed a remarkable stability. American and Canadian villages were quite different. Never set in permanent form, they usually mushroomed along routes of travel—at a port, a crossroad, a river landing, a railway depot. They were forever on their way from here to there, their horizons bounded only by the mouth of the river or the end of the tracks. Localities became less localized, reaching for far-flung points of reference, and local history became more accurately regional history.

To a fragmenting society that seems increasingly devoid of meaning to an alarming number of its citizens, the study of local history can make at least four contributions: immediacy, identity, perspective, and an acceptance of change. "Perhaps the greatest pleasure of local history is its immediacy," writes J. H. Plumb. "It brings one face to face with ordinary men and women who once walked the streets that we walk and are now dead and almost forgotten. The bundles of letters which are so frequently the core of an article in a journal of local history have a poignancy that is rarely matched. They express hopes and fears, affection, love, want, despair; in them our common humanity is bared. Written without a thought for posterity, they reveal human character as sharply as any novel."⁸

The writer might have added that there is no more convincing demonstration of the relevance of the past, for local history brings with it a special dimension of reality. Here the individual is not lost to sight. Clifford L. Lord put this well when he said that the "study of history at the local level—the study of people—reveals how things really happen; how things act and react, how the wheels and gears of history

⁷ Philip D. Jordan, *The Nature and Practice of State and Local History*, 8 (Washington, D.C., 1958); Maurice Mandelbaum, "Concerning Recent Trends in the Theory of Historiography," in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 16:512 (October, 1955).

⁸ J. H. Plumb, "Perspective," in *Saturday Review*, August 31, 1968, p. 21.

mesh and cog with one another.”⁹ Local history shows men and women living together — also working (or failing to work) together — in politics, business, and government, and in social and cultural pursuits.

By affirming the place of the individual in the community, local history can help preserve or rebuild a sense of identity. One need not be a lifelong resident of a town to feel that he belongs there and is a part of its ongoing story. The streets belong to him who knows whence their names came, what they looked like fifty or a hundred years ago, and who walked their pavements. The past may seem to some like a shadow world, but they will find that at times it has a deeper grip than the bustling, ever-transient present. The sense of continuity is bound up with the past — with the view of life as a stream in which each individual plays his part and affects not only the visible world around him but the future. Such a view can free man from the sense of isolation, from the haunting questions, “Who am I? Where did I come from? What am I a part of?”

All too often these values of history are overlooked. Far too many people view local history as essentially lifeless and historians as mere attic explorers. The very words conjure up relics and ancestor worship. And sometimes historians themselves are partially to blame. One of the sharpest criticisms, made in the context of historic sites, has been leveled by David Lowenthal. He quotes an English visitor who pointed out that “What is absent in America’s pursuit of the past . . . is the familiarity of constant association’ . . . what is old is looked at as special, ‘historic,’ different. Not wanting to be dominated by ‘antiquity,’

⁹ Clifford L. Lord, S. K. Stevens, Albert B. Corey *et al.*, *Making Our Heritage Live*, 145 (Sturbridge, Massachusetts, 1951).

¹⁰ David Lowenthal, “The American Way of History,” in *Columbia University Forum*, Summer, 1966, p. 32.

¹¹ H. R. Trevor-Roper, quoted in Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, vi (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967).

¹² Walter S. Ross, *The Last Hero: Charles A. Lindbergh*, 4n (New York, 1968).

Americans anathematized the past. In the process, they became conscious of antiquity as a separate realm. And as the past was cut away from the present, history emerged as an isolated object of reverence and pleasure.” It became Historyland — something to be visited on Sunday afternoon.¹⁰

Independence Hall serves as an example of Mr. Lowenthal’s point. It is a national shrine, painstakingly restored, surrounded by lawns, and reserved for the admiring tourist almost as though it were under glass. In Europe it would be carefully preserved but still in use for the daily affairs of men — like Westminster Abbey, where past merges naturally into present with scarcely a break.

The study of history too often lacks a sense of evolution. It has been said that “By our explanations, interpretations, assumptions we gradually make it seem automatic, natural, inevitable; we remove from it the sense of wonder, the unpredictability, and therefore the freshness it ought to have.”¹¹ Anniversaries, in particular, have a way of hardening the arteries of historical events and personages. A refreshing contrast is found in Charles A. Lindbergh’s view of the fortieth anniversary of his epoch-making flight. “On Tuesday, May 16, 1967, at the Lotos Club in New York,” writes Walter S. Ross, “many of Lindbergh’s old friends and colleagues gathered at dinner to remember him, as the fortieth anniversary of his famous flight (May 20–21, 1927) approached Later the same week there was a dinner with speeches at the Garden City Hotel, a plaque was dedicated at the approximate spot where the *Spirit of St. Louis* left the ground. . . . Lindbergh was not present at any of these events. . . . On the anniversary date of his flight, he was in Indonesia tracking a rare species of rhinoceros threatened with extinction. The general told a friend he thought it futile to keep on promoting an event that took place forty years ago. ‘I devoted time to that in 1927 and ’28,’ he said, ‘and I’ve written two books about it. It’s not that era any more, and I’m not that boy.’”¹²

Local history will have no greater test of its power to combat a frozen stereotype of past events than in the upcoming bicentennial of the American Revolution. Will this anniversary of the cardinal event in the history of the United States go the regrettable way of the Civil War centennial that was launched in a burst of commercialism and ill-conceived hoopla? Or will we seize this opportunity to re-examine and re-evaluate the event in the light of a new age of revolution? Will we emphasize the fact that there was nothing fixed and foreordained about it—that the cause of the Revolution hung in the balance, that its nature and meaning evolved through time, that it might have had many possible outcomes?

