

HISTORY IS WHERE YOU FIND IT

By Charlton W. Tebeau

POVERTY OF MIND AND IMAGINATION ARISE FIRST FROM A TOO LIMITED DEFINITION OF HISTORY

A professional historian who had written several books on Florida subjects lamented, "The well has run dry. There are no more subjects." A college student curious about a subject in local history went to the card catalogue in the library, found nothing under that title, concluded further search would be futile and abandoned it. A teacher searching frantically for class paper topics for which materials were available drew almost a complete blank. There simply was not anything to be suggested or assigned. A college graduate, perhaps the holder of a graduate degree, accustomed to great archival and library resources, but deprived of them when he leaves the university, finds the wellspring of historical curiosity and creativeness drying up for lack of sustenance.

None of this need be true. Another student, teacher, researcher, scholar, author, or ordinary but inquiring citizen finding himself in a new situation begins to exploit whatever is there. The newcomer is always at an advantage over the long-time resident to whom the community large or small is a familiar story. The recent arrival is curious about what he sees and hears and he begins to ask questions. Soon there is a story whether or not it ever is written; the potential for history is there.

Poverty of mind and imagination arise first from a too limited definition of history which excludes anything not considered significant, not documented in traditional references. Others may never think of history as anything outside books and documents assigned in classes as textbooks or library references. Contrast that with James Harvey Robinson's definition of history as everything man has ever said, thought, or done. He did not require that the person, the word, or the act be important or have any measurable effect on the course of human history.

This poverty also arises from lack of curiosity about people and their doings. There is rather general agreement among the critics of modern historical writing that people have disappeared from it, that vaguely defined but powerful econ-



BROWARD COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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omic and social forces or determinants beyond the control of the individual account for all human behavior, make up the subject matter of history. I think that I am first of all interested in people and that this interest finds an outlet in history, particularly in local history. History is more than information. It is the meaningful story of people in action.

History Written Backward

It may very well be true that history has been written backward in most instances. The general history has been written first. The earliest effort at state history is likely to read much like the national history with the rest of the country left out. Only as more local studies are made can meaningful state history be written. The same may be said of the regional history. The first textbook history of the south, by W. B. Hesseltine (*A History of the South*, New York, 1936), differed little from the history of the nation except that other regions were left out of it. Subsequently, when more research had been done at the local and state level, Hesseltine, with co-author David K. Smiley, brought out new and improved editions in 1943 and 1960. The same development may be observed in the successive editions of Francis Butler Simkins, *History of the South*, (New York, 1947, 1953, and 1963).

The attractiveness and value of the *Rivers of America* and the *Lakes of America* series lies in local color and human interest. Alfred Jackson and Kathryn Abbey Hanna did an excellent book in the Lakes series on *Lake Okeechobee, Wellspring of the Everglades*. Lawrence E. Will of Belle Glade had lived and worked on and around Lake Okeechobee for a half century. He had collected notes and photographs on all stages of development since the first efforts to reclaim Everglades land there. What should he do with it? What could he do with it? When I suggested that he write a history of Lake Okeechobee and the surrounding area, he replied that the Hannas had already written the book. I urged that he write the book behind the book they had written. He started out to write an article on the 1928 hurricane that grew into a small book. *A Cracker History of Lake Okeechobee* and two smaller volumes followed. At seventy-three he is not running out of subjects and material, he is running out of time. He has moved out on the prairie to do a book on the open range cattle industry.

This poverty arises too from failure to recognize the sources of history when one sees them. They need not be in the form of documents with a government imprint on them, nor books with a reputable publishers' imprint. There are archaeological, literary, photographic, and oral sources around in overwhelming abundance.

A local case in point: we have only begun to learn about the aboriginal Indians in South Florida who left no written record. Nor do we have adequate accounts of their lives by discoverers and early visitors. Yet we have a better knowledge of their life than we do of that of early white settlers. Archaeologists and anthropologists learn it from the artifacts they left behind in kitchen middens, ceremonial mounds, burial mounds, and refuse heaps of any kind. These Indians lived an almost completely self-sufficient life in isolation from all other people. Nature was bountiful in some things and stingy in others. Of food there was plenty. They could live the year around without planting anything or migrating with seasonal changes. On the other hand there was no metal or hard stone. Hence they used bones, shells, and vegetable fibers for buildings, tools, weapons, and ornaments. Investigations, collections, and interpretations are only now being made. These subjects can be studied at only a few of our colleges and universities. There is a wealth of material at our doorstep, particularly in the Everglades National Park.

