

THE CHALLENGES OF LOCAL HISTORY

Leslie H. Fishel, Jr.
Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center

In a century in which the unexpected makes news, the unusual has been known to make history. Seventy years ago, James Harvey Robinson took historians to task for concentrating on what he called "fortuitous prominence." Other disciplines, he pointed out, "try to make the normal clear at any cost The rule, not the exception, is (the) object." Since Robinson wrote, "fortuitous prominence" has lost its central place in historians' favor and many facets of our discipline deal forthrightly with the normative, the commonplace, the routine. Local history is one of those facets which confronts the rule, not the exception, which explores the currents which move in the streams and creeks of life, not just in the major rivers. (1)

In the fall of 1984, my wife and I were privileged to meet and talk with the Field Officer of the British Association of Local History, David Hayns. He and his wife, Jill, entertained us in their home and told us something of the British local history movement. For many years local history activities were encouraged by a Standing Conference for Local History, which was organized in 1948 by a national voluntary agency. In addition to stimulating local societies, the Standing Conference held annual conventions for local historians. After a quarter century, the edge began to dull. Questions about the efficacy of this arrangement brought about a national committee, headed by Lord Blake, which explored in depth the role of local history in British society. The Blake Committee report, published in 1979 and shaped for the British scene, makes instructive reading for all who are interested in local history. Its major recommendation was the establishment of the British Association for Local History (BALH) (2). Several years later, the BALH came into being and appointed David Hayns as the Field Officer.

His charge was to visit local historical organizations all over England and Wales to discover what they wanted to do. He was to aid them where he could, bring them together to exchange views, and help them raise the consciousness of communities about local history. Right away, he discovered what local historians in this country know, that local history does not seem to fit anywhere in the spectrum of professional historians. Academics in both countries are slow to accept local history and incorporate it into their fields of study. To a large extent in England, as in the United States, academic historians and local historians do not

mix often or well. Yet in England about 50% of the graduate theses fall into the local history arena, (3) and a quick review of U. S. dissertation titles, published in two issues of the *Journal of American History* (December, 1984 and March, 1985), showed that approximately 20% appear to have a local history focus.

The similarities between the state and status of local history in these two English-speaking countries are large and significant, but so are the differences. In facing the challenges of local history in this country, we might do well to look at the experiences of our cousins across the ocean. They seem to be more committed to publications, since many of their local organizations publish journals. They seem to have a wider acceptance in their communities than similar groups in this country; in some small villages, the meeting of the local historical or archaeological society is an important event. The English do more with historical archaeology, a natural bent since they have a considerably longer history and written records become more scarce, the further back historians go. On the other hand, they have problems which are familiar to our local history movement: financing, professional guidance, intragroup bickering, and so on.

In one area -- defining what local history is -- there would probably be some unanimity of opinion in both countries. The highly reputable and irrepressible Civil War scholar, William B. Hesseltine, used to pronounce with great emphasis that "All history is local history," and there would be few English local historians who would disagree. Twenty-five years ago, at a convention sponsored by the now-defunct Standing Conference on Local History, the debate on the issue of "What is local history?" was closed when a participant asserted that "We do not know and do not care what we mean by local history but we are all determined to get on with it!"(4)

The Blake Report had trouble with definitions, too, explaining that the Committee did not "examine at length" the question, but when it tried its hand at a definition, came up with a tasty slice of Swiss cheese. "Local history," the committee proclaimed, "is the study of man's past in relation to his locality," going on to explain that locality is "determined by an individual's interests and experiences." One need not be a cynic to see the loopholes in that ambiguous assertion. Definitions on both sides of the water are vague and less than helpful, an indication of

mutual awareness of the complexity of the subject. In this country, local history takes on so many colors and can be found in so many subdisciplines of academic history (like urban history and the new social history), that it defies precision in definition. Perhaps the best advice, after all, is just to get on with it.

This is where the challenges are -- where we "get on with it." There are many ways to confront the challenge, but I would like to suggest three, in particular. Those who engage in local history, as museum guides, research scholars, school teachers, genealogists, curators in special areas or administrators, to specify just a few examples, must learn to connect, correct, and collect. Let me elaborate on these conditions.

If local history, octopuslike, reaches into most of the crevasses which other historical approaches develop, then the burden is on the octopus to show that it belongs. Local history has the responsibility to demonstrate how it relates to other branches of history. James Bratt put it in a telling aphorism: "Raise large questions in small places," he wrote. (5) The connection is there between the local and the regional, the local and the national. It has to be made. Years ago, Peter Coleman discovered that the apparently stable population of a Wisconsin county on the Mississippi River in the mid-nineteenth century was misleading; while the number of people remained about the same, the people changed because the county was a way station of the movement west. Coleman raised a large question in a small place. (6)

Lord Blake's group discovered that "in recent years", local history activity has had an impact on interpretation of "national" and "political" history, even resulting in "a change in historical perception" in some fields of historical study. Surely the same can be said for aspects of national history in the United States; our colonial period is a ripe example, but the early studies of western cattlemen and the more current research on Southern black-white relations and urban configurations have implications beyond the local scene. In these ways, local history makes a connection and enlarges its significance.(7)

One approach, which has recently become more widely accepted at the scholarly level in the two countries, uses local history data and interpretations imaginatively. Comparative history is a post World War II development, although it has only been since the last decade that historians in any number have utilized it. When cultural phenomena and societal mores are compared between or among differentiated demographic groupings, the local unit becomes an

important point of departure. Local historians might themselves enter the field of comparative history, possibly working in concert, to determine community or institutional patterns of evolution and development. Whether they go this far or not, local historians should at the least be cognizant of how these investigations might connect to others on a different scale.

