EXPLORING NEARBY HISTORY IN THE WESTERN RESERVE

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Who built the seven towers of Thebes?
The books are filled with names of kings.
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?
And Babylon, so many times destroyed,
Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima's houses,
That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?
In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished
Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome
Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom
Did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song,
Were all her dwellings palaces? And even in Atlantis of the legend
The night the sea rushed in,
The drowning men still bellowed for their slaves.

Young Alexander plundered India.
He alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Was there not even a cook in his army?
Philip of Spain wept as his fleet
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?
Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War. Who
Triumphed with him?

Each page a victory,
At whose expense the victory ball?
Every ten years a great man,
Who paid the piper?

So many particulars.
So many questions.

When Bertholt Brecht posed those questions, he called the poem "A Worker Who Reads History." Brecht, a social and political radical, was challenging modern political leaders who in their various national crusades were insensitive to the masses. Brecht was also trying to call attention to the neglect of life at the grass roots by those who were writing history. Brecht realized that the way the past was presented influenced the thinking of those who were shaping contemporary affairs. He recognized the important truth that our understanding of the past determines the way we deal with the present. Therefore, he was quite unhappy, as well he should have been, with the way historians had for the most part ignored ordinary people and everyday life.

Fortunately, a realization has been growing in recent years that those questions of "A Worker Who Reads History" are important. A curiosity has been stirred about what has gone on in the local area in the past. A desire to provide answers has been increasing. This conference on the history of Ohio's Western Reserve is one sure sign of these developments.

Many doubts nevertheless exist, even among those who are intrigued by the nearby world of family and community, as to whether this is "real history," an important subject worthy of serious consideration, or whether it is merely an engaging pursuit for hobbyists. Should those of us who reside in Northeast Ohio really be devoting our energy and resources to the study of the history of our own locality, the Western Reserve? This is a vital question that deserves to be addressed at the outset of this conference.

It is certainly understandable how the doubts about the legitimacy of community and family history arose. It is part of the story of the rise of the academic discipline of history in this country. In the earliest stages of America's history, the story of what had taken place was presented by

individuals such as William Bradford and Cotton Mather, men primarily engaged in other activities but wanting to tell the story of their local community for a purpose, in particular to let England know about the nature and success of seventeenth century Puritan colonization. The same local focus was evident in initial efforts to describe the revolt of the American colonies in the eighteenth century. The uprising of Boston, or Concord, or at most Massachusetts was the topic of those first accounts.

Not until George Bancroft's first volume appeared in 1834 was there a serious attempt to describe the American experience in nationally rather than locally-oriented terms. Bancroft's ten volumes over 38 years represented the first substantial attempt at writing a national history. Only the late nineteenth century would see the emergence of an academic profession and with it the end of an era in which most historical writing was done by gentleman amateurs. With this change the notion emerged that academic historians should concentrate on national history, in their minds clearly a more important subject than local history.

German-style seminar training, a cooperative endeavor in the analysis of primary sources first used at Johns Hopkins University in the mid-1870s, began to create a new class of historians. These academics held the notion that history could be scientific. It required special training and scholarly cooperation. Patrician amateurs with a view of history as a branch of literature and little sense that history should be a collective enterprise were soon in eclipse.

In 1884 there were only twenty professors of history among the 400 U.S. colleges. Of the forty-one historians who created the American Historical Association that year, only a minority had professional academic training. At first the AHA involved both the new academics and the older (and more local history oriented) amateurs. But before long, the academics came to dominate the AHA, while amateurs were made to feel unwelcome. The split between academics and amateurs continued to grow, with academics increasingly viewing amateurs with disdain. Academics came to believe that they worked on broad, important questions with clinical skill and detachment while amateurs worked on unimportant locally-oriented questions, too personal to be taken seriously. Academics felt that they sought truth, while amateurs indulged in nostalgia. Academics thought in universal terms, and considered the interests of most amateurs to be parochial. The very term "local historian" became one of disparagement among academics. For their part amateurs saw academics as hopelessly aloof, pedantic, and detached from reality.