This raises the question of how best to commemorate a revolution in an age when revolution has changed in meaning to our nation. How can it be shown that, although the American Revolution overthrew an imperial power symbolized by George III, the rebels continued to emulate and admire much in the civilization of the enemy? How can historians explain a revolution that gave birth to the first new nation—a nation that now has the oldest continuing form of government in the world? And how can we portray to present-day youth a revolution that fell short of its ideals by achieving equality for some men but perpetuating servitude for others? Such commemoration demands the most careful understanding of the parallels and the vast differences between the Revolutionary period and our present situation.

Perhaps we should read again the words of John Adams, written to Thomas Jefferson on August 24, 1815: "What do we mean by the revolution? The war? That was no part of the revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years, before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington. The records of thirteen legislatures, the pamphlets, newspapers in all the colonies ought to be consulted during that period, to ascertain the steps by which

the public opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the authority of parliament over the colonies."¹³

In his classic work on *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Bernard Bailyn describes why this event belongs as much to the American future as to its past: "How else could it end? . . . The details of this new world were not as yet clearly depicted; but faith ran high that a better world than any that had ever been known could be built where authority was distrusted and held in constant scrutiny; where the status of men flowed from their achievements and from their personal qualities, not from distinctions ascribed to them at birth; and where the use of power over the lives of men was jealously guarded and severely restricted. It was only where there was this defiance, this refusal to truckle, this distrust of all authority, political or social, that institutions would express human aspirations, not crush them."¹⁴

If this sense of the American Revolution is carried into the bicentennial, the anniversary could be a most significant event. For one of the great lessons to be derived from a study of the past is that change is the perpetual condition of mankind. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes observed, "It's not so much where we stand: it's a question of in what direction are we moving."¹⁵

Our view of history itself is constantly changing. Its focus is being adjusted to new forces and new values. Jacksonian Democracy is interpreted quite differently now than it was a century ago; explanations of the Civil War and the Reconstruction vary today from those of yesterday; our understanding of the role of the immigrant has been modified. No longer are Turner's frontier and sectional theses accepted as gospel, and the very concept of America as a unique

¹³ Paul Wiltach, ed., *Correspondence of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, 1812–1826*, 116 (Indianapolis, 1925).

¹⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 319.

¹⁵ Quoted in "Director's Report for 1966," in *New York History*, 48:119 (April, 1967).

experiment in the history of mankind is called into question.

There will be no final answers, but through the process of constant revision history can bring perspective to a society in turmoil. This is probably its greatest contribution to an age in which man reshapes his environment but seems impotent to control his inner self, an age in which humanism no longer seems to motivate the thought of men as does science, and in which the machine threatens to become the arbiter of values.

Seventy-five years ago the English scholar William Edward Hartpole Lecky wrote that "History is never more valuable than when it enables us, standing as on a height, to look beyond the smoke and turmoil of our petty quarrels, and to detect in the slow developments of the past the great permanent forces that are steadily bearing nations onwards to improvement or decay."¹⁶

The perspective of history can equate contemporary problems with past fears and can offer a measure of comfort. It can demonstrate that there is no need to despair. Mankind has faced monumental crises before and has come through them. History can show that despite the appearance of the machine age, it is the individual—the you and the me—that gives meaning to life, that creates ideas and ideals which shape our daily experience.

Writing in 1960, George F. Kennan challenged historians. "It may be true," he wrote, "that we are condemned to explore only tiny and seemingly unrelated bits of a pattern already too vast for any of us to encompass, and rapidly becoming more so. All these things, to my mind, merely make the effort of historical scholarship not less urgent but more so."¹⁷ On the course of debates over method, we must never lose sight of our basic job and ultimate goal—a deepening

¹⁶ William E. H. Lecky, *The Political Value of History*, 54 (New York, 1893).

¹⁷ George F. Kennan, "The Experience of Writing History," in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 36:214 (Spring, 1960).

¹⁸ Margaret Mead, "We Must Learn to See What's Really New," in *Life*, August 23, 1968, p. 30.

of the understanding of history. As increasing numbers of people seem to know more and more about a restricted subject and less and less about the world of which they are a part, the need for widespread sense of history among Americans has never been greater.

Although our physical frontiers are expanding into space, greater conformity is developing among us, and opportunities to share moral and intellectual values are diminishing. Young people, confronted with the fastest rate of change the world has known, find it ever more difficult to communicate with the older generation. As Margaret Mead has pointed out: "There is tremendous confusion today about change. . . . Young people have been confronted with the changes, but at the same time they have no sense of history and no one has been able to explain to them what has happened. We are always very poor at teaching the last 25 years of history. Adults have been shrieking about the fact that great newnesses are here but they are not talking about what the newnesses are. . . . I'm not denigrating the crisis but in order to cope with change you have to know what is new and what is old."¹⁸

Racial minorities, groping for a sense of identity and pride, are seeking eagerly for their own roots in the past—roots that at once bind them and lend support to our common destiny as a nation. Today there are vital reasons for understanding and perpetuating the ties that hold our increasingly disparate and complex world together—the common heritage of traditions, customs, and values that cements individuals into groups and binds groups into communities and nations. We need to be reminded of the nature of the species we belong to and of both the limitations and possibilities of the human condition. History, the memory of mankind, is *the* human study, and through whatever channel we choose to approach it, we must keep in mind the need of man to see himself as he is—linked with both past and future.