It is too easy to assume that there are not literary records of frontier life. The first settlers are not likely to write much and much of that little will be lost. Yet there are surprising exceptions. I did a small book on one of the Ten Thousand Islands that has been inhabited since the middle of the last century. Charles G. McKenny, a better than usually educated man for such a venture, moved there and wrote a weekly column for the *Fort Myers Press* with some regularity until his death in 1926. Adolphus Santini came to the island at about the same time and kept a diary with daily entries until he moved away in 1899. Each day he reported on the wind, direction and velocity, and the weather, important items to farmers and operators of sail boats. The material is tediously repetitious, but few communities in the United States have their complete history so well documented. To round out the story, Charles S. Smallwood, who came to the island in 1906, later wrote a narrative account of his experiences there. The real point of this story for us is that people, thinking only of conventional sources in the usual places for them, might easily have missed these, and they might more easily have been lost and never come to anybody's attention.

Forgotten Sources

Other documentary sources are more obvious, but sometimes forgotten. Abstracts of title often provide important clues as to dates of settlement as well as to names of settlers. Surveyors' field notes are sometimes more than descriptions of

metes and bounds. They may describe the soil, timber, wildlife, or other natural features, or mention an abandoned clearing or homesite. The minutes of school boards and county commissioners frequently tell us things about the social life of the community. In the 1880's, the school board of Lee County, Florida, charged a teacher with working in his garden on Sunday. His defense was not the assertion of his right to do so, but a denial that he had been weeding the tomatoes. He was only walking through the garden, but promised, thereafter, to refrain from even the appearance of such deadly evil. Deeds, wills, baptismal, marriage, birth and death records, and tombstone inscriptions all provide the bits and pieces that make up local history.

Photographs, possible only in the last century, have great value. They tell a story often better than words. They are an open sesame almost anywhere when a researcher is seeking interviews. It is not from the pioneer settlers on the lower west coast of the Florida peninsula that one gets them, but from visiting yachtsmen, hunters, and fishermen who undoubtedly gave the subjects copies which they have since lost. The great tragedy is that too often the photographs are not dated and subjects not identified.

Various well-endowed, oral history projects are another measure of what may be done in the collection of sources. There is nothing new about this, but techniques such as electronic recorders make it much easier. A century ago Hubert Howe Bancroft sent interviewers out to gather written and oral records of pioneer settlers in the Rocky Mountains and Pacific Coast states while first settlers were still there. He thereby saved a priceless record for the Bancroft Library at the University of California. Interviewing is no simple task. I am frequently asked why we do not send new graduate students out to interview pioneers. To begin with, an interviewer must know almost as much about the subject as does his informant. He must know what questions to ask, how to evaluate what he hears, and when to follow up leads. No questionnaire has ever been devised that will cover all possibilities that may arise.

There is a vast amount of folklore and sheer fantasy in what one hears, and memory is not reliable. I have concluded that all fishing and hunting guides, like the conductors of tours, come to believe the stories they tell. They probably develop this skill to entertain clients when the weather is bad, fish don't bite, and game cannot be found. The priceless value of the interview lies in the leads which can be followed and in the insights into information gathered from other sources.

I submit that local history is the best laboratory in which to learn the historians' craft. It can be done at any grade level. It actually involves a greater variety of skills than is likely to be required of the professional historian writing of larger events. I learned this lesson by experience long after I had completed my formal education in historical method in graduate school. When I started the study of Collier County, the second largest in area in the state, it had less than five thousand inhabitants. I wondered what I would write about to make a book-length story. I felt compelled to delve into Indian background, which produced four of the most valuable chapters in the book. Study of Indians forcibly brought to my attention the intimate relation between them and the natural environment. So, working backward, I found the starting point in the knowledge of the physical features and the human uses of the natural resources.

In terms of skills this meant geology, geography, and biology. The next involvement was in archaeology and anthropology, the story of primitive man learned through the artifacts he left. Finally, since several language groups were involved in the white man's discovery, exploration, and settlement, it became desirable to know French and Spanish sources. Because place names are frequently a garbling of two or more languages, the study of their origins is a fascinating subject. If we knew the true origin of all place names the extent and sureness of our knowledge would be vastly increased. It might reveal such gems as Green River Swamp named for a pile of Green River Bourbon bottles left by a club which had a hunting camp on the edge of the swamp.

Many Needed

The organization of the American Association for State and Local History and its activities, and the growing number of local and county historical societies and museums engaged in the collection, preservation and use of these scattered and too often overlooked materials, attest to the growing importance of local history and its sources. This new interest in local history may arise from an increasingly mobile and uprooted people searching for identity in the grass roots of their adopted communities.

The moral for us is obvious. Scarcely any record of human activity, whatever its form and condition, may be rejected or discarded. It will have value for some questioning student at some time.