NEW APPROACHES TO LOCAL HISTORY

Van Beck Hall

New ideas, methods, and techniques have revitalized in many ways the study of local and family history. Yet, many fear that the application of social science theories; the borrowing of models and methods from related disciplines such as political science, sociology, anthropology, and demography (the study of populations); and the use of statistical analysis and complex calculating equipment takes the fun out of history and leaves the field entirely in the hands of academic professionals who scoff at antiquarians and genealogists. Tonight, I venture to suggest that these new approaches will actually permit the so-called professionals to work much more closely with local and amateur historians and with persons interested in the histories of their local communities, their families, and their ancestors. Not only will these approaches permit these groups to cooperate with one another, but using them will enable the so-called amateurs to produce studies that will give individual satisfaction and have enduring historical value.

But, how can this be done? Why does the shift within the profession toward new methods, approaches, and sources actually bring the amateurs and professionals into closer contact? The answers to these questions spring from three basic shifts in the perspectives of many professional historians. Instead of concentrating on the great man or the important event, they have become more interested in describing groups and societies; they have become involved in detailed studies of local communities and families; and they have begun to use new source materials. Each of these shifts increases the contacts between professionals and amateurs, and each permits the local historian and genealogist with his great knowledge of sources to produce first-rate studies.

The first shift seems the most frightening to many amateurs. It seems that the professionals have abandoned history and have wandered far afield pursuing esoteric sociological or anthropological models, abandoning the narrative in favor of jargon-laden discussions of society and replacing text with statistics. It all seems to dehumanize

Dr. Hall is a member of the history department at the University of Pittsburgh. This talk was given at the Society on December 1, 1971.—Editor
history. Instead of engaging stories of persons and events, we are confronted by abstract theories and long tables of numbers that seem terribly difficult and dreadfully dull. Yet, this new emphasis on society, social theory, and statistics actually increases the number of persons and groups whose historical importance can and should be assessed. When historians asked questions dealing with great events or wrote biographies of famous men, the masses of people, communities, and families served only as a backdrop, while the spotlight fell on the event or the man. The shift toward social science merely means that many historians have now become more interested in looking at these previously unrecognized people and have found that all sorts of economic, social, cultural, religious, political, and many other differences existed among them. They also found that a great deal of important and exciting history can be written by describing these differences—how the people changed with time and the impact that the differences and the changes had upon the development of a community, region, state, or nation. In order to describe and analyze these differences, historians have borrowed some analytical tools from other disciplines, most of which can also be used by skilled amateurs.

One of the best starting points for analysis is the recognition that economic, social, religious, and cultural differences will cause different people to interpret their societies and live their lives in different ways. A poor subsistence farmer in frontier Pennsylvania during the 1790s had a very different view of the world than did George Washington or Thomas Jefferson; an immigrant Roman Catholic German in Old Allegheny in the 1850s had a different viewpoint than a successful Presbyterian lawyer in the same city; and a Roman Catholic Slavic steelworker in 1906 had a different cultural outlook than a wealthy banker included in the social register. We all recognize these differences in everyday life, and we often realize the influence that certain patterns of family life, education, religion, and social-economic position have had upon the way that we ourselves look at life. We also realize that these different outlooks result in different political choices, different patterns of childrearing and family size, differences in life styles, and thousands of other distinctions. It is these differences, their changes over time, and the impact of these differences and changes that have become more and more interesting to historians. The social sciences give us some analytical and methodological tools for dealing with these types of questions. For example, in studying a community we may suspect that differences in wealth or social-economic class may
be related to political disputes, religious differences, or even to membership in social organizations. We can take the particular community and use tax information to arrange the families in order of wealth and can see who were the richest and the poorest in the town. Then we can take the total number of families, divide them into ten equal groups, and from this ascertain the amount of wealth and property held by the highest, lowest, or any other 10 percent of the population. This immediately gives us a figure for concentration of wealth that can be compared with other communities or with the same community at another period of time. Using these lists we can compare this with information about occupations, places of residence, membership in various clubs and organizations, religion, ethnic background, and many other variables to begin to build up a total picture of the particular community. We can see how important politicians, officeholders, and commercial and industrial leaders fit into these patterns, and we can trace the rise and fall of individuals, families, and entire groups over a period of time. After laying out some of these basic social-cultural-economic patterns, the historian can then begin to show why various classes, denominations, or groups voted differently, and which ones spearheaded economic development, political reform, or joined different religious denominations. He can begin to discover why different sorts of people behaved differently and how their patterns of behavior changed or remained constant over time. Individual ancestors and families can be placed in these patterns, and we can even discover how our ancestors "fitted" into their societies. In my own case, the life of a great-great-grandfather, William McFarland, makes more sense when I see that his Methodism, his interest in education, his Whiggish and later Republican politics, and his growing anti-Southernism made him an ideal supporter of the new state of West Virginia when it separated from Virginia. Thus William, instead of being of only antiquarian or family interest, becomes a representative of certain patterns, forces, and interests that had a tremendous impact on American development. In a nutshell, the shift toward social science means that many historians are now more interested in the masses of previously unknown individuals, including most of our own ancestors, than they have been in the past. If we use some of these techniques and methods the lives of the many unknown William McFarlands may tell us a great deal about American society.

