The Mission And Importance Of A Local Historical Magazine*

A local historical magazine is usually an organ of a local historical society. Its mission and importance, therefore, are dependent upon the functions and work of a local historical society.

The average society of this type is a peculiar combination of library, museum, picture gallery, research institution, and publishing corporation. As such a combination it has or may have half a dozen or more functions. Nearly two decades ago these were set forth by the American Historical Association. (1)

They include: (1) a survey of the archeaeology and ethnology of the district, the acquisition of a collection illustrating the same and co-operation in fraternal relations with local collectors, private and public, and the publication of joint check lists of the objects acquired; (2) the acquisition or at least the listing of the local records such as those of the county, city, town or village governments, of the courts, the churches, and the schools; (3) the systematic collection of diaries, mercantile account books, anniversary addresses, private letters describing early life and manners, field books of surveyors, etc.; (4) the collection and preservation of local newspaper files; (5) the solicitation by persons conversant with local history of information from pioneers; (6) the collection of all manner of miscellaneous local printed matter—such as the year books of societies, churches, and clubs, the programmes of entertainments, and the catalogues and memoranda of educational or other public and private institutions. Related to all these functions and in a way the capstone of the work of the society is the function of publication.

The function of publication on the part of a local historical society may have either broad or limited scope, a matter largely dependent upon financial support and strength.

Publication in its broad scope may include carefully edited volumes of the archives and other historical material.

*Address before the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, September, 1922.
classified above. It may include a series of volumes composed of monographs, essays, and addresses based on original material. Certainly it should include bibliographies and check lists of collections. Each of these three types of broad scope publication activity is important. In regard to the first, a distinguished American editor says, "The printing of documents and materials * * * is the work which counts in the long run, the work which gives permanent value to the society's volumes." (2) The second type may be the finished product of historiographical work. Unfortunately it is often not the finished product, and in regard to earlier volumes of this type Dr. Jameson has made the discouraging remark that nearly all the articles and essays are obsolete and antiquated. (3) The third type is a matter of service, partly to the local clientele but more particularly to others elsewhere working in the general field of history.

Publication of a limited scope may include both a volume of annual proceedings and a quarterly magazine. It may resolve itself into a choice of one of these two. With the latter choice I am concerned.

Anyone who is familiar with the volumes of a local historical magazine such as our own, is aware that as a rule, a quarterly historical magazine is a substitute in a small way for the more elaborate works of broad scope publication. Through its magazines the local historical society in humble fashion endeavors to meet some of the responsibilities involved in the manifold functions of such an institution. In a sense, therefore, further discussion is not necessary. Nevertheless, a review of these responsibilities in particular relation to a quarterly magazine may put the matter of the mission and importance of our magazine more clearly before us.

The first mission of a local historical magazine is the publication of matter which stimulates interest in local history. Local history is the reason for the organization and maintenance of local historical societies, for they win
their public support, their money, and their members by devoting themselves to matters of local historical significance. The importance of this is not always realized. As an old editorial puts it, "It is clear enough, upon a moment's reflection that the progress of any community must rely to a great extent upon the spirit of patriotism, while patriotism must rely in turn to a great extent either upon racial feeling or else upon a background of history and tradition." (4) A somewhat different statement of that idea is that "one of the principal aims of an historical society should be the cultivation among the masses of that civic patriotism which is inevitably the outgrowth of an attractive presentation of local history." (5) The rising generations should receive instructions in "the deeds of valor, the acts of statesmanship, or the honors in the field of letters achieved by the men who once walked the streets they now walk." (6)

Our community is frequently criticized for lack of community spirit, which is but another designation for local patriotism. With our vast foreign population it is obvious that we cannot depend greatly upon racial feeling for its stimulation. We must, therefore, if we wish more community spirit, cultivate the background of local history and tradition. The dissemination by our society through its quarterly magazine of accurate materials bearing on local history is vital as the foundation upon which such instruction may be built up. We should even go beyond this. Popularization should follow publication. This might be done by lectures, pamphlets, pageants, or even school books. Successful results of such popularization would bring about a civic comprehension of the importance of the location of the place, of its topography, geology, and botany, of the history of its settlement, of the establishment of its early churches, of its growth and municipal history, of its important public buildings, of its military activities, of its industries, of its railroads, of its highways, of its commerce, of its educational institutions, and of the noted men and women who were born or have lived in the town or visited it. (7)
In the matter of publication of local material a caution is necessary. It has long ago been expressed by others. (8) Our duties and fields must not be conceived in too narrow a sense. Dr. Jameson states that (9) "There are some topics of local history which are merely local and nothing else, and there are those which, while no less important to the history of the locality, are also of significance with respect to the larger life of the nation." (10) The historical society which does not interest itself in these topics of larger significance, according to Dr. Jameson, "fails of the best part of its mission." (11) "American history, locally exemplified", he holds to be the field of work of a local historical society. (12) Certainly it should be the ideal continuously held in mind by collector, custodian, research student, writer, publication committee, and editor.

