

Local History: A Brief Historical Overview and Issues Central to its Practice

by

Michael J. Eula, Ph.D.
Genesee County Historian

Introduction

It is only since the 1970s that local history has become evident in American academic life to any great extent. It began with case studies of Puritanism in New England and social mobility in industrial cities. The concern about life at the local level, and the attendant concerns about the changing role of local communities within wider American life, is one which, of course, historians outside of academia have long been concerned about before the 1970s. Genesee County, like America at large, has long had a local history tradition, which our historians here today are proud heirs to.

This process of preserving local history is one that really became discernible in the nineteenth century throughout Genesee County and beyond. Here in Genesee County we are familiar with the work of such historians as Safford E. North and his 1899 publication entitled *A Descriptive and Biographical Record of Genesee County New York*, or O. Turner's *Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase of Western New York* (1850). In Turner's account there is an acknowledgment that "the local historian . . . finds at the threshold of the task he enters upon, difficulties and embarrassments." The complexities spoken of by Turner usher us into some of the challenges faced early on by scholars. Historians such as North and Turner were undertaking the recreation of past community life. On the one hand, there is the necessity of simply talking about what happened. But what appears to be an objective chronicle of the past can disintegrate into a timeline devoid of meaning or an uncritical, boosterish taking of one across the border from history to a tale serving to portray a community as having no significance except for itself.

How have local historians addressed such concerns in their work? And most importantly, how have those approaches shed light on what it is that local historians aspire to do? How can we best reach our audience while still maintaining the integrity of the historian's craft?

The History of Local History

Nineteenth and early twentieth century local histories often presented communities as harmonious. Not only were these unquestionably stable societies, they were also settlements moving in the direction of progress. Hence there are accounts of the sufferings and accomplishments of early settlers who dispossess Native Americans; indigenous peoples who come across as quaint but anachronistic. There is a steady stream of noteworthy governmental and political events, which typically include the community's contributions to such national developments as wars. For example, there is the description of Genesee County troops in the War of 1812 by North, when he focuses upon the last year of the war, when those soldiers

. . . won undying fame by reason of their high patriotism, their coolness and bravery, their splendid obedience to the commands of their officers and their general behavior during the most critical periods of the contests in which they took part.

These early local histories were also accounts of the main social, cultural, and economic trends in evidence. The lives of prominent citizens were also featured. While providing valuable information, these histories nonetheless shed little light on unique qualities in those localities or what these qualities meant to the development of wider America. For the most part, these local histories – especially before the last quarter of the 1800s – tended to be written by the local elites. In other words, they usually were the product of professionals whose occupations afforded them the time – and the resources – to plunge into the writing of history. In this period, they were almost exclusively men – and they were driven by a common objective to write well about their hometowns. Who

were these professionals? They tended to be editors, physicians, lawyers, ministers, or newspaper publishers. One can argue that their interests and their attitudes influenced much of what was published in local history well into the 1970s. Indeed, their writing style shaped much of the public perception of what local history was.

Such early area historians were, more times than not, local boosters hoping to entice settlers into their communities. Many of these writers depicted their locales in as positive a light as possible. Not surprisingly, a considerable number of these histories were extended tributes to the region's earliest inhabitants. Interestingly, there was a detectable defensive quality in these nineteenth century and early twentieth century histories. It was as if the historian was endeavoring to depict a degree of sophistication serving to undermine the idea that the early settlements were in any way uncivilized. This idea of a cultivated culture was inevitably linked to the notion of progress. The typical nineteenth and early twentieth century historian viewed change as good *unless* it produced societal shifts that were destructive of older values.

And for many of these historians, beliefs having a seemingly timeless quality were best found at home. Not surprisingly, many of the nineteenth and early twentieth century histories presented their respective areas as centers of all that embodied purposeful change and yet as areas exuding unchanging values. A message was being sent to young people – look at the glorious history of your ancestors. Therefore, stay here and continue the wonderful heritage being passed along to you. In an industrializing and urbanizing America offering the promise of opportunity beyond the boundaries of small communities, such a message was crucial if talented and energetic young people were to remain home. Local historians were standing against a tide in American life captured succinctly by Howard Mumford Jones in 1971 in *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915*:

Mobility, which had been a mark of a westering society from the beginning, became an absolute virtue in an industrial democracy wherein

mechanism put a special premium on speed and movement and a special disadvantage on standing still.

Part of the effort to demonstrate to young people that opportunity can be found locally included a sustained effort to promote local heroes. Even a cursory examination of nineteenth and early twentieth century local histories reveal the lengthy presentation of home-grown men of substance. But it would be a mistake to simply see these as a list of local notables. Instead, the deeper significance lies in their essential democratic thrust – even men of humble origins are capable of attaining higher social status. For example, look at the description of Eugene H. Moissinac of Darien Center. In North's account, this successful farmer, an immigrant from France at the age of seven in 1853, attended school in Buffalo until, at the age of twelve,

. . . his mother died, his father having died three years previous, breaking up the family home and turning him upon the world to fight life's battles.

