


# IOWA HISTORY: ALIVE AND/OR WELL?

by  
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## *Introduction*

ne of the strangest incidents during my tenure as administrator of the State Historical Society was the call to the state archives from the producers of the “Jeopardy” quiz show. Gordon Hendrickson reported to me that they wanted to know the name of Iowa’s first state budget director. (To quote a favorite line from columnist Dave Barry, I am not making this up.) Picture for a minute the three panelists facing the familiar board with its six vertical categories. One of them calls out, “I’ll take State Budget Directors for \$400, Alex.” Our archives supplied the information, but I never heard that it appeared as a question on the show. Some time later, our counterparts in South Dakota reported getting a similar request for an equally obscure state officer there.

While there was some speculation in the office that these events signaled a possible resurgence of interest in state and local history, a long-term trend failed to materialize. The teaching of Iowa history has fallen on hard times. In fact, in the frantic concentration of improving K-12 test scores in math, reading, and science, teaching history at all levels seems to be increasingly relegated to an “as time allows” activity in a crowded curriculum. A survey of Iowa districts shows wide disparities in the grade level at which the subject is taught and the time allotted to it. At the college level, the results were even worse. A study by John Liepa, a member of the board of trustees of the State Historical Society and a history instructor at DMACC, found that few colleges, universities or community colleges around the state even offer Iowa history courses on a regular basis. When Dr. Dorothy Schwieder retired from the History Department at Iowa State, the department abandoned its commitment to a faculty position specializing in Iowa history. Currently, not one of the three state universities supports a tenure-track history faculty member whose primary academic focus is Iowa history.

## *Stirrings of Interest in Iowa History?*

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However, some recent stirrings from separate sources may prove

to be a prelude to a renewed interest in state and local history. One of the first bills introduced into the Iowa Senate in 2004 promoted the teaching of Iowa history in a major and radical way. Senator Maggie Tinsman introduced legislation to require all Iowa high school students to complete a full semester (one-half unit) of Iowa history. (See S.F. 2012) The mandate did not substitute Iowa history for another social studies course; it increased required the graduation requirement by adding a separate stand-alone semester course in Iowa history. Furthermore, the bill directed school districts to absorb the cost for the new course out of dollars the district receives in state aid. In other words there was to be no increased funding to cover the new mandate. The bill never made it to the floor of the Senate.

A second bill on the teaching of Iowa history, Senate File 2255, emerged from the Senate Education Committee, this one also aimed at the high school level. Section I of the Committee bill stated that Iowa students should learn to appreciate “Iowa’s history and government and Iowa citizens long and distinguished record of civic responsibility.” The purpose of such instruction is to “assist the students to succeed in society and confer upon them the ability to make their own valuable contributions to Iowa’s history.” Toward that end, the University of Northern Iowa, in cooperation with community colleges and AEAs, was charged with creating a professional development plan to train teachers to teach Iowa history and producing an Iowa studies curriculum.

Under the direction of the dean of the UNI College of Education, a committee would be created with four charges:

- 1) To publicize the professional development plan to schools and AEAs;
- 2) To develop partnerships with historical societies, libraries, civic groups and related organizations, to promote Iowa studies.
- 3) To develop assessment standards for both student learning and teacher training in Iowa history; and
- 4) To establish a plan to encourage Iowa history pilot programs around the state where curricula could be tried and evaluated.

The bill spelled out the composition of the nine-member committee, which included a representative of the Iowa Council of Social Studies and at least one certified social studies teacher. In addition, the committee was charged with submitting a report to legislative leaders in 2007 on the progress of implementing its development plans. In 2008, the legislature asked for a final report including all evaluation data, after which the committee would permanently dissolve.

In this second bill there were no mandates for school districts. No school was required to use any part of the committee's recommended curriculum or professional development plan. Nevertheless, even making the proposals purely voluntary for the school districts was not enough to secure the necessary support to get it to the floor for a vote. In an acrimonious year of reduced revenues and substantive budget cuts, legislators were in no mood to institute new education initiatives.

However, the two bills were not without an impact. A small cadre of Iowa history enthusiasts, led by several trustees of the State Historical Society, developed a lobbying effort to raise awareness of the tenuous condition of state and local history instruction. The Des Moines Register picked up the message on its editorial pages. Chuck Offenburger, a SHSI trustee and member of the Iowans for a Better Future commission, spearheaded a series of ten teach-ins around the state. Each stop included afternoon workshops on Iowa for high school students with a two-hour radio show on some aspect of Iowa's future. Tom Morain, a former SHSI administrator, taught the afternoon workshops and supplied an "Iowa history moment" during the evening broadcast. Offenburger introduced the sessions by pointing out how few schools teach Iowa history and encouraging its revival. The activists are meeting to lay out plans to re-introduce legislation in the 2005 session.

### *Three Instructional Approaches to an Iowa Curriculum*

Whatever progress occurs in directing resources toward the development of an Iowa history curriculum and professional development, classroom practitioners will need to make some choices in how they present the subject. Currently three different approaches account for most efforts. Each has its strengths, and as complementary approaches, they provide the student with a more comprehensive understanding than any of them would alone.

The first integrates Iowa content across the curriculum in many different disciplines. This is essentially the principle guiding the State Historical Society's massive compilation of teaching units, *Prairie Voices*. For example, there is a 2-3 day unit for grades 5-8 on Iowa conservationists Aldo Leopold and Ding Darling called "The Art and Soul of the Land" that could be incorporated in science, art, reading, or history. Both men gained national stature in their fields, and both are significant

Iowans. By introducing facets of Iowa life through many disciplines, the curriculum encourages students to view Iowa subjects as worthy of attention, that the familiar can be significant.

