

THE ROLE OF A LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY IN TIMES OF WAR¹

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THE TITLE of this paper may at first glance seem somewhat out of place. Just what does the speaker have in mind? What is he up to? Does he not realize that we are at war with three great, powerful nations of the world? Does he not know that our first job, for the moment, our only job, is to win this war? Does he not realize that this is a "total war," an "all-out war"? Why then does he waste his time, and our time, in appearing on this program and venturing upon such a far-fetched subject?

And may I say right here that none of the questions I have just mentioned is hypothetical. I have been confronted, not once, but many times over within the past few weeks with these identical questions, even to the very words and phraseology I have used. And I like to believe that those who put the questions did so in perfectly good faith. I had the feeling that they meant it when they said that in time of war the thing to do was to fight—not write. Historians, they informed me, should be content to wait until this war is over, then there will be plenty of time to gather up the documents, arrange them in their proper order, and write the history of this war.

Well, the time was when such views as above expressed were correct. During the fighting of earlier wars, historians did not bother themselves with the task of recording the events of the war while they were in the making. There is, for example, no contemporary history of the Revolutionary War, that is, a history of the American Revolution compiled during the years of actual fighting. Nor is there such a history of the War of 1812; nor of the Mexican War of 1846-48. Nor is there a

¹ Read at the annual meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on January 27, 1942. Dr. Oliver is head of the history department of the University of Pittsburgh.—*Ed.*

contemporary history of the Civil War, from 1861 to 1865. The same can be said of the Spanish-American War of 1898.

Not until our first World War, 1917-1918, did any respected member of the historical profession dare to compile an authentic record of the progress and unfolding of events of the struggle *while it was in the making*. It just wasn't done. Historians felt they should wait; until the war was ended, the treaty of peace signed, and the generals and the admirals and all the survivors of the war had returned home. Then, said the historians, we will get busy. We will gather up all the papers, dispatches, documents, proclamations, congressional debates, official governmental reports, and the peace treaty, and go to work.

Better still, they could proceed with more confidence and understanding if they waited until some of the survivors of the war published their memoirs; their diaries; and related their war experiences. I repeat—that not until within recent years, as recent as the World War I, did any respectable American historian dare undertake the task of compiling the history of a war *while it was actually being fought*.

How then, can we account for this change? What was it that enabled respectable historians to start to work on writing the history of America's part in the World War I, while the war was still being fought? The answer is: there were several reasons. But the chief reason that enabled the historians to swing into immediate action was because of the magnificent work done by the libraries and historical societies scattered throughout the entire nation. Even before the United States entered that war in April, 1917—in fact, months before we officially declared war—the more alert and wide-awake historical societies and public libraries were on the job. With their well-trained staffs, collectors, catalogers, and research reference workers, and with a vision that comes only from years of training and experience, they took the lead in collecting, compiling, and preserving all papers, documents, leaflets, and other data of historical value that any historian would need when he set to work to compile the history of that war.

As a result, all the major activities of the last World War were, within a few years after its close, ably and definitively recorded, and had already become a part of our nation's history. Never before were his-

torians, writers, and research scholars able to undertake such a difficult task so quickly, on such a large scale, and with such completeness.

If you will pardon a personal reference here, the speaker asks your indulgence while he relates briefly, and with a perfect understanding of all its shortcomings, the outline of a war history program which he set in motion on April 2, 1917. It was on that date you will recall that President Woodrow Wilson went before a joint session of Congress, and read that inspiring message, asking Congress to declare war against Germany. Your speaker at that time was serving as an assistant in the Indiana State Library, with offices in the State House, Indianapolis. The day following President Wilson's message, I asked the state librarian to establish an Indiana War History Committee. The request was granted; and the writer of this paper was appointed to take charge of the work. A small sum was allocated to this work, together with funds for secretarial help.

With a modest sum and a small staff, we went to work. Two copies of each of the three Indianapolis newspapers were subscribed for, and with these, we started a clipping bureau. Every item of local war news that appeared in these newspapers, from April 2, 1917, and continuing on throughout the war and up until December 31, 1919, thirteen months after the close of the war, was clipped, properly dated, pasted on large-size black cardboard pages, and then bound in a series of volumes for permanent keeping. The historical value of this one collection numbering several volumes, cannot be measured.