In 1940 the academic/amateur, national/local split became official as those disenchanted with the American Historical Association created the American Association for State and Local History. Two years earlier the AHA turned down a proposal that it publish a popular history magazine for a general adult audience. This was seen by the academics as too commercial and not sufficiently scholarly. It took until 1954, but supporters of the popular history magazine idea were finally able, with AASLH sponsorship, to create their magazine, *American Heritage*. It soon achieved a circulation of 200,000 in comparison with the 15,000 of the AHA's *American Historical Review*.

While the efforts of academics to produce a satisfactory national history proved very worthwhile, generating a remarkable amount of careful research, useful synthesis, and penetrating insight, their disdain for local history was unfortunate and self-defeating. Among other things, it helped create the impression that history was detached and distant, concerned only with "the great white men," and not at all interested in ordinary people, especially if they were neither great, white, nor male. The grassroots reaction was captured by Jeff MacNelly, the Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist, in his comic strip *Shoe* about a community of birds. Two of Shoe's young birds are out walking when one asks, "What's the name of that game where you try to answer a bunch of trivia questions for points?" The other responds, "Oh yeah... We play that in school. We call it American history."

This detachment of academic history from the nearby world runs counter to the desire of most of us to feel connected, to see the link between our personal world and the past, to understand the tie between our situation and the historical environment. Novelist Wright Morris reflected on the idea of making connections with the past in *The Home Place*.

> There's a story in the family, on my mother's side, that my Grandmother Osborn started west with her man, her Bible, and her cane-seated rocking chair. As things got bad she had to give up both her man and the Bible, and to keep from freezing to death she had to burn the chair. But first she unraveled the cane-bottom seat. She wrapped it around her waist, and when she got to where she was going she unwrapped it, put it in a new chair.

> Her kids grew up with their bottoms on it. That cane seat was the connection with all of the things, for one reason or another, she had to leave behind.

Exploring the past of one's nearby world is like sitting in that cane-bottomed chair.

In the 1960s the gulf between academic and local history began to narrow, but by then the evolutionary cycle was so far advanced that the reuniting of the two species of common origin proved quite difficult, divided as they were by experience, focus, and mutual distaste. The 60's upheavals of race, sex, and war caused academic historians to realize that they knew far too little about the lives of Americans who were black, female, poor, or otherwise out of step with the leadership elite. Academic historians in large numbers began to be interested in what life was like for ordinary people.

When historians turned to the examination of workers, women, minorities, and everyday life at the grass roots (including work and leisure, sexual activity, social and geographical mobility, health and medicine, crime and law enforcement, childhood, adolescence, aging and death, behavior and values), they discovered that these topics could not be dealt with adequately using traditional historical research methods. Case studies of individual communities and even families provided a useful way to examine "history from the bottom up." At the same time they discovered that census information and other large bodies of statistical information could be manipulated using the new technology of computers to bring to light patterns of ordinary existence. And lo and behold, academics began to discover that local historians, most of them amateurs, had access and skill in dealing with census data and other local materials which they had been using all along. It was in the 1960s that academic historians began to realize the truth of what English philosopher Alfred North Whitehead had observed: "We think in generalities, but we live in details. To make the past live, we must perceive it in detail in addition to thinking of it in generalities."

In the past two decades academic and amateur historians, nationally-focused and locally-focused historians have come closer together than at any time in the last century. A new intellectual awareness has fostered academic interest in and respect for regional, community, and family history. The old gulf between academic and non-academic historians has been at least partially bridged.

One manifestation of the new atmosphere is a shared interest in the history of the American family. Academics, who for a long time casually assumed that the family was an unchanging institution, have come to realize that, not only has the family evolved in vitally important ways but that the changes in the family provide valuable clues to historical shifts in American society. They have also discovered that family historians and genealogists have developed useful methods of gathering information about families in the past. For their part, many amateur genealogists and family historians have found that the work of more generalizing academic historians of the family provides useful insights which allow comparisons of their own family's experience with that of other American families.

