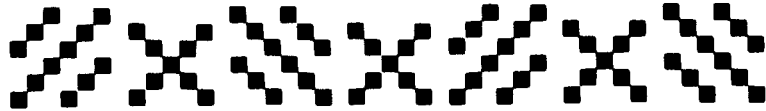


State and Local History: A Review Essay

*Robert M. Sutton**



How Local Is Local History? By Helen M. Cavanagh. ([Normal: Illinois State University Foundation], 1976. Pp. iv, 59. Notes, bibliography. Paperbound, free in limited quantities upon request.)

A Primer for Local Historical Societies. By Dorothy Weyer Creigh. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1976. Pp. ix, 153. Illustrations, additional reference materials, appendixes, index. Paperbound, \$6.50.)

Researching, Writing and Publishing Local History. By Thomas E. Felt. (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1976. Pp. xiv, 165. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. Paperbound, \$8.50.)

A Guide to Writing History. [By Doris Riker Marston]. (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 1976. Pp. xiv, 258. End maps, bibliography, index. \$8.50.)

Nothing illustrates more clearly the present high level of interest in state and local (or the newer term, family and community) history than the number of helpful handbooks and monographs which have recently appeared. This renewed interest had begun prior to the Bicentennial observance and the publication of *Roots*, but it was certainly stimulated by the one and continues to be sustained by the other as time goes on. The four small volumes reviewed here are representative of the widespread interest crystallized by these recent events. Any number of other publications could have been chosen which would illustrate different interests and illuminate additional

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areas of the state and local history movement. Surely the "States and the Nation" series, aiming to produce an interpretative volume on each of our fifty states plus the District of Columbia, is the most ambitious undertaking of all.

It might be noted in passing that of the four books discussed here, three were directly commissioned by or were inspired in one way or another by the Bicentennial. The American Association for State and Local History continues to be a most effective agent in weaving the many divergent strands present in family and community history into a useable fabric. *The volumes by Creigh and Felt were, in fact, published by that association.*

The most unusual monograph of the four here reviewed is the one by Helen Cavanagh, professor of history emerita at Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois. Cavanagh paints local history with broad, bold strokes while reviewing a lifetime of stimulating service in the classroom and in the direction of graduate student research. In the first of her five short chapters she struggles to perfect a useable definition of local history and cites with approval Henry Steele Commager's dictum that in the writing of any history the essential ingredients are "integrity, imagination and common sense." She finds merit in Carl Becker's streamlined definition that "history is the *memory* of things said and done" and ends by suggesting that the meaning of local history may be largely in the mind of the labeler or the beholder.

By far the most impressive of Cavanagh's contributions, however, is her effort to wrestle with the philosophic requirements of a modern approach to local history. While granting the contribution which quantitative social science *may* be able to make to the writing of history, Cavanagh's real message is a stirring appeal for the centrality of history in the educational curriculum and a warning against losing sight of the historical process in our endeavors.

The remaining three volumes are directed toward the needs of the small, local historical society and its devotees, with each approaching its audience from a slightly different point of view. For books of limited size their claims are not the least bit modest and perhaps even a bit over ambitious. Marston's *Guide* is the most substantial of the lot, is the only hardback among them, and is also the most comprehensive. In a series of twenty-two well-written chapters the author ranges all the way from "how to find the right ideas" and "the historian as detective and scholar" through oral history and the use of audio-

visuals to historical poetry, historical fiction, biography, and even job opportunities—especially for women. If reading about how to do history can substitute for actually doing it, this volume can save the beginner years of experience! Even though it contains a good bit of what might be described as extraneous material, Marston's *Guide* will inspire young and inexperienced writers with visions of success even while preparing them for the frustrating journey through research, writing, rejection, rewriting, editorial changes, and, finally, acceptance and publication.

Thomas Felt's cleverly written treatise very largely replaces the long useful *Local History: How to Gather It, Write It, and Publish It* (1941) by Donald Dean Parker. The new volume, *Researching, Writing and Publishing Local History*, will prove to be an up-to-date and generally helpful guide to these three essential aspects of any effort at serious historical study. Not surprisingly, the book's rather unimaginative organization finds chapter one devoted to research, chapter two to writing, and chapter three to publishing. The research chapter contains a good discussion of the complicated mechanics of doing history, including a review of many of the sources for local history such as plats and maps, manuscripts, newspapers, interviews, and government, church, and business records; strangely absent, however, is any mention of the availability of federal and state census records for the nineteenth century and the inviting possibility for demographic studies utilizing the new computer technology. Chapter two on writing devotes less attention to actual writing skills and techniques than it does to a realistic appraisal of the potential buying publics for various types of local history publications. The section on footnotes is especially good as Felt makes this sometimes intimidating subject both clear and logical. The final chapter, on publishing, offers useful, up-to-date, and practical information on book design and production problems. This is an extremely valuable section of great interest to anyone who has ever (or for that matter, who has never) experienced the joy and misery of seeing a publication, large or small, through the press. Felt's book closes with an annotated bibliography of references appropriate for the three topics discussed in this spare, 165-page handbook.

Finally, the delightful and intensely practical *Primer* by Dorothy Weyer Creigh is a joy to review. The author begins her book with a series of questions which any historical group interested in forming a society would do well to ask itself at the outset. Why do you want to have a historical society? What is

your scope? Who are your members? How do you finance it? Where do you get help? How do you begin? These questions, and others like them, are explored in the fourteen chapters which follow, and suggestions are offered on just about every kind of activity in which a historical society might want to be engaged. Does the group wish to be a museum society, a library, a site-marking group, a restored building agency, a publishing house—or more likely a combination of some of the above? All are dealt with sympathetically and at some length in *A Primer for Local Historical Societies*. In the author's own words, this book was written for the historical society which "is short on money, but long on enthusiasm, imagination and ingenuity, and is geographically remote from professional help and advice" (p. ix). This combination of characteristics will surely strike a responsive chord in the inner circles of many local historical agencies. One of its most valuable features is the list of "Other Help Available" at the conclusion of nearly every chapter. Also useful are the five appendixes appearing at the end which provide addresses for state and provincial (Canada) historical, arts and humanities, conservation, and foundation support groups which have much to offer local societies.