Once this program got under way, it spread into every war board, bureau, and commission organized in the state. It soon won the respect and admiration of the various private organizations, boards, committees, clubs, and other groups engaged in war work. They soon recognized the value of having one central board or agency, whose duty it was to collect, compile, and preserve all local war records of historical value, and began to send in records relating to the war activities of their own local communities.

Your speaker entered the armed service of the United States in the summer of 1918, but the work we had started went on better than ever. Following the close of the war, and my return to civilian life, I was asked to return to Indiana and become director of the newly created Indiana War History Commission. This historical agency was created

by act of the state legislature for the purpose of collecting, compiling, and publishing the records of that state in the World War. We entered upon that important task in January 1919. Whatever progress we made—and truth compels me to say that I think we did a fairly creditable job—was due entirely to the excellent work done by those who had assembled those valuable war records covering the war while it was being fought. Several volumes were published, relating to the various war activities of that state. In years to come, these records will stand as a great historical monument to the patriotic people of that state. Moreover, the state War History Commission was instrumental in setting up local war history commissions in each of the ninety-two counties of Indiana. And many (not all) of the counties compiled and published creditable histories of their own local war activities.

And, in this connection, I want to take this opportunity to tell you that the man who has been serving us so ably here during the past few years as the director of our Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Mr. F. F. Holbrook, did a pre-eminently fine job in collecting, compiling, and publishing the war history records of his state of Minnesota. His two volumes on Minnesota in the World War rank among the best of the state war histories of the nation.²

Lack of time prevents a further review of the war history activities of other states. Suffice it to say that, for the first time in our nation's history, local historical societies and public libraries stepped out of the rôle of antiquarian collectors and museum repositories, and became indispensable agencies of the state and local units of government in collecting, compiling, editing, and publishing the war records of the different states of the union.

All of which brings me to the more specific phases of the subject under discussion.

Here we are, members of a well recognized, highly respected, historical society—The Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania. We comprise the one outstanding historical organization of this part of the

² Franklin F. Holbrook and Livia Appel, *Minnesota in the War with Germany*, two volumes (St. Paul, 1928, 1932). The former cannot accept full credit for this work, for much of it belongs to the co-author and others who shared largely in the inception of the work and carried the full burden of completing it.—Ed.

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. We therefore have a duty to perform which no other agency in this section can render so efficiently, and that is to lend all our efforts, our resources, and our talent to the job of collecting, compiling, and preserving those records that relate to Pittsburgh's and Western Pennsylvania's part in this present World War.

I realize it is no easy job. It is one of the biggest undertakings that we have ever faced. But that is all the more reason why it should be attempted. The war in which our nation is now engaged is different from any and all previous wars. We are told, and rightly so, that this is a war of ideologies; that the existence of our civilization is at stake; that this is an all-out war; a struggle between two ways of life, one of which must be completely overthrown.

And having said all this, we are then told that in waging this war, we have to adopt different methods, different tactics, different techniques, from those that were followed in former wars. This, we are told, is a mechanized war; a war of machines, of planes, of tanks. This war will be won in the research laboratories, the factories, and on the assembly lines. Mass production of war materials, of munitions, the like of which people never dreamed, is called for; and these requests will be answered by our scientists, our engineers, and our technologists.

If all this is true—and I think we all agree that these statements are true, then where in all America can one find a community or a region that is destined to play a more important part in winning this war than right here in Western Pennsylvania? This workshop of the world is now rapidly becoming the arsenal of democracy. And as such it is writing a daily chapter in the history of this war which no other community in all America can ever hope to equal.

This is not the place, nor do I have the time, to outline in any detail all the various topics that should be included in such an undertaking. But let me suggest a few of the subjects that future historians of this war will have to consider: topics that will cause teachers and writers to come right here to Pittsburgh.

The number is so vast that one scarcely knows where to begin. But perhaps one might as well start with the beginnings of our program of National Defense in the summer of 1940. I realize that one could go even back of that, but I arbitrarily choose this as my starting point.

