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Suggestions to
Local Historians in Iowa

Iowa State Historical Society

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Suggestions to local historians

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THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
BULLETIN OF INFORMATION No 4 JUNE 1905

SUGGESTIONS

TO

LOCAL HISTORIANS IN IOWA

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STATE OF IOWA



THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA CITY IOWA JULY 1905

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EXPLANATION

These suggestions to local historians are made in response to a demand for some general directions relative to the investigation and study of the materials of local history with a view to their compilation and publication.

Where county or other local historical societies exist, local historians are urged to seek their support and coöperation. Indeed the pamphlet, monograph, or book on local history might with advantage and propriety be published by, or under the auspices of, the local historical society. Briefer papers and reminiscences may be read at the meetings of the local historical society and afterwards published in the newspapers of the county or town.

No historical material should ever be destroyed. All manuscripts, books, pamphlets, papers, etc., should, after the local historian is through with them, be placed in the custody of a public library or an historical society, where they may be used by others. The State Historical Society of Iowa is always pleased to receive such matter.

The following pages, taken from *Bulletin No. 12*, of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, are here reprinted by permission. Only such changes have been introduced in the text as are necessary to make the suggestions applicable to Iowa.

SUGGESTIONS TO LOCAL HISTORIANS IN IOWA

The following suggestions are, in the main, directed to those who are engaged in compiling county histories; but the village, town, city, or district historian can readily adapt them to his special sphere.

SOME GENERAL REQUIREMENTS

Above all things, the historian should keep himself scrupulously free from bias. To tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about the past, should be his religious duty. Particularly must he guard against careless or incorrect statements about the dead, who cannot defend themselves. Let the historian remember, too, that other investigators will, in due time, follow him; and that posterity is sure to weigh biased historical work in the balance and find its writers wanting.

Local history is not isolated; it is a part of State history—indeed, of national and world history. Local matters have to be tested by their relation to State history, and to still larger movements.

The local historian will the better prepare himself for the task if he read what some of the masters of historical research have to suggest as to means and methods. Channing and Hart's *Guide to the Study of American History* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1896; price \$2) contains many useful suggestions, and a bibliography which will guide the reader to more extended discussions of the subject. Small and Vincent's *An Introduction to the Study of Society* (American Book Co., 1894; price \$1.80) is also an admirable manual. In the last named work, there is told (Book II) in brief compass, the story of the development of an anonymous Western community (the reference is to Topeka, Kansas) from the arrival of the first "prairie

schooner" to the final evolution of the settlement into a flourishing city. A reading of this sketch will be instructive to local historians anywhere in the United States, especially in the Middle West and the trans-Mississippi country. In the first two chapters of Vol. I of Hart's *American History told by Contemporaries* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1897, price \$2) there is a discussion of historical sources and their uses, which will be found helpful.

Wherever possible the county history should be illustrated with maps. Those published and sold by the U. S. Geological Survey (apply to the Director thereof, Washington, D. C.) for 5 cents each, are the best; they are on a large scale, and minutely depict the topography of the various districts treated. Unfortunately not much of the surface of this State has been covered in this manner.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

In the first place, there should be a systematic search for information. It is of primary importance that the historian should understand and preserve the distinction between original and secondary sources for historical work.

Original sources include all material—whether written or printed documents, or survivals like mounds, buildings, and relics in general—which have descended from the period which is to be studied.

Secondary sources are historical writings based upon the original sources—for examples in different forms: Salter's *Iowa: The First Free State in the Louisiana Purchase*; Byers' *Iowa in War Times*; and Sabin's *The Making of Iowa*.

It is obvious that original sources, when obtainable, are the safest guides, although they will need sifting and weighing; the historian must take into account the probable opportunity of the author of the original records to know his facts, his liability to prejudice, etc. In the use of secondary sources, still greater caution is necessary, for here we have merely an interpretation of the originals, and all men are liable to err—to misinterpret, or to either consciously or unconsciously understate or exaggerate.

The local historian should, as we have above suggested, remember that in due time others will probably follow in his path and analyze his work, just as he is analyzing the work of his predecessors. If his work is to stand, it must be good work; every assertion made must be susceptible of proof. For this reason he should fortify every statement with a footnote, citing his authority—giving the date and whereabouts of every document from which the fact is gleaned, the volume and page of the book from which he obtained it, or the name of the pioneer who informed him. If he neglects to do this his work stands in danger either of neglect by future historians, or of being discredited as a mass of unsubstantiated statements.

