

A Sense of Recurring Uniqueness

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A HISTORY is a story about the past. It includes not only what happened, who made it happen, and why, but also the perceptions of the teller or writer, who is aware of some things and not of others, who chooses to tell only part of what she or he knows, who arranges those parts in a particular way and uses his or her voice and vocabulary to communicate with hearers or readers. The job of evaluating a number of recently published local histories pulls a reviewer in different directions. I am torn between two ends of what I see as a continuum, with folk history on one end and scholarly history on the other.

Some of the things that make one person's history different from another's are the same things that make one person different from another: two eyewitnesses will often give different versions of the same event. Other differences have to do with training, with credentials, with status. There are many versions of the past, even of the same years in the same small town, farm, or city neighborhood. Since we can never recover the whole—"true" or "objective"—past, then we should try to gather as many pieces of it, and as many versions of these pieces, as we can. Those of us who care about the past and who believe we can learn about ourselves and others as we reconstruct or participate in another's reconstruction of it, value the variety. It is one way of getting at some of the complexity of history.

Social historians are concerned about including everyone—the usual list includes workers as well as employers, women as well as men, immigrants as well as natives, people of color as well as whites, children as well as adults. Many social historians, and I count myself among them, strive not only to include information about all these groups, but their viewpoints as well. Oral history is one method that allows insight into ordinary people's (meaning in this case, nonhistorians') views of their own experiences. People writing about their own communities is another.

People who form committees to piece together a

local history add to the possibilities of complexity. The result, then, is not the vision or memory of one person, but a product of the give-and-take of the minds and ideas of several people. Sometimes a community group will decide not to do the history themselves or to find a knowledgeable local person to write it; instead, they will hire a writer, a professional historian, or someone else perceived as having credentials to do a "better" job. Then, although the impulse to write a history comes from within the community, the writer may not. How do the commissioners and the writers interact in producing a history?

Scholars accept the need for revision within their ranks, for history to be rewritten by every new generation of historians. Historians need to consider the benefits of encouraging ordinary people to think about and to tell their own stories of the past—of their families, their communities, their religious organizations, their workplaces—and then to appreciate those stories and make use of them. Professional historians need not relinquish their valuable training in critical thinking, skepticism about sources, the importance of context. But we need to recognize that the versions of the past that professional historians create are not the only ones. Maybe if we paid more mind to the stories of the past presented by untrained historians/ordinary people, then ordinary people might have some reason to pay more attention to what we present. If we have some common ground to meet upon, all of us interested in and concerned about the past, the telling of the past, and learning from that telling, then we have the makings of a democratic effort to elevate both the past and history to a place of importance in our society. A brief look at a number of recently published local histories may flesh out these ideas.

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NEAR THE END of the Waconia Heritage Association's *Waconia, Paradise of the Northwest: The Lake and Its Island*¹ is a brief section called "Labor Pains, or A History of the History," revealing that the book is the product of a collective effort. The book is intended as the first of three to tell the history of the city of Waconia, its businesses, organizations, and people—but the authors decided to start with the thing that made Waconia different from most other places in Minnesota: Coney Island of the West, in Lake Waconia. In the process, they contributed to a branch of social history that deals with leisure, with how people spent their free time, with tourism. The particulars, as well as the association's willingness to bring the story up to date and to write about problems as well as pleasures, make this book both a model for other resort areas and a contribution to a fascinating piece of Minnesota's past. It would have been interesting, however, to hear more about the oral histories that must have provided much of the book's material. Happily, there is an index, a brief bibliography, and many wonderful photographs and other illustrations.

The Douglas County Historical Society has also taken a somewhat different view from the chronological narrative provided by many county and local histories. Its two paperback volumes called *This Was Our Livelihood*² focus on work, specifically, the ways many of the county's people have made their livings. The first volume (1983) starts off with a bang: "Howdy Folks! I am Mrs. Fred Plagman and my profession is a lady taxidermist." Mrs. Plagman is pictured with a piece of her work, a two-headed calf; fish trophies are mounted on the wall behind her. Near the end of the piece she reports that her husband "still gives me lots of help. He cooks the meals and washes the dishes. Lots of times he will bring me a cup of coffee and a cookie, or whatever, about 10 in the morning, and we will have coffee together in my shop. I wouldn't dare just let a project sit when I'm right in the middle of it, or it could harden or get stiff on me, and I'd have a heck of a mess and be in trouble!" Other occupations, as described by their practitioners or by relatives or friends, include creamery man, pattern cutter, fishing guide, milliner, farm equipment seller, resort owners, thresher, midwife, beautician, boat factory owner, mortician, game warden, barnstormer, inventor, and shoe salesman. And that's just a sample of what's in the first volume. The foreword to volume two notes its goal of "preserving in written form, a way of life that is no more." The second volume (1985) includes some of the same occupations (with different practitioners) as the first, and some others, including florist, hotel worker, Fuller Brush man, professional duck hunter, rock splitter, service station cafe owner, movie projectionist, and well driller. These books make clear how interesting and unusual "ordi-

nary" people's lives are. Neither volume, unfortunately, is indexed.