By themselves, however, Prairie Voices activities do not provide the historical context that explain the forces that influenced Leopold or Darling or how their work relates to future developments. The units are essentially discrete and do not provide the linkages that are the hallmark of historical thinking. If we used this approach to teach students about our national heritage, we would dispense with American history courses with their chronological approach and rely on other disciplines to utilize American content. We would read American authors in literature, study American artists in art, examine case studies of Americans and American settings in psychology and sociology, and solve word problems based on American settings in math. The “Iowa content integrated across the curriculum” approach can increase students’ awareness of contributions of individual Iowans and provide a greater awareness of the significance of local dimensions. Without the chronological skeleton relating developments to one another, it does not provide the student with an Iowa history storyline or a sequential explanation of the development of the state or local community.

A second approach is to mainstream Iowa history into American history courses. Here the goal is to illustrate how national events were experienced at the state and local level. The U.S. imposed rationing during WW II. How did it work in Davenport? How did Iowans react to the Kennedy assassination? What can we learn about the impact of government de-regulation of the airlines by looking at the battle over railroad regulation in Iowa in the late 19th century? Here the national experience provides the organizing experience; Iowa experiences provide local color. Some American history teachers have had success with the “mainstreaming” approach. The examples illustrate how things that happened everywhere in general happened somewhere in particular. They give immediacy and reality to events that students might see as distant and removed from their own situations. They also counter Iowans’ unfortunate tendency to assume that Important Things always happen Somewhere Else, that local events and players are not significant in the grand scheme of events.

Alone, the “American history mainstreaming” approach has two shortcomings. One is that it accepts the national experience as the norm for examining the Iowa experience. According to most U.S. history textbooks, the 1920s were a period of economic prosperity followed by a

sudden plunge into the Great Depression following the stock market crash in 1929. The Iowa experience, along with most of the rural Midwest, was quite different. The collapse of farm prices in 1920 following the removal of wartime subsidies led to sharp drops in crop, livestock prices and a land values. Bankruptcies of rural banks mushroomed and Iowa farmers found themselves left out of the heady economic boom that other sections of the economy were experiencing. In a similar way the declining population of rural areas brought on by the incredible technological improvements of farm equipment in the 20th century and the implications on the communities in which Iowa students live rarely gets much attention in American history classes.

The “American history mainstreaming” approach has its strengths, both in providing an immediacy to national events and in introducing students to the contributions of Iowans to those events. The theme of most American history courses is nation-building, however, and topics take their significance from that starting point. In most American history textbooks, the Upper Mississippi Valley gets attention when it is being explored by the French in the 17th and 18th centuries and then disappears until it is carved into individual states that enter the Union in the first half of the 19th century. After it becomes a state, Iowa drops off the pages. A third approach makes Iowa history a separate course. A tough question that confronts advocates of creating a unique curriculum for Iowa history is whether or not the subject merits such attention. If time were not a factor, a stand-alone course would have much to commend it. Students could learn about their own place and the factors that have shaped the world with which they are most familiar.

But time is a factor, a cruel and unyielding taskmaster. We do not have time to teach everything. Can we justify scarce minutes in the school day to Iowa history? After all, in a world moving rapidly toward globalization and with a student body that will disperse itself across the nation and beyond within a year after graduation, what is the value of teaching the story of an individual state? That is a question that will frame the legislative debate in 2005 legislative session on the teaching of Iowa history.

### *Conclusion: The Value of Teaching about Iowa*

Without arguing against the importance of global or national perspectives, let me suggest two reasons for the teaching of Iowa history. One is that it is a way to help students comprehend “how history works.”

Westward expansion is a major theme in American history, and it is easy to provide a map that depicts the eastern United States divided into states while the West is still one large chunk of real estate. But there are other legitimate perspectives on our past. What was going on in the Upper Mississippi Valley in 1776? Why were the Sauk Indians allies of the British in the War of 1812? How did German immigrants react to their new homelands in Mississippi River towns? National history tends to be taught “from the top down.” State and local history provides a “from the bottom up” perspective that more closely parallels how most of us perceive the world around us.

Individuals lost in the national perspective can emerge in Iowa history. People in history books were real. State and local history can help students to make that imaginative leap into what their lives might have been like had they lived in a different time and place. What would my life have been like as a child in a log cabin? Ask that question after they have visited the 1850 cabin at Living History Farms. I will never forget my experience standing in the yard of the Norman Borlaug farmhouse near Cresco. There was nothing that distinguished the Borlaug square, white farmhouse from other square, white farmhouses in that Norwegian neighborhood nor anything unusual in the white one-room school that he attended nearby. Norman did chores like other kids his age and “put his pants on one leg at a time.” Yet from this place came a man who would win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his work in creating improved strains of wheat and rice that saved from starvation in the last half century an estimated one billion people. Ordinary people can do extraordinary things.

A second value of Iowa history is that it strengthens students’ connection with the state. Is this good? I think so. Iowans have traditionally tended to identify themselves with the state, often thinking of themselves as Iowans even when they move elsewhere. We are aware of certain rituals and traditions that link us, such as the high school basketball tournaments in March, the state fair, the presidential caucuses. We share the same stories. When we meet a fellow Iowans in our travels, we have a connection that allows us to pursue other connections—hometown, mutual acquaintances, and, of course, thoughts on the weather. Iowa history strengthens student’s definitions of themselves as Iowans. If that is something that a local district values, Iowa history is a resource. Whether to require the teaching of Iowa history or only to encourage it will be a point of legislative debate next session. The question of how to teach it still remains.

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