

History Teachers' Forum

SEEKING HIGHER DEGREES

By WILLIAM O. LYNCH

Very few high school teachers of history are without degrees. Many have sought, or are seeking, the degree of master of arts—a very laudable effort. The teacher with a bachelor's degree who is in love with history and who wishes to keep growing, soon feels the urge to pursue the subject further. School superintendents quite generally desire their teachers to do work leading to an advanced degree. It is easier to point with pride to high school faculties when a considerable number of the teachers have done, or are doing, graduate work. The prestige of the school becomes greater, and likewise that of the superintendent, as the training of teachers is extended. Because of these things and because teachers become more efficient through additional study, salary increases are frequently promised to those who complete the requirements and receive higher degrees.

The desire to add to one's prestige, to earn a higher salary, to place one's self in the way of promotion—any of these is praiseworthy. There are, however, some dangers to be guarded against. Real worth is not a mere matter of time spent taking courses that will count toward a coveted degree. Moreover, a master's degree is not something that should be granted or received as a mere matter of course after a year of additional work with grades not falling below a certain minimum. The graduate student should look on the extra period of study as a privilege. He should lose interest in many of the activities that absorbed his hours when an undergraduate. For the first time in his school career, he has the opportunity to work exclusively in the field where his greatest interest lies. If he does not have a vital interest in some field, sufficient ability to master the courses selected, a burning desire to increase his scholarship, and the power to extract real enjoyment from his study—he has no valid reason for seeking an advanced degree.

Graduate students seeking master's degrees are required to pass each course taken with a satisfactory grade, and they are usually required to present a thesis and to pass an oral examination. It seems entirely reasonable that each of these

conditions should be fairly met. Even when a student has met the set requirements, the degree is frequently conferred with misgivings. There is a characteristic which should belong to the holder of an advanced degree which is hard to define with precision, but it is a healthy, determined attitude in regard to the pursuit of the subject in which the degree has been sought—an unquenchable desire to know more accompanied by an anxiety to learn the best methods of obtaining the necessary data and judging its value.

Perhaps the following message if carried away by each student departing from an institution with a master's degree in history would exert an influence for good:

"You have met the requirements laid down for you. You have been subjected to certain tests and you have passed them. The degree has been conferred upon you, but, whether you really deserve it or not, only the future can determine. To be worthy of the degree, you must not permit your interest in the subject to wane. Your desire to know more must grow and you must read and search for new knowledge the rest of your days. You must make a reasonable effort to keep in touch with the growing literature of your field. You should, if you do not do more, carry on modest investigations from time to time and write up the results of your efforts. If you find it utterly impossible to write, you should read more extensively, being certain to study some good piece of published or unpublished contemporary material from time to time. All these obligations rest upon you. You can and should fulfill them. If you regard your work as done when you receive the degree or allow yourself to drift into an attitude which amounts to the same thing, as too many have done and are doing, you should never have sought the degree. It is your privilege to take your stand among those who will keep the sacred fire burning as long as they live."