

## INTELLECTUAL RATIONALE FOR “USING LOCAL HISTORY TO HELP TELL AMERICA’S STORY”

Many students have a difficult time relating to the events and historical personas in standard history courses. Theodore Libber (1950) noted a "slavish adherence to the text" (p. 3), while Frances Nesmith (1968) feared that students get an incomplete picture from their text because most human affairs and activities go unrecorded. As Columbia's Hazel Hertzberg observed, "To many students, history and textbooks are often regarded as synonymous (Van Leuvan, 1969). These texts are often homogenized and dull because of pandering to special interests and out of concern for readability formulas (Sewall, 1988).

Since textbooks may make up as much as 90% of the course of study (CEEB, 1986), it is no surprise that student achievement and interest are low. A need for materials to embellish the text and course is manifest.

The use of local history to reinforce macro-level American history topics offers hope to the classroom teacher. Local history "brings home" events (Gerber, 1979, p. 24) and makes instruction realistic (Brown, 1952). "By starting with the nearby world, you counter the notion that history is to be found only in books" (Marty, 1980, p. 471). Many of today's scholars feel that history can best be studied from the ground up (Billington, 1984).

The Bradley Commission's Building a History Curriculum (1988) encourages the study of family and local history and their relation to the larger setting of American development as one of its eight topics for the study of American History.

Professional historians have always advocated the use of primary materials. Using newspaper accounts of local stories which reflect, or even become part of, the national experience introduces students to the historical process. The community can become a history laboratory. As noted in the aforementioned Bradley report (p. 24), "It is hard to imagine not taking advantage of local history, where primary sources can be used to their best effect, and genuine discoveries may be made by students on their own."

### **Student, Teacher and Community Benefits From Local History Programs**

Tryon (1936) advocated teaching local history "to foster pride in one's local community" (pp. 140-141). He felt that "one who is proud of his community is likely to be active in making it a better place to live" (p. 141). Students should view local history courses in a favorable light because they tend to personalize history (Van Leuvan, 1971), bring the faraway near (Wesley, 1942), and make instruction realistic (Brown, 1952). Crozier (1985) too viewed local history instruction as linking students to their communities. Koedel (1980), Pratt and Haley (1973), and Wiggington (1977) were also enthusiastic about the benefits a community derives from implementation of a local history offering. Koedel even referred to the course as "a community service."

Hinton (1980) felt that the community becomes more interested in the schools as "students begin to identify locations of historical significance and talk to people of the community about points of common concern" (p. 14). Local history can even be viewed as a recreational activity. Similarly, Bloxham (1980) advanced community studies as "a life-time hobby" (p. 3).

### **Student and Teacher Nativity**

Several authors have expressed concerns about the effects of a highly mobile population on the utility of local history content (Tryon, 1936; Dabbert, 1966; Pratt & Haley, 1973). Lord also noted the transient problem but came to the conclusion that student's local history helps students "sink roots into the local soil in a hurry." (p. 82). George and Cast (1975) acknowledged the mobility phenomenon, but observed that even non-natives showed considerable interest in local studies. Nesmith (1960) determined that, regardless of nativity, teachers and students learn together and benefit from the local studies program. Lord (1964) felt that teachers with training in historical method can teach local history anywhere.

### **Use of Primary Sources and Teaching Historical Methods**

The historical process is a part of everyone's daily life (Becker, 1932; College Board, 1986). As Fisher (1974) has observed, "The local paper is the diary of the community" (p. 10). Reporters and editors have to synthesize community happenings and

publish what they determine is of interest to the populace. Similarly, individuals replicate the same process, only remembering and using in the decision making process what is important to them (Becker, 1932).

Good local history content offers students training in historical method utilizing primary sources. Few high school students are afforded that opportunity today. The emphasis on utilizing primary sources dates from the training that early American historical professionals incurred in German universities over 100 years ago (Hertzberg, 1985). Their "source study" training has been advocated by virtually all professionals ever since.

The 1977 publishing of a survey text in American history structured around a local community is a good example of how far interest in the benefits of micro level history has come (Conzen, 1980). The American Historical Association's National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History "encourages high-quality community programs of historical research, presentation and publishing" (Weisberger, 1987, p. 31). Since its inception in 1921, the National Council for the Social Studies has been supportive of local history efforts (Hertzberg, 1985). Despite this, local history programs continue to be few in number. Professionals keep advocating local history in some form and community interest is present, but not much local history is being taught. The reasons may be those detected in Thomas Montgomery's 1982 survey of 109 school districts in Southwestern Ohio. Many districts felt that there was not enough time for local history, that there were no materials readily available, and that potential instructors

were not qualified to teach said subject matter. This project offers a real chance to overcome these inherent problems.