Moissinac then spent the next twenty-one years as a businessman in various coal and lumber enterprises until, at the age of thirty-three he was able to gather

. . . together his worldly wealth, which by hard work and strict economy he had accumulated (in) to a sufficient sum to enable him to buy his present farm, where he has since lived and enjoyed his country life.

North concludes that Moissinac "and his family (emerged as) active members of the Baptist church and are one of the most respected families of the county."

Moissinac is typical of the ordinary people starting life with few advantages but achieving heroic status because of their persistence and insistence upon remaining in the community, which rewards them for their hard work and upstanding moral character. Their success was portrayed as a beacon of light

inducing people to both stay at home and, for those contemplating emigration into the community, to do just that.

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century local histories one can also detect the classical learning of many local historians. Like the ancient historians, local historians through the early twentieth century worked to reconstruct a past both objective and consistently bound to a pursuit of truth. But to understand local histories as utterly dispassionate factual narratives is to misunderstand them. Like the ancients, they peppered their accounts with philosophical ruminations about the meaning of what was being described. Long before it became fashionable to do so, Turner pondered the significance of Columbus in his *Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase of Western New York* when he confronted the reader with this point:

We say that Columbus discovered a *new* world.
Why not that he helped to make two *old* ones
acquainted with each other?

The theoretical sophistication of many local histories became even more apparent to the interested public when local history received the encouragement of the President of the United States. As part of the nation's 1876 Centennial celebration, Ulysses S. Grant spoke of the worth of local histories. Grant encouraged even more Americans to write about their community's history. The Centennial had the effect of producing a virtual eruption of local historical scholarship. The Centennial combined with a general shift in American thought through the early twentieth century, when the study of history increasingly replaced the older emphasis upon the classics as the primary way to learn about oneself.

But it should also be remembered that an America moving into the twentieth century was an America displaying massive upheavals as a consequence of industrialization. Unprecedented immigration, class conflict, and the political movements of the left – socialism and anarchism – created a perception, at least for some, of an America that was unraveling. Accordingly, local histories

portrayed a vision of an older America in which consensus reigned supreme. Local histories – and local historical societies – stood as bastions of tradition and ways of life seemingly under assault by the forces of change. Local history was a refuge for those fearful of what the future of the republic might hold.

Of course there were other reasons for the surge of local history by the early twentieth century. One area that should not be overlooked is the passion for rescuing primary materials – and cultural artifacts of all sorts – from the possibility of disappearance. America was aging by the early twentieth century. The passage of time means the possibility of losing materials that cannot be replaced. Local historians were at the forefront of saving for posterity materials that otherwise may have been lost. Their efforts were not of course restricted to inanimate objects. Oral history also became another commonly used tool, and older people by the score were interviewed and shared for future generations what they recalled about their communities.

By the middle of the twentieth century the earlier generation of male professionals constituting the bulk of local historians began to yield to groups of people not previously represented in the ranks of local historians. This widening niche was helped along by the growing role of commercial publishers who were acknowledging a market for local history. More market opportunities meant a need for more writers, and in 1883 such groups as the Association of Collegiate Alumnae added the writing of local history to such recommended fields for women as elementary school teaching. This growth of local history was also pushed along by newspapers which, by the 1930s, utilized local history as a venue for the dissemination of material appealing to a wide readership. Be it the local historians of the pre-1870s period, or their female colleagues later on, generations of local historians continued – as they do to this day – to face issues germane to the writing of community-based narratives.

Issues Central to the Practice of Local History

It seems to me that there are several issues central to the work reality of any local historian. The first and maybe most obvious issue is the challenge of research itself. Secondly, and maybe just as evident, is the challenge of writing

local history. Writing local history many times translates into depicting that history in the mass media, be it a newspaper, or a pamphlet, or even via the radio. Finally, there are the questions raised about the local historian. If one were to reduce the complexities of the historian's craft to a job description, what kind of person would one look for – and how would those traits have an impact on how the historian functions? With all of this in mind, let us turn initially to the question of historical research.

Maybe the most daunting task faced by the historian is the realization that the past has a multitude of clues. As if this was not intimidating enough, there is the question of interpretation. In the most general sense, interpretation means two things. On the one hand, as no historian can take *everything* into account, there is the need to use theory, or the asking of a significant question. Putting this question to the materials enables one to sift through the evidence, deciding what should, and should not be, included in one's account. The absence of a theoretical starting point leaves the scholar adrift in a sea of facts that quickly become overwhelming. But one could ask if the posing of a significant question means that the historian abandons all pretense of objectivity. For many historians, maybe the most objective one could be is to be open in the *acknowledgment* of what question is asked. For example, if one believes that family life reveals much of what there is to know about a community's history, then one will organize the research effort around sources that illuminate family life – materials such as diaries, high school or college yearbooks, scrapbooks, baby books, photo albums, letters, boxes of clippings, family Bibles, etc. But of course the effort does not stop here. An interpretation guided by the premise that family life is central to a community's history also requires a realization regarding *how* those sources can be understood. Crucial here is knowing how to generalize. In other words, how can one depict a reality that is understandable while avoiding oversimplifications that create a false appearance? It is not possible to offer a solution to this problem, except to say this: the historian needs to immerse oneself in the materials and then begin to write. Reading one's writing with a critical eye usually serves to shed light on what is most likely not plausible. It is also helpful to ask

others to read what you have written, in an effort to detect statements that cannot be supported by the evidence.