Another caution in regard to the publication of local historical material is advisable. It should not consist of mainly genealogical compilations. Nor should recent history be sacrificed in the fascination of origins. Both genealogies and excessive antiquarianism are short of the highest possibilities of a historical magazine.

"Our historical societies would add greatly to their usefulness if, in their published work and what they do in furtherance of research, they would pay more attention to the more recent periods of American history." (13) I think it may be said in regard to the five volumes of the magazine put out under the able editorship of Mr. Dahlinger that these cautions have hitherto guided the policy of our magazine.

Another mission of a local historical magazine is the stimulation of interest in critical, scientific, professional, historical research. This can be accomplished in several ways. One way is by example, by setting up, in material printed, satisfactory canons of historical composition and publication. Another not less important is by offering facilities for the publication of work well done.
This leads directly to the question of the relation of the educational institutions of a region to the local historical societies. This has been a matter of concern for many years in America. (14) Local history offers the best opportunity for exhaustive graduate work. Materials for advanced research in other fields of history are often lacking. A bond between educational institutions and the historical society which should be of advantage to both, can often be established. From the standpoint of the society it is worth while to arouse the interest of students in these institutions in local history "so as to secure their participation after leaving college in the work of historical societies. For what the societies need above everything else is active members who know enough history to give a local event its national setting and whose knowledge of the historical development of mankind is sufficient to prevent them from arriving at absurd conclusions." (15) In this connection the amount of time at the disposal of a student and the volume of research which can be done by many students under satisfactory direction are matters of importance. Historical publication by others requires long years of research at odd moments or the most fortunate circumstances in the disposal of one's time.

I may add at this point the remark that the relations between the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and the University of Pittsburgh have been most happy and gratifying. With the expansion of the work of the University the importance of the Historical Society at its very doors will be increasingly appreciated. It is to be hoped that the faculty and students of the University will bring strength to the Society, and the Society through its library, collections, and publications will offer increasing encouragement to the generations which come on all too rapidly behind us.

In connection with the matter of critical advanced research in local history by students in educational institutions it may be observed that the undeveloped possibilities in Western Pennsylvania are many. Printed materials in newspapers, memoirs, and directories and unpublished
archives are easily available. This region offers wonderful opportunities for detailed economic studies of great importance. It offers hardly less wonderful opportunities for sociological research and surveys; and it is rich in material for valuable biographical studies in both earlier and later days. One mission of our magazine is to stimulate such research and in so far as our limitations permit publish its results when they are presented.

Yet another mission of a local historical magazine and one of no small importance is the revelation to others at a distance and the critical interpretation for them of the best of our past and present. Any community owes this much to itself. Its light should not be kept hidden under a bushel. Such a revelation and interpretation if scientifically critical need not violate the cause of true perspective.

In regard to the editorial policy of the future I may be permitted to say that a serious effort will be made to maintain the high standard of excellence reached by the former editor. Articles dealing with all phases of local history are solicited and will be given careful consideration by the publication committee. An earnest endeavor will be made to see that articles published are in satisfactory shape, preferably in that of scientific historical monographs. In this respect the standard set by other historical magazines, such as the American Historical Magazine, will be kept before us as a guide.

It should be our policy to encourage contributions to our magazine by those at a distance who in some way or other have become interested in research in Western Pennsylvania history.

Finally as a matter of editorial policy, while the publication in our limited way of many kinds of material covering many aspects of local history early and recent, will be kept up, a special effort will be made to locate and print manuscript material in the nature of documentary sources which have not yet appeared in print. It is thus in the opinion of critics that we can be of most service both to ourselves and others.

University of Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh, Pa.

Alfred P. James
REFERENCES


(3) Ibid.

(4) "Local History and the ‘Civic Renaissance’". *The American Monthly Review of Reviews*, XVI (July-December 1897), 447.


(7) Ibid.


(9) Ibid.

(10) On the possibilities of this as regards Pittsburgh, see the final remark of the writer in an article "The Preservation of local Historical Material", *Pittsburgh First* (The official organ of the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce), Vol. 4, No. 9, (June 17, 1922), 3.

(11) Loc. cit.

(12) Ibid., p. 56.


(15) Ibid., p. 182.