Flowing naturally from this shift in emphasis away from great men and important events is the much greater attention that profes-
sionals are giving to community studies which involve the detailed examination of a town, county, or region. In both Europe and America historians have rediscovered the community and have turned out studies that tell us a great deal about the social-economic, religious, political, ethnic, and countless other patterns in towns and regions and among all sorts of groups throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. Several of these studies have changed our interpretations of early American history.

A study of Kent, a frontier town in Connecticut during the eighteenth century, showed that land and wealth became more concentrated with the passage of time, and that political leaders, almost without exception, came from the wealthiest families in the town. Historians have taken a close look at the distribution of wealth and land in Chester County, Pennsylvania, for a one hundred-year period stretching from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth century and also found land and wealth became more and more concentrated in the hands of a few farmers as the county grew and became commercialized.

Historians have also studied colonial cities. Sam Warner studying Philadelphia found a fantastic concentration of wealth, with about 10 percent of the wealthiest families holding over 70 percent of the land wealth in the early 1770s. James Henretta studying Boston found that political officeholding was closely related to an individual's wealth. The wealthiest men served as selectmen and town representatives in the General Court. Poor men served as constables and tax collectors and still poorer individuals became hog reeves and dog wardens. One of my own students at Pitt completed a master's paper in which he analyzed the distribution of wealth and property in several Massachusetts towns and found that even in the frontier towns the upper 10 percent of the tax-paying families possessed around 40 percent of the property, and this figure increased substantially in the older and more commercialized towns. My own book on the politics of Massachusetts, Politics Without Parties: Massachusetts, 1780-1791, attempts to rank the 343 towns, plantations, and districts in the state on the basis of their being more or less subsistence or commercial and more or less involved in all sorts of cultural, social, and religious activities. Using this description as a base I can then argue that political differences among the towns were related to these economic and cultural differences among them.

Another of my students has completed a dissertation on Western Pennsylvania between 1780 and 1795 that shows the sudden changes
that occurred in this seemingly frontier area. In less than fifteen years towns developed, wealth and property ownership became more concentrated in the hands of fewer persons, and political leadership fell into the hands of professionals and traders who were usually residents of the rapidly developing small towns. All of these studies help to change our image of colonial and early national America. Instead of a homogeneous society we see one plagued by all sorts of economic, political, and social-cultural conflicts. Instead of an equalitarian society we see one that not only has a heavy concentration of wealth in a relatively few hands, but one in which wealth and property become even more concentrated as the society becomes more commercial and industrial.

Moving into the nineteenth century, historians have also produced similar studies that shed light on religion, politics, the role of the immigrant, and the distribution of wealth and power. Robert Doherty, now at the University of Pittsburgh, analyzed Quakers in the 1820s and 1830s and found that upwardly, mobile types with connections in non-Quaker society were much more interested in evangelistic religion than others who had remained more attached to traditional Quakerism. A political science student at the university completed a detailed political study of Somerset County, also in the 1820s and 1830s, showing that the anti-Masonic and Whig parties were supported by Lutheran German farmers who opposed the wealthier, professional, town-dwelling Masons who had controlled the Democratic-Republican party in the county since the early 1800s. Stephen Thernstrom, in his study of laboring men in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in the 1860-1880 period, showed how laborers became upwardly mobile and underlined differences in patterns between Irish and Yankees, the Yankees investing in education for their children, while the Irish accumulated more property by sending their children out to work. Doherty is now completing a study that shows the changes over time in terms of social structure, concentration of wealth and property, and political participation and power in five Massachusetts towns between 1800 and 1850. By choosing an old commercial town, an industrialized commercial town, a subsistence-farming town that becomes industrial, and a subsistence-farming town that stagnates, he can explain many of the distinctions among the towns in terms of their varied development.