This brings us to my second point. How should the historian proceed during the actual writing phase? Again, let us use the example of a historian focusing on the role played by family life in a community's history. One should initially remember that many of the nineteenth century local histories are not the best models of historical writing. A laundry list of events is not really history in the fullest sense of that concept – the historian needs to reflect on the meaning of what is presented. In this case, the examination of the materials of a family's history means asking questions of that material. To do this effectively organization is central – and one sound way of organizing is to begin with a clear, concise, and yet flexible, outline. Staying with the family history model, one can start with an exploration of paternal and maternal lines, and of course would be adjusted to take into account early deaths, divorces, remarriages, etc. The point is to have a roadmap to make manageable what could quickly become unmanageable due to a potentially limitless array of sources.

As one writes one searches for clues which might make the family's history unique – or, in other ways, typical and thus representative of broader community and even national patterns. Illustrations and photographs could serve to deepen one's comprehension of what is being analyzed. In this instance, a focus on the family in a local history has the possibility of revealing broader social, economic, political, cultural, and intellectual trends evident in American life at that moment.

Writing local history could mean writing a book or an article. But it could also mean writing an historical account designed to appear in a newspaper or even shared verbally on the local radio station. Regardless of the form of communication – and I have only mentioned a handful here – the local historian, unlike an academic one, typically researches and communicates about a community history in an area they reside in. There are benefits to this – sources are close at hand and the area's terrain – literally and otherwise – is one which the local historian is very knowledgeable about. This means easier access to evidence, as the local historian tends to know where to look. The local historian

tends to be known and hence enjoys a trust which other scholars do not always have. The community typically has high expectations of its local historian, which translates into a responsibility on the part of that historian to be as sensitive as possible to local attitudes on a multitude of issues. That sensitivity amounts to a reasonable expectation that the local historian consistently and without hesitation share what he or she knows of the local past.

It takes a special kind of person to be a local historian. If one had to write a job description for such a person, it would certainly include the following. A good local historian is by definition an intellectual. "Intellectual" in this sense means someone passionate about ideas. It is someone who is intensely interested in how the world works. Accordingly, a local historian is an avid reader. Reading about local history is of course assumed. But a local historian should also read widely in the pursuit of general knowledge, historical and otherwise. The worth of this is obvious – broadening one's knowledge means the evolution of fresh perspectives that are brought to bear on local sources. Reading broadly also exposes the local historian to the methodologies employed by other historians which are of potential use.

Our hypothetical job description also seeks a person interested in the past and how that past plays out today. This is someone whose intellect exudes the excitement of imagination – in other words, trying to put ourselves in the place of the historical actor being portrayed. For instance, a local historian reading a letter from a Civil War soldier who had experienced combat can imagine – and then try to articulate – the fear and anxiety that the soldier felt. This would then extend to the soldier's family receiving the letter. The local historian who can imagine what the writer of such a letter felt – and what the loved one receiving such a letter felt – is an historian capable of depicting a humane and thoughtful sensitivity.

The exercise of such intellectual creativity also demands that the local historian be as open-minded as possible. Evidence that may not support pre-conceived notions should still be a candidate for inclusion. The local historian should try to explain, rather than simply dismiss out-of-hand, evidence of a surprising nature. There should be a continuous effort to balance the local history with its regional

and national context. While some local historical developments are unique others, needless to say, are not. The careful historian strives to achieve the reasonable balance.

Conclusion

Local history is one of the most popular forms of history around the world. In Japan, local historians probe the most intricate details of a community – in Shinjo, historians have organized lists of rice prices for the years 1830 through 1952. The Japanese local historians include scholars whose work is paid for by local officials. Finnish local historians undertake ecological and ethnographic studies as part of their community depictions, while in China it is estimated that an examination of ancient texts reveals that about ten percent of them are local histories. Some of these histories were authored more than two thousand years ago.

Norwegian local historians tend to write chronological narratives in which the prevalent organizing principle is the farm. As much of the nation is rural, and there is so much activity in this area of historical scholarship that Norway features a professional local history journal with wide circulation throughout the country. Great Britain and Canada have long-established local history traditions, where in England this interest also manifests itself in local history adult education courses.

Regardless of the national tradition of local history that one examines, there is a common theme evident in all – including the United States. Local historians, maybe more than other kinds of scholars, must continuously work to achieve just the right balance between broad generalizations and minute details. Working to disseminate historical knowledge to a wide audience with a deep desire to grasp how the community came to be, the local historian serves a vital function in the world of historical research and dissemination. Ultimately, it is the local historian who is at the forefront of satisfying the public's thirst for an awareness of the past serving to illuminate the intricacies of the present – and maybe even the future as well.