Scarcely had the National Defense program been launched in the summer of 1940, when the press of the nation began to refer to Pittsburgh as the focal point in all this vast war program. So important was the defense program of this region that the President of the United States deemed it his duty (there are those who do not use such charitable words) to come out here on what he said was "a defense inspection trip." If the newspaper reports are correct, here is a chapter for future historians, different from any in all our history. For never before had any President of the United States considered Pittsburgh so important in the nation's defense program as to cause him to lay aside the pressing duties of that office and journey out to Pittsburgh on a personal inspection trip.

There are those, of course, who will say this trip was planned and timed for the purpose of seeking political votes. Others, however, will insist that it was a desire to see at first hand our defense program, and get a first-hand view of the war production efforts in this city. These different opinions will in themselves supply a lot of data for historians to wrangle over in years to come.

But my prediction is that these personal issues will not occupy a very important chapter in the larger history of Pittsburgh's part in this Second World War. Something much greater, much more fundamental, much more far-reaching than personal issues will have to be considered when the record of Pittsburgh's part in this second World War is properly recorded. I refer, of course, to our great industrial, scientific, engineering, and technological contributions. It is in these fields of endeavor that Pittsburgh is destined to lead the nation. When on December 3, last year, Sir Philip Gibbs, of the British Purchasing Commission, after touring the leading industrial centers of America, declared here in Pittsburgh—and I quote: "It is the factories and mills of this region that are responsible for the Nazi defeats that are now taking place in Russia"—he was not merely giving us a "pat on the back." On the contrary, he was expressing the cold, hard, factual truth. He was merely echoing what the spokesman of another British group, consisting of ten members known as a labor-management commission, had said here on September 23, when he too declared: "We look to your mills and mines, your factories and your shops to turn the tide of battle and drive those beasts (the Nazis) under the ground."

Such phrases as these have a very special meaning when one attempts to envision the larger picture of Pittsburgh's part in this Second World War. It is doubtful whether statements like these could be made of any other community in the entire United States.

But the statements I have just read are only a few of dozens, yes, scores, of comments of similar nature. When, for example, on last September 25, our local papers carried the story, accompanied by illustrations, announcing that Pittsburgh had been selected as the "try-out" city of the nation's program in volunteer civilian defense, and that a representative from Mayor La Guardia's Office of Civilian Defense was here to assist in setting up this first extensive program, that was a signal for every other city in the nation to keep their eyes on Pittsburgh. The following day a press dispatch bearing a Washington date line appeared in our local papers, saying that "Mr. La Guardia's Civilian Defense Organization announced today that Pittsburgh is to be made experimental 'guinea pig' for the best way to establish, train, and distribute women civilian defense workers." Here again, the future historians of this war will discover, when they start to write this important chapter dealing with Civilian Defense, that they will have first to study the movement as it got under way right here in our midst.

And so we might go on, pointing out scores of similar cases. If one attempted to give even a partial list of the major war developments that have originated here in our midst, he would of course have to devote special chapters to the part played by such mammoth concerns as the Aluminum Company of America; the great Mesta Machine Company, awarded the first contract in the country for forging 155-millimeter guns, to hurl 95-pound shells a distance of 15 miles; the Mackintosh-Hemphill Company, for building those huge 16-inch coast defense guns, capable of shooting a shell weighing 4,000 pounds, 30 miles out to sea—each gun, be it noted, requiring over 700,000 pounds of steel; the research laboratories of the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company, for their work in perfecting audio-locating devices for detecting submarines; the Dravo Corporation, for launching from Neville Island, last October 17, the first combat vessel built here since the Civil War, and for a program that calls for launching of fifteen other vessels of similar design to be launched here by June of this year; and the steel

mills of this district, which are supplying over seventy per cent of the rolled steel now going into war production.