Now let us consider, in some detail, the various sources which will require examination:—

1. *Archæology and Ethnology.*—If there have been discovered within the county any rock-carvings, considerable deposits of stone and copper tools, earth mounds, or evidences of Indian villages and planting-grounds, these should be carefully examined, and the objects specifically described. *This survey ought not to be taken as an excuse for opening any more mounds—none but scientifically-equipped archæologists* (such as those connected with the Iowa Anthropological Association) should be trusted to do this work. For present scientific purposes, a sufficient number of Iowa mounds have probably already been opened. Local historians and historical societies should consider it one of their duties to protect and preserve what mounds there are left, not only as interesting monuments of the past, but for the benefit of scholarly investigators of a later period, with fuller basis for study than is now obtainable. The local historian of to-day will do well to have the existing mounds carefully indicated on the atlas sheets of the U. S. Geological Survey, and listed by range, township, section, etc. In this connection ascertain and cite any notable collections of prehistoric specimens, either in private hands or in museums, within the county. For an example of scientific mound study, see Ward's *Some Iowa Mounds*, published by The State Historical Society of Iowa.

2. *Official Records*.—It is no light task to examine these. The records of the county government (or of the town, the village, or the city), of the courts, the churches, and the schools should of course be studied, and notes taken of all the essential transactions. The records of the State at Des Moines, including the printed statutes and legislative journals, and reports of State officers and bureaus should also be examined to ascertain the relations between the State and the political section (county, town, village, or city) which is to be the subject of the contemplated history. For instance: the creation of the county, with its original boundaries, will be found in some statute; other statutes will describe the boundary changes, if there have been any, and any other legislation specially affecting the county. Even petitions to the legislature, emanating from the county, may have bearing on local affairs. The reports of State officers, commissions or bureaus, may contain important matter of local interest—affecting, for example, the manufactures, fish and game, agriculture, the schools, public libraries, or charitable and penal institutions. In short, the official records, properly utilized, will prove to be a mine of reliable information.

3. *Manuscripts*.—In many localities diaries have been kept by some of the original settlers. These are valuable records, early and eagerly to be sought; for if they were written at the time of the occurrences, they establish dates beyond a question, and in many ways will assist in correcting other people's memories. Sometimes it will be found that early settlers have kept account-books, which will give prices and fix dates of other events. The account books of early storekeepers are valuable, in this connection, and should be sought and examined. Now and then a treasure will be found in some minister's "barrel," in the form of an old anniversary sermon, giving the history of his parish; or of some similar report, in the archives of a local lodge or society. In many an attic are bundles of private letters, which will be found to contain a wealth of historical material when properly used—letters written to the pioneers, in the early days, by other pioneers, or by the stay-at-homes in the

old towns in New England or in "York State." These will call up a flood of memories to the survivors of those times, and contain suggestions to the intelligent historian. Better still would be old letters written by Iowa pioneers to friends in the East, describing conditions in the new settlements; doubtless many of these could still be obtained from eastern garrets, if systematic efforts were made. The field-books of the early surveyors are important; so also, manuscript genealogies and the records so frequently found in family Bibles.

It should be remembered in this connection that The State Historical Society of Iowa is anxious to amass and preserve manuscript records of the various kinds mentioned under this section. Local historians will confer a benefit upon the people of the State at large if they will secure such for our archives, after they have made from them what notes they deem proper. Historical material of this sort should be carefully deposited where it will be of use to all future investigators, and the State is the most appropriate custodian. Citizens holding documents which are of historical importance should remember that so long as these remain in private hands they are liable to suffer from fire, decay, damp, theft, or the neglect of future generations which may care nothing for them; and they are practically inaccessible to the student of history. Every consideration of public policy, and of family pride, points to the importance of placing them in a great public collection, like this, where for all time they will be carefully preserved and utilized.

4. *Newspaper Files.*—Newspapers are an important source of information to the local historian. In their pages are mirrored the daily life of the people. The advertising columns in the early journals must not be neglected; they will often be found to contain more available material than the news and editorial departments. The advertisements of those who cater to the necessities, the amusements, or the vanities of life, unconsciously illustrate with remarkable faithfulness the changing economic and social condition of each decade. The advertisements contained in the public journals of to-

day will, in turn, interest the historian of a half century hence far more than the news items. Files may be sought in the offices of the respective journals or in the garrets of former editors.

