

What Makes Local History Unique?

by

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There is little doubt that many in our society care deeply about the past. Few people need to be convinced that it is important to remember what has happened in years gone by. What is the evidence for this assumption? One can point to the millions of Americans who visit historic sites each year. One can also acknowledge the number of history books and historical novels that Americans read annually. There are of course the numerous Americans who take the time and spend the money to view historically oriented films. The History Channel and other channels with a strong historical emphasis, e.g. the American Heroes Channel, also are suggestive of a population caring very much about how the past shapes our contemporary world.

Maybe the area of history where this passion is most in evidence is in local history. Since assuming the Genesee County Historian's position I have been awestruck by the levels of commitment and devotion that so many in our county display in their quest to discover, understand, and to just know the important and fascinating history that is the story of Genesee County. Out of this pervasive interest there flows a commitment to share with others what has been discovered and explained. It is that zeal to share this historical knowledge that maybe more than anything else reveals the uniqueness of local history.

The motivations prompting someone to undertake local historical research varies greatly. There are people who are interested in the history of the home they reside in, or in buildings found in their town or village. Maybe most commonly are those seeking an awareness of family genealogy. Others have an interest in their church's history, or in the story of a company they have worked for. Regardless of the interest stimulating someone to undertake local historical research, the consequence of desiring to share what has been unearthed with as

wide an audience as possible just might be what distinguishes the practice of local history from other forms of historical work.

One obvious form of communicating the excitement of local historical research is of course the book. Genesee County has been fortunate in having had a number of concise narratives published about the County's past – notable here is the 1985 release of the *History of Genesee County New York, 1890-1892*, edited by Mary McCulley. Drawing upon the expertise of numerous town historians, it is a fact-filled introduction and overview of the County's past that manages to present much detailed narrative in an accessible and coherent format. Along with such books local historians – in sharp contrast with their academic contemporaries – spend much time sharing with the public what they know about local history through the regular publication of articles in newspapers and other forms of locally-produced written materials, e.g. *The Pennysaver*. Such publications go a long way to meeting the neighborhood thirst for local history.

But publications designed to meet the needs of a wider audience than those targeted by academic historians – a clearly defined feature of local history suggestive of its uniqueness – are only one form of communication seen in Genesee County and other locales around New York and indeed wider America. Another method of communicating knowledge about local history is through the museum exhibit. Genesee County is indeed fortunate in having a wide array of museums staffed by very committed members of any of a number of historical societies. These organizations, found throughout our county, perform a great service to the community.

One of the exciting features of local museums is the use of objects from the past to make that past come alive. Instead of relying upon a written word that does not necessarily meet the need of all of those hungry for historical knowledge, the utilization of objects ranging from kitchen devices to farm tools accomplishes the purpose of presenting a past populated by real people leading real lives on a daily basis. For example, a display of something as simple as a tea cup can communicate in very direct ways much about the family using such dinnerware. Let us assume for discussion purposes that an eighteenth century

family used this tea cup. Further, let us assume that this tea cup did not have a handle or even a saucer. What could this tell us as we look at the object? How can the museum staff use this tea cup to tell a story?

To begin with, the absence of a handle – at least in the 1700s – reveals that the cup was most likely manufactured somewhere in Asia. This simple fact reveals the obvious – that this family possessed the resources to purchase imported china. We can add to this picture. An eighteenth century family owning imported china could also have a tea chest. Displaying this chest – rather than simply describing it via the written text – brings the past to life while simultaneously hinting at other realities found on the local level – at least within this eighteenth century family. The chest was probably made of wood that was harvested in the American colonies. This wood was then exported to Great Britain to be worked into a tea chest fitted with metal handles. The completed chest was then sent back to the colonies as a finished product that was subsequently sold. So what starts with a tea chest ends up illustrating the economic dynamic of the British Empire in the eighteenth century. The objects associated with tea drinking are not only interesting in and of themselves, but in addition, they show how the system of mercantilism, or one in which Great Britain sought to attain a surplus of exports over imports in foreign trade, worked. That same family of course was precisely the kind with the potential to undertake rebellion against the British Empire because of the unfairness of British economic policy from the vantage point of the colonies. The objects associated with tea drinking in a museum display consequently contain the potential to illuminate one of the primary causes of the American Revolution.

The interest in history that I alluded to early on in this essay is one that for many people is best satisfied through an exploration of local history. For a considerable number of people history is not merely accounts of famous people and of events that took place in other parts of the world. Instead, it is the story of ordinary people living their lives – going to work, raising families, attending school, getting married, burying loved ones, etc. Local history is particularly well-equipped to shed light on the aspects of life that touch people most directly.

Focusing on local history reminds us that villages, towns, and the county as a whole has a history; one bubbling over with historical information of all kinds with the potential to satisfy the interests of a wide range of people. Naturally, some of the uniqueness of local history lies in the seductive attraction of focusing in on the minutest of details. One can conceivably begin with one's backyard – which means tracing all of the ownerships going back to the original grant. What buildings were once on your backyard? Did soldiers ever march on it? Did indigenous people once hunt there? Was there ever an adjacent road there? And of course, what family memories can be recalled as one looks upon that backyard?

In sum, the uniqueness of local history lies in its capacity to touch someone directly. Because more times than not it is about someone's home – be it one's backyard or the community at large – what is learned through research is a drama that inevitably demands to be communicated. As I have suggested, that communication has the potential to take radically different forms. But regardless of the way the story is conveyed, the excitement of local history – maybe its ultimate uniqueness – lies in its unfolding. One fact; one incident; one local personality leads to yet another fact, another incident, another local personality. Like the peeling of an onion, one layer of the story yields yet another layer, as history keeps peeping out at us from around every corner, from around yet another backyard.