Attention must also be given to the key position that Pittsburgh now plays as the chief distribution center for over 400,000,000 gallons of gas and oil shipped by water from Texas oil fields to Midland, Pennsylvania, McKees Rocks, and Pittsburgh, en route to eastern cities. And we have just been told in the last forty-eight hours that the pioneer plant for the manufacture of synthetic rubber, subsidized by federal funds, is to be located in the immediate vicinity of Pittsburgh. Dr. Edward R. Weidlein, director of Mellon Institute, and chief of the chemical division of the War Production Board, a Pittsburgher, and a world-renowned scientist, has been appointed to direct this monumental task. Here is material for another great chapter in writing the history of Pittsburgh's part in the Second World War.³

These are only a few of scores of companies, corporations, associations, and individuals to be included in recording Pittsburgh's part in this war.

This paper is already too long. But one cannot refrain from suggesting one or two other tasks that fall upon us who want to see this historical society do its share in times like these. Look for a moment at one other approach to the problem that the citizens of this community faced on the eve of this great war. Where, in all America for example will the historian of the future find a better illustration of the anti-war sentiment than was expressed right here in the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall on that Sabbath afternoon of December 7, 1941? Here was a member of the United States Senate, who had come on from Washington to address a mass meeting sponsored by the local America First Committee, presided over by an ex-United States Senator; and in the face of repeated radio announcements of the attack on Pearl Harbor that morning, he refused to inform his audience that the first blow in this war had

³ Since this paper was read, numerous other outstanding achievements have occurred here, which must be incorporated in the history of Pittsburgh's part in the Second World War. On March 5, 1942, the Dravo Corporation of Pittsburgh became the first defense industry in America to receive the All-Navy "E" award. The occasion was the launching of a submarine chaser, the PC 573. Said the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* the next morning: "The coveted All-Navy 'E' was awarded to Dravo after the firm had been recommended by two bureaus of the Navy Department for excellence—a very rare recommendation that carries with it the right of employes to wear the Navy 'E' lapel buttons and the right of the firm to fly the All-Navy 'E' pennant for six months."

already been struck. This one story alone is good for at least a chapter in any history relating to the anti-war movement of this community during the past two years. It is another example of the need on our part to be on the alert in collecting, compiling and preserving all related materials bearing upon this incident.

These, I repeat, are only samples of scores of events of epoch-making importance that are happening right here in our midst, and which should be included in any war history program.

Finally, how could I conclude this paper on a more appropriate note than by referring to one other chapter that must be included in any war history relating to Pittsburgh's part in this world conflict, than by quoting a recent newspaper article on daylight saving time? Today, the entire nation knows that the "Father of Daylight Saving in the United States" is none other than our own worthy president of this historical society, Robert Garland. Of the hundreds of newspaper articles that have recently appeared relating to Mr. Garland's part in this wartime measure, I quote the following from the *New York Times* of January 25, 1942:

SAVING DAYLIGHT

In a glass museum case of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society, in Pittsburgh, have long lain three pens. One was used by President Woodrow Wilson, another by Vice President Thomas R. Marshall, the third (a Quill) by Speaker Champ Clark for the signing of the first national daylight saving law in March, 1918. Last week a fourth pen was destined for the collection. It had been used on Tuesday by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to sign the second national daylight saving law. At 2 A. M. on February 9th the country will push its clocks one hour ahead. The new time will remain in effect until six months after the war's end.

The owner of the four pens is Robert Garland, Pittsburgh business and civic leader, who is known as "the father of daylight saving." Irish-born, the son of a Crimean War veteran, Mr. Garland has made his way from a clerkship with one of the Smoky City's steel companies to the direction of his own firm—manufacturers of nuts, rivets and electrical conduits.

In 1916, as a member of the Pittsburgh Council, he advocated daylight saving. The United States Chamber of Commerce put him at the head of a committee that pressed the issue before Congress. When World War II broke out, Mr. Garland again headed a group that supported the Administration's drive to turn the clocks ahead. In recognition of this effort, Mr. Roosevelt, like President Wilson before him, directed that the pen used in the signing of the new law be sent to the Pittsburgh manufacturer."

Where, I ask, can one find another historical society in all America whose president occupies such a unique position? An unswerving, hide-bound Republican of the Old School, yet able to persuade two Democratic Presidents of the need of this war emergency measure, in the latter case when all the brain trusters of the New Deal had failed! So, here is another chapter that must be included in that volume relating to Pittsburgh's part in the Second World War. Obviously, only the president of our historical society can write this particular chapter.