HISTORIANS ARE EVERYWHERE

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Two years ago one of my Miami colleagues handed me a cartoon from the comic strip "Blondie" which had appeared in that morning's Cincinnati Enquirer. One of his students had just given it to him. The cartoon showed Dagwood and his young son walking down the street, the son commenting, "My first history test is today, and I can't remember when the Battle of Hastings was." Dagwood starts to answer, "Let's see, it was...." At that point a rubbish truck rumbles by and the rubbishman calls out, "It was 1066." To this Dagwood muses, "Historians are everywhere."

The student who brought that cartoon strip in to show his professor did so to evoke some good office laughter, but after the laughter was over he asked in all seriousness, "Is history really a profession? Do most people see it as anything more than just trivia questions? Are there really any good jobs in history still out there? Or, is the cartoonist, through the rubbishman, trying to tell me something?"

I made a xerox copy of that cartoon. I still have it. For, you see, there is a lot more to Dagwood's observation than meets the eye -- or the funnybone.

It is true that for some time professional positions in history have been relatively scarce and that we have had an over-supply of college graduates prepared to fill them. Though that time appears, happily, to be coming to an end, we have had enough relatively recent examples of unemployed or underemployed persons with baccalaureate and even graduate degrees in history that Dagwood's laconic reference to the rubbishman that "historians are everywhere" has more than a little ring of truth to it.

But let's take another look at that same observation. While only a comparative few of us make our living as professional historians, all of us, and I mean all of us, need to know our history, to be informed by it, to learn from it. Alone among all the species of life on the planet earth, and quite possibly the universe, we humans are born into a state of history. Human infants born today, through family, school, church, and community, can have transmitted to them in the years ahead the accumulated knowledge and understanding of the human condition and experience through the centuries. In turn, they can add to this knowledge and understanding before their time on earth comes to an end and their places are taken by others. In other words, none of us has to reinvent the wheel; we can begin life where preceding generations have left off, and go from there.

Because humans are born into a state of history, it is important for everyone to be exposed again and again to history in all its many facets, the who, how, why, what and where of human experience. In that sense, Dagwood's observation takes on a quite different-than-intended meaning. Whether professionals or laity, "Historians should be everywhere!"
But what is the state of history at the present time? I wish I could say that it has never been healthier, but you and I know otherwise.

In 1985, the United States Congress instructed the National Endowments for both the Arts and Humanities to study the state of humanities and arts education in the nation's schools and report on its findings. At that time particular urgency was being expressed repeatedly concerning the state of education in the nation's schools in mathematics and the sciences, but history and literature were seldom part of the discussion.

The study (summarized in the NEH 1988 report, American Memory: The Humanities in the Nation's Public Schools) revealed that our schools, which had long been relied on "to transmit knowledge of the past to upcoming generations," appeared instead to be "about a different task." Rather than preserving the past, they appeared to be consciously disregarding it, sometimes in the name of 'progress,' advancing instead "the idea that today has little to learn from yesterday." The study also revealed that in many schools the culprit was "process -- the belief that we can teach students how to understand the world in which they live without conveying to them the events and ideas that brought it into existence."

To be sure, among some teachers the idea still persisted that responsible teaching involved the transmission of culture from one generation to the next. But among others there was a sense that history was only an irrelevant record of what had happened in the past, not a way of finding paths into the present and future.

Predictably some shocking results attended nationwide surveys and questionnaires completed by thousands of public school students. In one survey, 45 percent thought that Karl Marx's phrase "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" was part of the United States Constitution. In another, more than two-thirds of the nation's seventeen-year-olds who responded were unable to locate the Civil War within the correct half-century. More than two-thirds could not identify the Reformation or the Magna Carta. Many did not know that George Washington had led American forces in the Revolutionary War; that there had been a World War I; that Spanish, not Latin, is the principal language of Latin America. By "vast majorities, students demonstrated unfamiliarity with writers whose works are regarded as classics: Dante, Chaucer, Dostoevsky, Austen, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, Cather."