Increasingly academics and amateurs find themselves addressing the same set of fundamental questions about the family. It seems appropriate to pose at least a few of those questions to demonstrate the shared concerns of the two groups and also to suggest the possibilities awaiting someone who pursues an inquiry into family history, individual or collective.

How did courtship and the decision to form a family occur?

How and by whom were family decisions made?

How do men and women of different generations or circumstances compare in age at marriage, age at birth of first child, number of pregnancies and live childbirths, and age at birth of last child?

How have child-rearing practices evolved?

Who cared for sick, aged, or dependent family members?

Why and how were moves undertaken?

What kinds of work did family members do specifically and how did it change over the years, even in the same job?

How were family finances decided and handled?

How did changing technology affect the family; that is, when and how did such things as plumbing, cars, refrigerators, telephones, radios, vacuum cleaners, televisions, microwave ovens, and so forth have an impact?

What sort of educational and religious training and values were provided?

How did the family handle death and inheritance?

What was the nature of military service and the family attitude about it?

How were family members involved, if at all, in neighborhood and community affairs, charitable activities, reform movements, or politics?

Consider the buildings in which the family resided. They are a part of the family's past, and also a part of the larger history of the community as they pass through the hands of various owners and occupants.

When and by whom was the building designed and built?

How was it laid out, decorated, furnished, and used over the years?

Who occupied it?

Institutions were involved: businesses, unions, schools, churches, clubs. They have interesting histories in their own right and may form an important part of both family and community history.

When, how, by whom, and why was it formed?

What sort of beliefs did it display, and what sort of program did it conduct?

How and why did its structure, leadership, support, location, and function change over the years?

What do its various institutions reveal about the community in which they are located?

Consider the neighborhood and community in which a family lives. It is made up of a variety of families, buildings, and institutions. It can be a cohesive social unit or merely a geographical district.

How is the neighborhood defined? What are its boundaries?

What sorts of structures and open spaces could be found there at various times?

Where did residents work, shop, obtain services, worship, seek to relax?

What have been the important institutions in the neighborhood (parks, grange halls, churches, taverns, libraries, stores, shopping malls, schools, hospitals, others), and what has been their role?

Who has lived in the neighborhood? Have various groups clashed?

From where have residents come and to where have departing residents gone?

How and why have events, activities, or problems brought residents together, if at all, or divided them?

How has acceptable behavior and order been defined and enforced? Who have been the police? Who the criminals?

Who have been the community leaders and why?

What ideas and values have been highly regarded or promoted by particular individuals or groups, and the community as a whole. How have beliefs clashed and changed?

How have creative and unconventional persons been treated?

What has influenced the community's growth, stagnation, or decay?

That agenda of family-related historical questions ought to persuade anyone that family, community, or regional history can be a worthwhile and illuminating pursuit for any historian, whether concerned about individual and local matters or broad social patterns.

Shakespeare said, "There is a history in all men's lives." The bard of Avon might be persuaded to put his observation in less sexist terms today, but, more important, once disdainful academic historians have come to realize the truth of Shakespeare's fundamental insight. It is encouraging to see that academic and amateur historians are sharing interests and methods, learning from each other and gaining respect for each other. At least some of us academics have realized that while academics and professionals do history as a job we're paid to do, amateurs pursue history simply because of their love for it. That interest and enthusiasm deserves the highest respect.

The current state of affairs leads me to believe that the investigation of regional, community, and family history by amateurs and academics alike will continue to grow in popularity and significance. That augers well for our ability in the future to provide better answers to the questions of Brecht's "Worker Who Reads History." The contemporary English historian H.P.R. Finberg neatly sums up the possibilities inherent in the study of family and local history when he writes, "We may picture the family, the local community, the national state, and the supra-national society as a series of concentric circles. Each requires to be studied with constant reference to the one outside it; but the inner rings are not the less perfect circles for being wholly surrounded and enclosed by the outer." Finberg's notion should fortify and encourage everyone who is interested in studying the history of the Western Reserve, for he is saying that if we can better understand the wider world, we can make a better connection to it, through a study of history which begins at home.