### **General Observations on the Value of Local History**

C. L. Lord, whose seminal work in the field of local history did much to bring local history to the attention of the public, felt that there was no American social studies course which "cannot benefit from the use of localized materials for illustration, for investigation and for the achievement of greater understanding and wisdom" (Lord, 1964, p. 16). Lord believed that no student was too sophisticated to benefit from such a program.

Downey observed "The people and events of the past can only be understood when viewed within the larger context in which they existed" (1985, p. 11). Similarly, Hazel Hertzberg said that the history imagination develops "through acquiring for oneself a sense of the concrete circumstances of life--its sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures" (1968, p. 26). Her feeling was that students "need to use all their senses in gaining an understanding and feeling for the past." As Gage (1985) stated, "A small segment of the world is easier to understand than the whole continental landform or a large political division" (p. 7).

Another supporter of local history instruction, Koedel (1980) argued that "local people, local places, and local events have an appealing immediacy about them" even if

they date from a century or two ago (p. 8). Crozier (1985) observed that "Using the experience of the local community to teach history is probably as old as teaching history itself" (p. 4). Continuing this line of reasoning, Weisberger (1979) praised the excitement in the sights and sounds of yesteryear. He felt that there was an identity to be formed "from an awareness of continuity - that it happened here, on this spot, to people like me" (p. 103).

Wesley (1942) recognized that skillful teachers have always known the pedagogical value of firsthand experience. He stated that "the local instance is the reality that the student has studied in the textbook" (p. 502).

Frances Nesmith (1968), whose dissertation on teaching local history in Texas was one of the pioneering works in local history instruction, deduced that if local history resources are available and teachers know how to guide students in their use, history instruction may be both interesting and informative. She used local history to amplify national history because of her belief that "generalization may be understood only to the extent that the learner has knowledge of detail" (p. 22).

Daniel Van Leuvan (1969) proposed using local history instruction to help students understand the processes of inductive and deductive reasoning. He felt that local data personalized history and that local history "can furnish a type of case study, a unique demonstration lesson" (p. 30).

Hinton (1980) has maintained that using local content helps make history "personal and real, not an abstract and distant subject encompassed within the covers of a book" (p. 12). Thomas Montgomery (1982) similarly believes that local history instruction "clearly affords a rich opportunity for teachers of the social studies to become more effective and interesting instructors" (p. 17). Foxfire's Eliot Wiggington, after 22 years with the project, was still convinced that making the surrounding community as much a part of classroom activities as a text is extremely important (Puckett, 1986).

The use of examples and illustrations which help clarify generalizations that otherwise might seem distant and vague is another advantage of local history instruction advocated by Hinton (1980). Polley (1972) also cited teacher and administrative support for implementing his local history program.

Libber (1950) and Polley (1972) both determined community support for their programs before implementation. Thomas Montgomery (1982) went through the same procedure on the regional level.

In summary, the literature tends to be very favorable to implementation of local history programs. "Many studies have emphasized that the study of local history is highly motivational for secondary students" (Feldman, 1981, p. 9). Research did not discover any articles, books, or dissertations offering opposition to local history packages,

“Using Local History To Help Tell America’s Story” seeks to use the manifest potentialities of local content inclusion to make American history a more meaningful experience for the teachers and students of Shelby County, Ohio. Project teachers must be licensed to teach American history at either the middle or high school level and currently teach in that field. This program will significantly increase participant knowledge of American history as well as present research-based methods of classroom content delivery. Ongoing professional growth of all county American history instructors, both formal and informal, will result in an affective change which intrinsically motivates group members to read relevant biographies, be involved in professional associations and attend and present at professional seminars.

#### DESIGN OF THE PROGRAM

Upon approval, “Using Local History To Help Tell America’s Story” partners will meet to finalize content, purchase books for the semi-annual reading circles, select primary sources for the seminars, meet with the external evaluator to schedule base-line data collection, and arrange logistics for all professional development sessions. The project kick off will be a three-day National Council for History Education Colloquium(NCHE), which will introduce participants to NCHE’s Themes and Habits of the Mind...excellent organizers for historical thought. Content for the sessions will feature topics from colonial origins to 1800 and feature Dan Usner, chair of the Vanderbilt history department; Dale Van Eck, history education specialist from Colonial Williamsburg and Laura Wakefield, a National Board Certified middle-school American

history teacher from Florida. The first year continues with a February three-day program which includes an introduction to local American history resource research arranged by The Shelby County Historical Society, followed by a two-day NCHE Colloquium focusing on “Heroes In Early American History” hosted by acclaimed presenter Dennis Denenberg and National History Day expert Jim McNeil, a high school American history teacher from South Carolina.