Painfully evident was the fact that many of the nation's schools had all but swept history and literature into oblivion, preferring to deal instead with current events, "modern problems," and the latest in television programming.

And what were the specific recommendations made to the Congress at the close of the report?

1. More rather than less time should be devoted to the study of history,
literature, and foreign languages. Indeed, the report recommended that "both history and enduring works of literature should be a part of every school year and a part of every student's academic life."

2. Textbooks should be more substantive. "History textbooks should present the events of the past so that their significance is clear....Textbooks should inform students about ideas and their consequences; about the effect of human personality; about what is possible for men and women to accomplish. In literature, history, and foreign language classes, original works and original documents should be central to classroom instruction."

3. Teachers should be given opportunities to become more knowledgeable about the subjects they teach. "Higher education liberal arts faculties must recognize their responsibility for the humanities education of future teachers. Further, these faculties must play a greater role in the continuing education of teachers."

Now, what does this evident national malaise in the humanities have to do with why we are gathered here at the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio, for a Western Reserve Studies Symposium? My thesis simply is this: one of the very best ways to turn students on to history and the humanities in national and international contexts is through the medium of local, state, and regional history. History such as this is history in the least common denominator. It is history to which most students can readily relate. It is history they can reach out to, stand on, touch, feel, smell. It is the history of the very area they call home, of the people they know as friends and neighbors. In and of itself, local history has little meaning. But illustrative of history in broader context it can have great meaning. It is "flesh and blood" history, not abstract, remote impersonal history. It can be "history come alive," not history as dreary recital of unfamiliar names and dates as it has so often been presented in so many of our classrooms.

Some years ago the New York City School System conducted a survey among recent graduates to determine which courses taken in their schools had had the most meaning since graduation and which had had the least. Irony of ironies, when the results were in the same subject headed both lists. You've guessed it — history! But how could that be? Analysis of the results showed two determinants above all the rest. The first was the quality of teaching, the quality of presentation of the material, which varied dramatically from school to school, and within schools from teacher to teacher. The second, significantly, was the sense of relevance present in some classrooms but not in others, relevance through the use of pertinent illustrative material drawn from the local area, covering epochs of human experience from the remote prehistoric past all the way to the present. In other words, it had been the infusion of local and regional material into courses in some schools in New York City which had made history classes in those schools meaningful and exciting and, yes, (and here comes that "r" word frowned on by so many teachers) relevant.
That was New York, some will say, but what about Ohio? Don't we require all teachers of history in the schools of this state to have taken courses in local, regional, and state history in the colleges which prepared them? And, don't we require Ohio history of all our students? Unfortunately, the answer to both questions is no.

In the year 1922, the year I was born right here in Cleveland, the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly, in announcing the publication of a new school book, the History and Geography of Ohio by William M. Gregory and William B. Guitteau, editorialized: "It is to be regretted that in the educational system of our State there is no legal mandate to teach Ohio history in its public schools." Sixty-seven years later there is still no legal mandate to teach Ohio history in our public schools. But, wait a minute, some will say, didn't the Ohio General Assembly mandate the teaching of Ohio history in Ohio schools in 1954? Well, many of us thought that had happened, and since that year, most junior high schools around the state have been teaching a one-semester course in Ohio history.

However, in 1983 the requirement to teach Ohio history in Ohio schools as the cornerstone of a curriculum in Ohio studies was dropped. No longer was it necessary for Ohio students to learn about their Ohio heritage. Now it would be possible to spend the entire semester talking about current events or whatever else struck the teacher's fancy as long as it had something to do with Ohio. (I literally had one teacher of the "new" Ohio studies curriculum explain to me recently that the work of the entire semester in her class was going to center on the most recent Ohio gubernatorial election!) In explaining this change, the State Board of Education issued this rationale: "Traditionally, the study of Ohio has been approached from a historical perspective which all too often consists of the same sequence of events that most students experience at least three times in the American history surveys scheduled at various grade levels in the K-12 social studies program. While instruction in Ohio history has attempted to focus on the special contributions of Ohioans to our national heritage, students in general, have not been able to perceive any significant differences between this fourth experience with history and the other three." Among possible new directions the new Ohio studies curriculum might take, suggested the State Board of Education, might be the identification of "several global problems, e.g., energy and natural resources, and examine how these impact on Ohio and how Ohio is responding to them."