George and Winifred Boorman compiled *The History of the City of Leonard, Dudley Township* (Beltrami County).³ Their point of view is very much that of insiders with a mission, as their introduction indicates: "The time to gather the local and family history is now, as we lose a little each year as time slips by. I think it is good to preserve some of our knowledge of the past as a way to help face the future. A book will help save many facets of local history. We will write a little about many." This 189-page volume has neither a table of contents nor an index, or even a date of publication. However, it assembles and reproduces maps, abstracts, photos, and reference letters. Topics include the early days of Leonard, its creamery, the churches, the schools, timber, roads, businesses, more schools, a large section of family histories written by family members, and a sizable grouping of photographs. The book ends with the statement, "We started this book in January, 1982, since then several people have died, others married, babies have been born and people have moved. Time marches on." The Boormans certainly show readers some of their sources and draw community members—recent arrivals and oldtimers—into the publication by soliciting and publishing their family stories. This history contributes to the ongoing process of making a place and the people who live there into a community, as well as telling outsiders what insiders think is important about themselves and their town.

Anniversaries are often occasions for paying attention to history. Churches publish 25th, 50th, and 100th anniversary booklets. Local banks exhibit photos and artifacts in their lobbies to commemorate 75 years in business. And communities often write their histories with an eye to such occasions. A centennial history of a Minneapolis suburb is the Golden Valley Historical Society's *Golden Valley, A History of a Minnesota City, 1886-1986*.⁴ A handsome, well-indexed volume with a table of contents, it has fewer photos than I have come to look forward to in a local history. It was assembled by a committee and, like many community histories, includes chapters on early settlement, schools,

¹ Published in Dallas by the Taylor Publishing Co., 1986, 240 p., \$25 plus tax and postage, available from the Waconia Heritage Assn., Box 241, Waconia 55387. Wherever possible, the editors have included price and ordering information; unfortunately, this data was not always available.

² Published by the Douglas County Historical Society, vol. 1, 158 p., vol. 2, 129 p., available from the society, Alexandria 56308.

³ Published by the compilers and available from them for \$17 postpaid, Leonard 56652.

⁴ Published in Golden Valley by the Golden Valley Historical Society, 1986, 160 p.

churches, government, business, and recreation. Community values may be reflected in the inclusion of a whole chapter on the library; proximity to Minneapolis and what that has meant for Golden Valley may be seen in chapters on community development and public services. The appendix, a personal reminiscence called "Golden Valley Remembered," is my favorite part of the book because it allows readers to see the place through the eyes of Frederick Wandersee, a lifelong resident.

The centennial publication of *Heron Lake, Minnesota, 1883-1983: 100 Years of Good Living*⁵ celebrates a strong belief in progress from the pioneer era to the 1980s; its creators mean the book to be "a nostalgic enticement for an adventuresome trip down Memory Lane." The themes its team of researchers and writers identified, from research based mostly on local newspapers, were the importance of the railroad, the prairie soil suitable for farming, a good environment for waterfowl, weather, and "the indomitable spirit of the early inhabitants." The book has a table of contents, but no index. At the back is a section of advertisements that future researchers will find interesting and useful. A large, hardcover volume with 441 double-columned pages, it covers origins, the lake, townships, transportation, agriculture, community services, businesses, medical and professional groups, churches, organizations, school and sports, entertainment, and a couple of nice catch-all categories called memories and pot-pourri.

Like all of these books, but perhaps most like the Dudley Township volume, the Heron Lake history was written by people intent on creating a meaningful past for themselves and their place. It is a conscious validation of their lives by means of a story, a long story, full of tales and details, by no means a seamless narrative, but a rendition of the past for their own purposes. Even in this genre of compendia, this book stands out as inclusive. Rather than eliminate names or other information, they simply reduced the type size! All the graduates of Heron Lake High School are listed as are as many teachers and staff as could be identified. A sports overview, 30 pages of minute type, includes girls and boys, men and women, teams and individuals, followed by pages of sports "bits and pieces" from local newspapers from the 1890s to the 1980s. Rather than include family histories, which make up a large part of many county and local histories these days, the Heron Lake folks wrote reminiscences of people, events, and so on. A definite point of view pervades the volume,

