

History Teachers' Forum

THE TRODDEN PATH

By OLD-TIMER

Years ago there was a path through the woods-pasture that many people used as a short cut to the main road that led on to the village. It was a gently winding path. There was a crude stile that enabled one to get over the rail fence at the edge of the pasture, and, close to the fence where the path started, stood a large white-oak. A few rods ahead as one passed along, there was a large granite boulder on the left. It was not a "granite boulder" to those who went that way—it was just "the big rock." Farther on, the line of travel took one around to the right of a fine clump of wild rose-bushes. Close by there was a lower area that did not drain well. Most of the year, this shallow basin was partly filled with water. Whether hurrying through or sauntering leisurely along, it did not matter, the path safely skirted the marshy sod or the mud at the outer rim of the pond. Just beyond there was a big, decaying walnut stump where a few years earlier had stood a splendid tree. A hundred paces on and not far from the old highway laid out by pioneers, stood the only evergreen among the three score of trees scattered over the thirty-acre tract. Passing this, one came at last to the "bars" guarding the opening into the public road. One could climb over, or slip back and let down "bars" two and three from the bottom, stoop over and step through or creep through to the outside. Before taking to the broad highway, by the unrecorded rules, the opening in the fence must be closed. It was almost a crime to leave the "bars" down.

To anyone who was accustomed to follow that well-marked path across the old woods-pasture, one way or the other, it became a friendly, helpful feature of life. Every curve, each gentle incline up or down and all the objects on either side turned into familiar guides that directed the footsteps aright. A good many people who, coming and going, passed that way years ago can still picture the beaten pathway across the enclosed tract from stile to "bars" or "bars" to stile, and would now find real pleasure going over it again.

Having taught history to many classes through a long period of years, Old Timer feels that any course in history

should stand out to both teacher and learner somewhat as the old woods-pasture with a familiar pathway across it. There would be some curves of course, some hill slopes, and some things presenting more or less distracting or difficult problems, but the clear pathway with its familiar events, their relations to each other and their order along the line of advance should always be there. Only the teacher of history who can readily follow and who loves to follow the highway through the history of any country or period can reveal it to the students in his classes. When the end of the semester or the year comes, students who cannot feel at home as they look forward or backward through the events which they have examined, analyzed and related to each other have really failed.

The teacher of history who cannot, at any point in the course, be it Roman, Medieval, Modern, English or American history, place himself on any part of the pathway and go forward or backward with sure steps is poorly prepared for his work. Even the college or university professor who rightly prides himself on his skill in historical criticism, dares not lose sight of the need to make plain the pathway through the period. After all, research and historical criticism are not ends in themselves, but means to be used in reaching an understanding of the events, the actors in, and the movements of history.

Old Timer does not believe that any teacher of history should—

Allow the text-book to control his teaching too completely.

Allow a long series of interesting class discussions of current problems to usurp most of the time that should be devoted to the teaching of history.

Allow himself to become a purveyor of propaganda for any self-seeking element of the country.

Allow himself to use his power and influence over his classes to indoctrinate them with all the beliefs that he has himself accepted.

Allow himself to think that he is too busy to read newspapers and magazines that deal with the questions of the day.

Allow himself to think that he has no time to read anything in addition to the text in larger histories, biographies, and source books.

Allow himself to remain ignorant of historical geography and still believe that he is teaching history.

Allow himself to believe that sets of true-false examination questions prepared by some one else are the only questions that he needs to use on his classes.

Allow himself to think that he knows how well or how poorly his students are doing their work without giving adequate tests and carefully grading the papers.