With the mandate to teach Ohio history in Ohio schools cast into the discard, Ohio's colleges and universities no longer saw the need to continue to require prospective social studies teachers to take courses in Ohio history. Accordingly, a number of schools stopped teaching Ohio history. The results were predictable. Distressed by reports of the abandonment of Ohio history in some schools, in 1987, the very year we celebrated the bicentennials of both the Northwest Ordinance and the United States Constitution, the Board of Trustees of the Ohio Historical Society authorized a study to determine what was happening to both the teachers and the teaching of Ohio history across the
state. The services of Dr. Marilyn G. Hood of Hood Associates in Columbus were employed to conduct the survey.

From the State Department of Education, Dr. Hood received the names of 1,296 teachers of Ohio studies in the Ohio public schools. From these, 519 were chosen randomly for the survey. Of the 519, 338 teachers (or 60%) from 78 of Ohio's 88 counties completed and returned the survey form to Dr. Hood.

Accepting the caveat that in all likelihood the more responsible teachers were the ones most likely to take the time to complete and return the survey, these were the results as reported to the Board of Trustees of the Ohio Historical Society on May 12, 1989:

1. 94% reported that the course in Ohio studies in their schools was taught in the 7th grade. Most of the rest said it was taught in the 8th grade.

2. 80% commented that it was a one semester course in their schools.

3. 42% of the teachers reported they had stopped their formal collegiate work at the baccalaureate degree; 33% had earned the masters degree; 24% had taken work beyond the masters.

4. 58% of them were certified to teach secondary education; 17%, elementary; and 9% held dual certification.

5. Though they were teaching the course on Ohio, only 8% of them had membership in the Ohio Historical Society and only 13% belonged to one or more of the 700 local historical societies in the state of Ohio. Expressed another way, 92% of the teachers in the Ohio studies curriculum did not belong to the principal historical society of the state and 87% of them did not even belong to their own local historical societies!

6. Questioned about field trips to key historical sites, 43% reported they never took their classes on them, the most frequent explanation being that there were no school funds to pay for them. As for their own individual travel, 70% of the teachers in the Ohio studies curriculum reported that they personally had never visited the Ohio Historical Center in Columbus; 66% had never visited even one of the Society's other 58 historical sites and museums about the state; and 62% reported that they had never visited any of the sites of local historical societies and museums, either, for that matter.

7. Asked if they had ever attended or collaborated in any way in programming with local historical societies and museums, 72% of these teachers in the Ohio studies curriculum reported they had not.

8. Finally, when questioned about the relative importance of selected subjects within the new Ohio studies curriculum, 61% still ranked Ohio history first; 6% ranked local history first; while the rest divided their answers among a variety of other subjects.
I must confess that when I first read the results of the survey of what the professional teachers of the courses on Ohio in the Ohio public schools were doing, and thinking, and planning concerning those courses and their students, I felt depressed and frustrated. And then I got mad! But, as my father, who taught history, government and economics for 49 years in the public schools of this state, used to say, there is no point in getting frustrated or mad unless you can do something and are willing to do something to change the situation.

And that is why I am here this afternoon, as your keynote speaker for this year's Western Reserve Studies Symposium. I am here because I believe, as humans born into a state of history, it is necessary for every man, woman, and child of us to know, to understand, and to appreciate the foundation, the heritage which has shaped and given direction to our lives. At the same time we must understand that we have an obligation, individually and collectively, to add to that heritage, and, as necessary, to provide new direction for it, not only for ourselves but for those who will follow. I am here because I believe that one of the very best ways to understand and appreciate our heritage is through an understanding and appreciation of it on the local, regional, and state levels. For many of our youth, history can begin to be comprehensible when considered in specific application to the local scene before it can begin to be comprehensible on more distant and abstract national and world levels. And when it is comprehensible it can be exciting. It can turn students on, not off. Rather than one more year of the same dreary recital of names and dates, as apparently viewed by the State Department of Education, it can be the catalyst that breathes life into those names, and meaning and relationship into those dates. Instead of dropping the requirement for the teaching of Ohio history in Ohio schools, the State Department hopefully may yet be able to see the course as potentially invigorating and energizing the rest of the social studies curriculum, instead of being a lackluster fourth-year paraphrase of three other years of American history in elementary, junior, and senior high schools.