Historians have also examined specific groups operating within a particular community, region, or nation. A recent prize-winning book deals with the composition of the crowds who mobbed the abolitionists
in the 1830s. Other authors have been interested in the differences among the members of various social organizations, denominations, or political parties, and they attempt to analyze specific groups within towns and communities. A few short papers by graduate students at the University of Pittsburgh give an even better indication of the types of studies that can be produced relatively quickly using some analytical methods and local sources.

Several students have examined the Pittsburgh upper classes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and have found deep divisions among small groups of wealthy Pittsburghers. Others have shown that professionals and groups interested in bureaucratically-backed reforms in early twentieth century Pittsburgh ranged from a centralized school system presided over by a nonelective board of education to a city council elected on a city-wide instead of a ward basis. These supposed reforms were bitterly opposed by an apparent majority of the so-called common people, whom many historians see as the force behind progressive reform. Bruce Stave's book *The New Deal and the Last Hurrah* shows how the Democrats in Pittsburgh built a new city machine during the depression decade of the 1930s based on the shrewd use of patronage and the identification of the city's ethnic and racial communities with the Democratic party. Another student analyzed "Dutchtown" in Old Allegheny during the 1850s and found that Germans differed from non-Germans in terms of residence, wealth, and occupation and that the Germans divided themselves into Roman Catholic, Lutheran, or secular communities, each one of which possessed distinguishing residential and economic characteristics. A political study of the city in the 1860 election showed that these Germans voted heavily Democratic and refused to follow well-known leaders such as Carl Schurz into the Republican camp. Several students have described the Black community and have shown social-economic differences in terms of occupation, place of residence, voting patterns, and membership in religious denominations and clubs. Students analyzed women's organizations in early twentieth century Pittsburgh and Wilkinsburg and found all sorts of differences among the women who belonged to social, political, or reformist organizations.

All of these studies indicate what can be done by looking at groups and communities, and all could have been done by local or amateur historians who were acquainted with the community studies that have been produced by professional historians. This is certainly one area where the knowledge of local records and sources possessed by the
local historian when combined with the questions and techniques used by the professionals can give us better studies of many relatively unknown towns, groups, and communities.

The emphasis on social science methods and approaches has also revitalized the study of the family, and for the first time historians and genealogists can work together to face some important problems. The social scientists seem to be most interested in collecting demographic or population data about populations over a certain period of time. At first this also seems esoteric until one realizes that they are interested in such common things as family size, marriage patterns, the spacing of children, child-rearing practices, methods of educating children, the geographic mobility of families and individuals, and many other questions that relate directly to our own families and to our ancestors. In Great Britain the population group at Cambridge University has cooperated with local historians and genealogists in preparing family reconstruction forms which give massive amounts of information about individual families. These data are now being computerized so that we can have even more information about families and individuals in eighteenth-century England. Although such a program doesn't exist in America, genealogists and amateurs interested in tracing their families can produce studies that can be of great advantage to the history profession. Instead of tracing back to find one ancestor, genealogists could begin tracing a family forward from a particular time and following the development of that entire family through time. A study of several generations would include thousands of descendants of the same basic family. Using such a group, a historian could show upward and downward social-economic mobility, changes in education and occupation, changes in politics and religion, changes in residence, changes in patterns of intermarriage with other social and religious groups, and many other developments that would enable one to relate the history of a particular family to the history of the entire nation. With such information we could begin to see how and when intermarriage with other groups began, which ethnic and religious groups moved or rose, and whether political and religious patterns changed with changes in wealth, occupation, and intermarriage. These studies, which would use the special training and expertise of the genealogist to answer the questions asked by social historians, could describe all sorts of important and fascinating changes over the years. At Pitt, many of my colleagues have begun to ask their students for such information about their families. Unfortunately, most students
can trace their descendants back only two or three generations, but even from these limited data certain patterns of residential, occupational, social, and religious change are made much clearer. Thus, in addition to increasing the importance and vitality of local history the new approaches and methods add an additional importance to family and genealogical studies.