Whatever efforts are put forward in the name of local history, they must be correct. Correct? Yes, correct in methodology, sources, publication or presentation, and documentation. This caveat applies to books, articles, talks, exhibits, reports, historical dramas, temporary displays and all other means of informing the public about its history. However history is presented, it must be sound and well-executed. There is always a temptation to elaborate the myth of say, the founding of a town, church or organization, or to utilize a legend as of sufficient merit to prove a point. This might titillate audiences but it is not in the interest of correct history. Myth and legends, properly identified, have their use and their place, but not as major supports for a solid and sound historical narrative.

Thomas Schlereth devoted a fascinating chapter in his *Artifacts and the American Past* to the "fallacies" often found in historical museum exhibits and history textbooks. These include influences which occasionally operate in local history circles, such as nostalgia and patriotism. Schlereth points out that these are noble sentiments, but they do not mix well with a sound historical approach. (8) The same might be said about the would-be historian who wears blinders, whose parochialism inhibits a well-rounded, beneath-the-surface look at historical data.

If local historians are prepared to connect and correct in their historical endeavors, they need a body of material to study, ruminate about and draw conclusions from. This can only develop if local historians are willing to collect materials. Here the field is wide open, embracing manuscript letters and diaries, census records, printed volumes and the many other familiar historical sources, but also including the less familiar, like photographs and illustrations, oral history, and what is coming to be called material culture. Artifacts as large as buildings and as small as earrings can tell a historian something about the period, the people and/or the event in which he or she is interested. Working with these less familiar types of data is not easy, but it is rewarding.

If collecting takes place, and with it proper recordkeeping and preservation, the local historian will not have difficulty in making the connections to the larger historical scene and

doing it in a totally acceptable way. In the process, the product of the local historian's work will illuminate for the community or region some fascinating phases of its development.

The local history movement in this country and in England is becoming sensitive to the need to observe these guidelines and in each country the national organization tries to stress them in a variety of ways. The British have an advantage of size; because their island is small, the BALH, through its Field Officer, can touch a number of local organizations, hold regional meetings and workshops, encourage publications and draw younger generations into the activity. The American Association for State and Local History (AASLH), an enterprising and highly successful organization, would face an overwhelming task if it attempted to parrot the English example. Our country is just too big. The AASLH does, however, through its annual meeting and its publication program, try to stimulate local history activity at a level which is suggested by these guidelines.

Both organizations suffer from financial limitations, particularly the BALH whose funds were due to run out this fall. Both organizations have to confront attitudes which, though expressed in a variety of ways, are similar in intent. Cambridge University's David Dymond, a specialist in local history, commented on one dismaying characteristic of the local history movements in both countries (though he was only speaking about the English): "...local historians," he wrote in 1981, "still have a dangerous tendency to ignore each other, to publish and proselytize with blithe independence, and to show little interest in discussing objectives, standards and co-operation." History is the loser when skills, time, money and even resources are wasted because local groups ignore each other. (9)

The United States and England are two closely related countries, and there is room for their local history movements to draw more closely together. While the movements will not and should not ape or even parallel one another, they can share techniques, information and enthusiasm. To take one example, the irritating issue of the relation of local historians, who are often not professionals, and academic historians who most generally are, might be more constructively approached by cooperating local historians in England and the U. S. beginning to work with cooperating academic historians in the two countries. Joining forces to resolve this one area of concern might make a difference.

The challenges of local history affirm again and again that local history is important, useful and enjoyable if it is done properly. Connecting, correcting and collecting are part of the proper process, as is communicating with others who have comparable interests. Still another part of that proper process is the recognition that everything has a history, but not everything needs a historian. There are some events, some activities, even some people whose history is best left in its original form. They do not need a historian; they speak for themselves or, perhaps, not at all.

The challenges of local history are never ending, never over. Its durability and vitality come from its subject matter: people. People in history are very much alive and what they do, which is the subject of historical research and its results, is vibrant with life. That is what makes creating a piece of history, a piece of local history, tantalizing and exciting. That is what makes being a historian, in Bill Williams' apt phrase, so much fun. (10)

FOOTNOTES

1. James Harvey Robinson, *The New History* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), 10.
2. Lord Blake, *Report of the Committee to Review Local History* (London: n.p., 1979).
3. Blake, *Report*, 2.
4. *Ibid.*, 2-3.
5. James D. Bratt, "Review of *Dutchmen on the Bay*." *Journal of American History*, v. 71, 2 (September, 1984), 399.

6. Peter J. Coleman, "Restless Grant County: Americans on the Move," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, v. 46, 1(Autumn, 1962), 16-20.
7. Blake, *Report*, 5.
8. Thomas Schlereth, *Artifacts and the American Past*, (Nashville, Tenn.: American Association for State and Local History, 1980), ch. 10, 207-221.
9. David Dymond, *Writing Local History: A Practical Guide*, (London: Bedford Square Press for British Association for Local History, 1981), 1.
10. William Appleman Williams, "Thoughts on the Fun and Purpose of Being an American Historian," *Organization of American Historians Newsletter*, v. 13, 1 (February, 1985), 2-3.