We ought to be ashamed that we have done so little to professionalize the teaching of local, regional, and state history. We ought to be ashamed that the overwhelming majority of those who teach it have no interest in belonging to or attending the meetings of our state and local historical societies. We ought to be ashamed of our silence when again and again the ones assigned to teach the Ohio history course in our schools have no professional preparation to teach it. Would we assign the teaching of French to one who had never had a course in French? Would we assign the teaching of chemistry to one who knew no chemistry? The teaching of mathematics to one who knew no math? Should we accept the teaching of any course by anyone without background, or interest, in it? Yet somehow, when it comes to the Ohio course, there have been and still are those who would argue that it can be taught by the gym teacher, the home economics teacher, or the football coach.

We are here today because we believe in the importance of the heritage of the Western Reserve to assure the better understanding of the heritage of our state and nation. And the heritage of the Western Reserve is rich, exciting,
vibrant. Growing up in Cleveland in the Western Reserve, I truly believed it to be "the best location in the nation." I learned to swim and fish in the Cuyahoga River. How upset I was, even though I no longer lived in Cleveland in later years but rather in the opposite corner of the state, when I began to hear references to Cleveland as "the mistake on the lake" and to the Cuyahoga River as the "river that burns."

You don't have to travel out of the Western Reserve to encounter the prehistoric past. I still have spear points found on my grandfather's farm in Ashtabula County when I was only five. It was not until long years later as I was growing up that I first heard relic collectors refer to those flint spears as a diagnostic type called "Ashtabula points" of the Archaic period of our aboriginal past. Those spear points started me on a life-long love affair with archaeology.

You don't have to travel out of the Western Reserve to encounter present-day challenges and opportunities relative to race and gender, or relative to what some are calling the post-post-industrial age here in America and the world. As an historian still in love with history I see all kinds of opportunities to develop better understanding of how we got from the distant past through all manner of intermediate eras to where we are today.

I appreciate that for some of our colleagues a program in Western Reserve Studies may not seem as glamorous or as consequential (in their eyes) as what they might style the really big programs in Soviet Studies, Far Eastern Studies, Latin American Studies, and American Studies in which some of them are involved. In this regard, I am reminded of the humorous story that went the rounds a decade or so ago that has a husband talking to a neighbor across the backyard fence, with the husband explaining the division of labor in their home. Explains the husband to the neighbor, "My wife handles all the little problems in our family -- the bills, the laundry, the children, our home -- while I take on the really big ones -- the Cold War, space exploration, the United Nations, the national debt."

My point is, the panorama of thousands of years of human experience on the planet earth, from primitive man to the space age, is reflected right here in the microcosm that is the Western Reserve. By first getting our young people turned on to neighborhood history, backyard history, nearby history -- you supply the name that best appeals to you -- we have a better chance of ultimately turning them on to the vastness and complexity of all of human experience. Once turned on, they will have an interest and a curiosity and an understanding of heritage that will be with them the rest of their lives.

I shall close as I began, with that cartoon from the comic strip "Blondie." Think how great it would be if all of us, all of us, whether bankers, or journalists, or rubbishmen, were so familiar with history that we all really would know and appreciate our roots, our heritage, where we came from and where we are going. That's really why we are here today, to take a step in that direction. That's what this symposium is all about. That's why Dagwood may someday be right. Historians, those with an understanding and appreciation of the past, whether professionals or laity, just may someday be everywhere!