5. *Other Printed Matter.*—Obviously, the local historian should familiarize himself with the published work of all previous gleaners in his field, whether in book or in pamphlet form. He should, however, as stated above, bear in mind that this material is a secondary source and needs criticism and possible correction. A local historian, of all persons, must remember that a statement is not necessarily true because it is "in print." He must not neglect, for purposes of incidental reference, such ephemeral material as the membership lists, year-books, and constitutions of societies of every kind; programs of local amusements and celebrations; or the catalogues and memorabilia of the educational or other public and private institutions within his chosen field. He will probably find less of this valuable data than he will wish had been preserved; and this discovery should inspire him with sufficient missionary zeal to induce the local public library authorities—if he be fortunate enough to have such a library in his neighborhood—to resolve hereafter to accumulate, for future local historians, all material of this sort, however apparently trivial. He will be able, from experience to inform the librarian that nothing comes amiss to the historical student.

6. *Interviews with Pioneers.*—The memories of the "oldest inhabitant" are valuable, and should of course be gathered. But it must be recognized that the human memory is the reverse of infallible; time unconsciously distorts the mental vision—incidents are apt to become confused, the relations of one event to another are not always clearly remembered; indeed the perspective, after long lapse of time, is seldom correct. For this reason we must receive with a certain amount of caution the statements of any person who, solely from memory, reports events long after their occurrence. No definite rules can be laid down in this matter, so much depends on the character of the individual interviewed, his education, and his experiences. The

historian must needs have a certain intuition as to the value of this sort of historical evidence, and, whenever possible, test the results by all available records.

SOME OF THE ESSENTIALS OF A LOCAL HISTORY

The local historian having exhausted the possibilities of the above sources of information, has now to arrange his material in logical sequence and succinctly to state the results. It is impossible to prescribe hard-and-fast rules for the treatment of such matters. A few general suggestions may, however, not be deemed out of place.

No county history can be considered complete, unless the following features have received some attention—and the same general treatment may be given to smaller political units, if desired:—

1. *Geography*.—Note briefly (with the use of map or maps) the situation, size, and physical characteristics of the county; in what manner its topography, its soil, and its natural resources (such as mines, forests, and fisheries) have attracted and influenced settlement, and determined its present economic and social conditions.

2. *Antiquities*.—Give some account of the mounds, rock-carvings, copper and stone implements, etc., left in the county by the earlier tribes of people. Follow up the account of the mounds, by what may be ascertained relative to the sites of modern Indian villages and planting-fields, with their relation to the topography of the district (proximity to hills, rivers, lakes, etc.), and to the location of the later white settlements. The customs of the aborigines in the days of the pioneer whites may be described, if new light can be thrown on them. Maps would be valuable additions to the text. See also, in this connection, remarks under Archæology and Ethnology given above.

3. *Pioneer Settlement*.—The settlement of the first whites should be noted and their annals summarized, with a statement of early life, experiences, customs, and sketches of character. It would be well to show on a map, so far as can be ascertained, the original Indian trails, the early highways, first settlements, and homestead sites.

4. *Claim Laws*.—If the early settlers formed associations or organizations regulating the making and holding of claims of land, a full account should be given of these regulations and laws. An effort should be made to find the record-books of any such organizations. A map showing the location of claims would be helpful.

5. *Political Affairs*.—This may include changes in county boundaries; the organization of villages, and their development into cities; the history of the county board; lists of citizens who have represented the county in legislatures or elsewhere; and some account of the rise and progress of political parties within the county.

6. *Industries and Commerce*.—All industries should be carefully treated, laying stress upon that which is predominant, be it agriculture, lumbering, mining, fishing, or manufacturing. The process of industrial evolution within the county may profitably be traced, statistics given, and present conditions and prospects for the future outlined. An account of the growth of commerce and commercial methods will be essential. Closely allied to this is the story of the development of common roads and railways; here, again, use maps.

7. *Religious and Social Progress*.—This department of the history should include the growth of churches, philanthropy, reforms, and civic societies; but be careful not to burden the text with unnecessary details, or fulsome praise.

8. *Education*.—It is desirable to embrace a general historical account of the school system of the county, and of the cities within it; this might be extended, if thought best, to include a sketch of each school district in the county, with chronological list of teachers and school officers, and of those graduates who have taken a higher education, or in any way have achieved scholastic distinction. Of course the various colleges, academies, and parochial and private schools within the county must receive due attention under this head; so also those important adjuncts of any educational system, the various public, subscription, or school libraries. An enumeration of the literary work of citizens of the county will be of interest; it will be safest for the historian to confine himself, if he undertake

such a list, to a mere enumeration of books and pamphlets without comment.

9. *Foreign-born Settlers*.—Give an account of the several groups of foreign-born settlers within the county.

10. *Military History*.—The part which both the men and the women of the county took in the late War of Secession and the Spanish-American War, should receive full treatment. The old militia companies and the modern Iowa National Guard must not be forgotten. In the field of military history it would be well for the county historian to communicate with the posts of the Grand Army of the Republic, the Woman's Relief Corps, etc.

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