

Indiana Historical Society

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A reviewer in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* recently criticized an author in these words: "His local history is, however, so erroneous as greatly to impair an otherwise scholarly work." By "local history" the reviewer seems to mean the historical geography of the locality with which he was concerned. His additional statement that the work of many historians shows similar weakness is an indication of the importance to the study of local history of investigators who know the locality and its relation to larger units. Academic historians, even when dealing with large areas and general movements, run into errors if they proceed without spade work of local historians. This is true, not only of their geographical references, but also of many other details upon which sound historical work depends.

How unsafe it is to write history solely on the basis of state and national documents and books covering large fields is illustrated by a recent development in this state. Several years ago the Indiana Historical Records Survey, a WPA project, made and published inventories of county archives of Indiana. Each of the inventories which was completed included a short history of the county and a list of the duties of the county officers, as well as a detailed list of the county records. The account of duties and responsibilities of officers was compiled at Indianapolis from state legislation dealing with these offices from the beginning down to date. This account was practically the same for all of the counties. Consequently, special and particular duties imposed by special and local legislation and by local circumstances upon officials in certain counties, duties peculiar to one county, were overlooked.

Thus the *Inventory* of Marshall County Archives made no mention of the responsibility of the county authorities at Plymouth, assumed under the Act making a state appropriation for the erection of the Menominee Village monument, to maintain the monument after it was erected and to keep it in good order. Even if the county officials looked to the *Inventory* for information on their responsibilities, they would not know of this particular duty laid upon them. In this respect the historical sketch and other parts of the *In-*

ventory were of no particular application. This item is not cited as a reflection on the workers in the WPA project (of which indeed the Indiana Historical Bureau was sponsor), but as an illustration of a defect common to a great deal of historical work—a defect which is a partial explanation of the lack of interest in historical writings among men of affairs and of their failure to use them.

An instance of the help which local historians may give to those working in a larger field has come up in connection with the publication by the Bureau of the three-volume collection of *The John Tipton Papers*. From the inception of this work many years ago, the search for writings and speeches of John Tipton led from the large collection of Tipton papers in the Indiana State Library into many other fields. Many items not in this collection were found in Indiana and Ohio newspapers. It was impossible for the Bureau, however, to make a search of all Indiana newspapers dating beyond the death of Tipton in 1839. Recently one of the Logansport members of the Indiana Historical Society, Robert B. Whitsett, Jr., found in one such unexplored newspaper, the *Logansport Star*, a series of unsigned articles published in the 1870's (the first was July 25, 1874) containing quite a lengthy account of Tipton's career. While the articles add little that is new to the story of Tipton's life, they are valuable as corroborative material on several points about which information was meager and unsatisfactory. They deserve a place in any Tipton bibliography, and it is unfortunate that they were discovered too late to be mentioned in the Bureau publication.

Emphasis is needed both on historians generally paying more attention to local history and on the call for local historians who feel the dignity of such work. Local historical societies, for the most part, find it hard to get people to participate in their activities, even people of ability and good historical education in the schools who ought to realize the significance of such work. If these people could sense the fascination and the value of accurate and complete information about the history of their communities, it would mean much, both for the local historical society and for the general welfare.