Year two, the 19<sup>th</sup> century, begins with a two-day Black History Month presentation on slavery, the Underground Rail Road and Emancipation by veteran NCHE board members and authors, Spencer Crew(National Underground Rail Road Freedom Center) and Betty Franks(NCHE Professional Development). The summer NCHE Colloquium features an NCHE team of Jim Percoco, Bill O’Brochta and Will Thomas. Jim is a Virginia-based high school American history teacher who is the author of a best-selling American history methods book, Bill is the chief education specialist for The Virginia Historical Society and Will(an expert on Civil War Websites) directs The Virginia Center for Digital History at The University of Virginia. A one-day research visit to the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus is also planned.

Twentieth century content, our third year focus, begins with an NCHE two-day Colloquium concentrating on oral history hosted by The University of Southern Mississippi’s Chuck Bolton(history chair) and Mary Beth Farrell(director of history student teaching). The July three-day program from NCHE will be presented by Howard Hunter, Louisiana Council for the Humanities Teach of the Year; Fritz Fisher, Co-Director of the history teacher education program at The University of Northern Colorado and a twentieth century specialist; along with Marc Selverstone, Managing Editor of

American President at The University of Virginia. Concluding grant event will be a trip to The Cincinnati Museum Center and National Underground Rail Road Freedom Center to utilize their excellent American history resources.

Local American history resources which are reflective of or contribute to our nation's story will be selected by The Shelby County Historical Society(SCHS) and Edison Community College American History Instructor Jim Oda. They will be incorporated into the larger American story at the planning meetings for NCHE Colloquia. Local primary source and resource kits will be prepared for eventual distribution to all Shelby County teachers of American History, both public and faith-based. Home school practitioners will also be able to benefit from the project by obtaining staff-developed materials from SCHS. Every middle and high school student in Shelby County stands to benefit from this partnership of Sidney City Schools, Shelby County Schools, NCHE, SCHS and the federal government!

#### EXTERNAL EVALUATION DESIGN

Urbana University has agreed to act as external evaluator for this project. Urbana will utilize American historians from her staff to develop instruments which will ascertain both student and teacher pre-program American history knowledge. One local middle-high school will serve as the control group in the experimental design, while all other similar schools will have staff participation in the project and form the experimental group. At the end of each year Urbana will provide quantitative and qualitative data concerning the participating schools, their students and teachers, to both project partners

and The Department of Education. Every attempt will be made to insure the integrity of the control group. At the end of the project the post test will be administered to both groups. It is hoped that the professional development strategies applied here will be successful and transferable to other locales.

#### NARRATIVE BUDGET JUSTIFICATION AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

Sidney City Schools and Shelby County Schools respectfully request a total of \$622,170 to make "Using Local History To Help Tell America's Story" a reality. Sidney City Schools will provide an office with phone, fax and computer capabilities without cost to the project. Of the monies requested, NCHE will provide six separate American history Colloquiums at a total cost of \$156,570. The Shelby County Historical Society(SCHS)(\$45,000), in collaboration with Edison Community College American History Instructor Jim Oda(\$6,000), will determine local primary and secondary sources which reflect content which is reflective of or contributed to the national experience. SCHS will develop resource kits for present and future county teachers, both public and private, who will ensure that this content has longevity beyond the project period.

Eleven of the professional development days will require teachers to be absent from the classroom and \$100/teacher is budgeted for a total of \$54,000(36 teachers x 11days x \$100). This total is reflected in the personnel column. Teachers will receive \$500/year as a training stipend(36 x \$500 x 3=\$54,000).

The budget for project director and assistant salaries is \$75,000 per year(\$50,000- full time for the director and \$25,000- ½ time asst.). Fringe benefits for the two are estimated at \$24,000/year.

## PARTNERS AND MANAGEMENT TEAM

Shelby County Ohio has a population of some 44,000 individuals, many with Appalachian heritage and a large free and reduced lunch student component. Partners in this project include Sidney City Schools, Shelby County Schools, The Shelby County Historical Society, and The National Council for History Education, the number one provider of traditional American history content for these projects. Jim Oda, Edison Community College American history instructor, will act as a consultant and presenter for the project.

Bill Ross, a history educator with 30 years of experience as a middle, high and college teacher will serve as project director and institute a National History Day Program in Shelby County. Bill currently serves as Director of Professional Development Services for NCHE and has published over 20 articles on the teaching of American history. A veteran presenter on American history topics at the state and national levels, Bill holds a doctorate in curriculum and instruction from The University of Southern Mississippi.