which is a model for incorporating women's history into everybody's history. Girls' as well as boys' sports teams, for example, are discussed. A section on Women in Agriculture begins "In the minds of most people the word 'farmer' presents a strictly masculine image, but in the Heron Lake Community there are several notable exceptions to that view. In addition to the housework, pioneer women were often relegated to the position of farm hand, responsible for livestock chores and pressed into service for field work when needed, but management was reserved to the superiority of the male mind. Among those who proved the fallacy of that theory was a family of young women who lived northwest of town." The reliance on newspapers as sources for much of the material in the Heron Lake history makes for some very interesting inclusions, like ads from early newspapers. We even learn that the workers at the Heron Lake Brickyard had an active chapter of the Industrial Workers of the World from 1914 to 1916, led by Mrs. Whitney, wife of the foreman.

Maxine Kayser Luehmann's *The Sun and the Moon: A History of Murray County*⁶ derives its comprehensive title from a quotation from Richard Hakluyt: "Geography and Chronology are the Sunne and the Moone, the right eye and the left eye of all history." A hardcover, 500-page book, it has no index or even date of publication listed (1986?) but has a detailed table of contents and a bibliography, which promises: "Every attempt to set forth a true record has been made." After recounting information about exploration, Indian people, shifts in sovereignty, and the development of Minnesota statehood, Luehmann works her way up to Murray County on page 105. Space is devoted to Indian-war and captivity stories, although most of the material has been published previously. A few rather nice modern landscape photos by Jill Landers give the reader from outside the county a look at the land. Much of the Murray County information is excerpted from local newspapers, including the brief sketches, township by township, of early settlers and their churches and township organization. We learn about grasshopper plagues, a Ku Klux Klan cross burning in 1924, some sports, county fairs, an 1887 Knights of Labor strike at the Stine Bros. hay press that ended after a week, "amicably settled by arbitration." The material seems to have been organized according to the sources from which it was excerpted. Little interviewing was done, and there are disappointingly few pictures. Near the end of the book is a section on farmer movements. Mrs. Nels P. Radick of Fulda is identified as the first woman agriculture lobbyist sent to Washington, D.C. She was vice-president of a coalition called the United Society of Agriculture. The *Fulda Free Press* reported that in 1922 she told a group of women in New York "that the farm women up in the Northwest have blazed the way

⁵ Published in Marceline, Mo., by the Walsworth Publishing Co., 1983, for the Heron Lake Centennial Book Committee.

⁶ Published in Fulda(?) by the Murray County Board of Commissioners, 500 p.

in cooperating with organized labour' " and concluded "we want to tell you that here are at least 3,000,000 wise farm women out in the West and Northwest, and they are going to try to help our country rapidly to real civilization."

*The Mississippi Headwaters Region: Scenes from the Past,*⁷ a 111-page paperback published by the Beltrami County Historical Society in 1986, is the work of Professor Harold T. Hagg of Bemidji State University, a well-known historian of northern Minnesota. It is a series of 14 very brief sketches on topics ranging from exploration, the fur trade, and logging through settlement, transportation, and agriculture, to ghost towns, politics, and tourism. Each sketch is followed by a brief bibliography. There is a table of contents, no index, and some well-chosen photos. Hagg explained in the preface that he intended to write about topics that would appeal to a general reader. "The approach is broadly chronological but some topics inevitably overlap. Furthermore, a regional narrative cannot be written exclusively in terms of the region. The locality is always part of something larger. Accordingly I have tried to integrate the regional story with the outside forces which shaped it." Unlike the other publications discussed here, it is a narrative, and the text is lively and well edited. Hagg is forthright about his analysis, noting, for example, that despite the very mixed legacy of logging in the area, its boom times are romantically

regarded by local people, even former lumberjacks. The sections on the farming frontier of the 1890s and 1910s and on ghost towns were particularly interesting. The photo of the 10 men of the Park Rapids Commercial Club at the Mississippi headwaters in 1916 (only one of whom had the good sense and lack of pomposity to remove his shoes and socks and roll up his pant legs) is an upbeat ending note.

These brief comments on recent local history publications highlight topics and perspectives of particular interest in my present research work. Professional historians researching other subject areas will probably find their interests discussed in local histories as well. And local historians have much to gain from reading each others' work, as sources of ideas for their own projects. Michael Lesy, a photographic historian, once observed about the effects of looking closely at hundreds and hundreds of photographs that after a while the mind begins creating patterns from such great variety. The same is true of local historical publications, although that may be the topic for another essay. A phrase from another context, however, has stuck in my mind: a sense of recurring uniqueness. That is at least part of what insider local histories contribute to the historical literature.

⁷ Available from Beltrami County Historical Society, 300 Bemidji Ave., P.O. Box 683, Bemidji 56601.



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