Book Reviews


This brief collection of papers dealing with interpretive approaches to community history will be of value to those who engage in local history research and its public presentation through museum exhibits, publications, and lectures. The authors, all prominent midwestern historians, were selected to present keynote addresses to four Indiana regional workshops for local historical society personnel during 1978 and 1979; their addresses comprise this paperbound volume.

While each author approaches the challenges of local history from a distinct perspective, two common themes pervade the book: the vital need for grassroots community research and the necessity of reorienting the topical and methodological approaches employed in research and interpretive presentation. Rather than continued emphasis on frontier beginnings, first families, and idiosyncratic happenings, all agree on the need for more meaningful local history utilizing broader hypotheses, perspectives from the social sciences, and concepts that enlighten the process of historical change rather than stressing limited historical facts.

Thomas D. Clark most successfully points out the challenges of local history research, as well as the variety of untapped issues and available sources. Clark is concerned with the historian's social role and sees local history as a means by which humanity can be rescued from scholarly abstractors and from the alienation produced by social and technological discontinuities in modern life. Accordingly, Clark encourages the collection and interpretation of commonplace experiences of the recent past and the synthesis of this social and economic history in a broader new national history. Richard Jensen is far less nostalgic about earlier American life, and he adroitly makes a case for the need to reinterpret local history on the basis of the conflict between "modernization" and "traditionalism" and the victory of the former. While some readers may fear that Jensen comes close to reifying ideal types and oversimplifying a complex historical record, he is quite right
about the need to recognize the basic historical direction of
change in the past century and a half. His reminder of the
superstition, apathy, and insensitivity of the "frontier genera-
tion" also is a healthy corrective for what can occur in local
history interpretations. Thomas J. Schlereth presents tech-
niques and Hoosier examples of "above-ground archaeology" as
a new means for museum curators and history teachers to
encourage a search for historical meaning outside museum ex-
hibits and history texts. Schlereth advocates interpretation of
the records of landscape, place names, architecture, and other
material culture artifacts, and he deftly demonstrates how this
art is practiced. Schlereth's excursion into history without tears
unintentionally demonstrates the need for documentary corrob-
oration and the utility of traditional historical knowledge for
gaining insight from a community's visual record.

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Local Government Records: An Introduction to Their Manage-
ment, Preservation, and Use. By H. G. Jones. (Nashville:
American Association for State and Local History, 1980.
Pp. xii, 208. Notes, illustrations, figures, appendixes, index.
Paperbound, $6.95.)

Among the 81,000 units of local government in the United
States, including counties, towns, villages, cities, parishes, and
boroughs, there is a bewildering variety of local public records.
Their form and content are as varied as the governmental
activities they reflect—collecting taxes, administering justice,
maintaining roads, conducting elections, providing public edu-
cation, and recording vital statistics and legal documents. To
provide some information about the management, preservation,
and use of this exponentially increasing body of records, the
National Historical Publications and Records Commission
(NHPRC) and the American Association for State and Local
History commissioned H. G. Jones to write this volume. Jones,
past president of the Society of American Archivists, former
director of the North Carolina Department of Archives and
History, and presently curator of the North Carolina Collection
at the University of North Carolina, was an obvious choice for
the assignment.

The original objective of providing a manual outlining a
model for the management and use of local public records had
to be abandoned because there appeared to be little consensus