Finally, these new techniques and approaches have opened vast mines of new source materials that can be used by professionals, amateurs, and genealogists. The Church of the Latter Day Saints has microfilmed masses of local records in Europe and the United States. Roll after roll of microfilm has been used to record marriages, deaths, probate inventories, wills, tax lists, and other information that is now available for historians and genealogists. But, even without the Mormons, these new approaches have led historians to look at new sources in an effort to reconstruct the societies of the past. Tax lists are an excellent starting point. All governments have collected taxes, and many of the lists have remained. From the lists, depending upon the state or community, you can obtain names of household heads and the amount of property owned by them. In some cases, they will give only the amount and value of land and livestock; others may list up to fifty-or-sixty different categories of property and give occupational and other information. The lists enable us to reestablish the property patterns of towns and counties and permit us to see where specific individuals are “plugged” into the society in terms of their wealth.

Unfortunately, many local governments have not taken good care of this information which is often stored in attics and basements, given away to trash collectors, or destroyed in mysterious courthouse fires. The data that remain must be found and protected and local historians can perform a tremendous service by forcing local governments to care for these valuable historical records. The United States census which is now opened through the 1890s (although unfortunately most of the 1890 census has been destroyed) is another valuable source. At first it listed the heads of households and the number of persons of various ages in the particular household. But, as the years passed the data became richer and by 1870 included information about every individual, where he was born, the value of his property, his education, and much else. This is an invaluable source for the local historian and genealogist. You can reconstruct a community at ten-year intervals; you can combine the census material with the tax data, and if you know that an ancestor was located in a certain place at a specific time
you can find the entire family in the census record. In addition to the population census, Uncle Sam also collected information about individual farms and factories and even compiled cultural data about churches, libraries, schools, and other social and religious institutions in specific communities. Again, this information can be used to show who became involved in manufacturing and commercial farming and which religious denominations had become important in specific communities. City directories give a vast amount of information about residence and occupation; social registers and blue books give lists of individuals in the upper classes; voter registration cards, especially after the 1920s, give residence, occupations, and party affiliations; and all this can be combined with church records, membership lists of social and cultural organizations, and traditional sources such as newspapers and family letters to give us a picture of the community and the individual or family within the community.

Other local records have also been used by historians to pursue their new interest in local history. Sam Warner, in a study of the growth and development of Boston suburbs, used plat books, real estate maps, and building permits to show the patterns of suburban growth. Thernstrom used savings bank deposit records to show which groups in Newburyport were accumulating property during the 1870s and 1880s. Some students have used school attendance records to discover the characteristics of families that sent their children to primary and secondary schools during the latter nineteenth century. Court documents and police records have been used to describe patterns of violence and how the judicial system actually worked. All of these records and documents can be used by imaginative amateur historians who are interested in describing groups, families, or communities, and how they changed over a period of time.

The growing interest in local historical sources underlines another area where professionals and amateurs can cooperate. As I have already said, we can work to keep the vast masses of local data, ranging from tax lists to building permits, from being destroyed. We must also somehow produce the basic archival and searching aids that will allow those interested in using this material for historical or genealogical research to find it. A few states have begun to collect and microfilm local materials and records but very few have provided the funds or the staff to carry out programs to classify and save these important sources. During the 1930s a special section of the WPA classified and listed some available local sources, producing hundreds of important
county guides to records, but unfortunately funding was ended during the early 1940s, and since then the national government has done almost nothing to classify or protect local and personal records.

Pennsylvania also has lagged in protecting its local sources. The state archives have neither the money nor the staff to mount the type of operation required to classify and protect town and county records, and with the exception of the city of Philadelphia almost none of our local governments have expressed much interest in their archives. Local historical societies and universities have attempted to fill this void, but few of these agencies have the money or manpower to carry out the type of program that is required. The American Historical Association is attempting to interest the bicentennial commission that is planning for the anniversary of the Revolution in funding efforts to continue some of the WPA programs of the 1930s, but the real effort will have to be made at the state and local level. We all have a vested interest in protecting these sources and closer cooperation among us could pay off in political pressure that might lead politicians to become more interested in the records and archives of their agencies.

Professionals could produce guides, and bibliographies, that would give local historians and genealogists an idea of some of the recent studies and approaches, and the local historians and genealogists can give the professionals a great deal of advice and assistance about the availability of local and family materials. The University of Pittsburgh history department is hoping to establish a seminar in local history and genealogy in which this kind of communication could be developed, and hopefully both groups will profit from working and thinking together.

Thus, the social-scientific revolution in history is nothing to be frightened of. It merely means that professionals are now interested in local and family history, and it actually opens the doors for closer cooperation between the academicians and the amateurs. It also underlines the fact that history remains the last of the old artisan-type academic professions in which a skilled amateur who knows his sources and uses some of the new ideas and approaches can produce work that can be both criticized and admired by the professionals who produce their monographs for fortune and promotion.