

Review Essay

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From File Folder to the Classroom: Recent Primary Source Curriculum Projects

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Abstract: The author reviews four curriculum units developed by the Illinois State Archives, the National Archives, the Cleveland Bureau of Jewish Education (in cooperation with the Western Reserve Historical Society), and the Minnesota Historical Society to bring primary sources into the secondary schools.

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ALL ARCHIVISTS, LIKE ALL historians, know the feeling when a stranger's letter written years ago seems to speak directly to them, collapsing in a sentence the distance between past and present. As rational professionals we recognize that time travel is an illusion; we also realize that reading dead people's mail is not only fun, but it also helps make history meaningful. Until recently, history teachers and their students have rarely been able to share this experience. The high school student who learned to test scientific generalizations by experimentation in the laboratory did not have a similar opportunity in the history classroom. Primary historical sources, the basis of the generalizations delivered up in their textbooks, almost never made it from the archives to the classroom. The process of historical discovery remained a mystery; the results of that process became data, memorized for tests and then quickly forgotten.

In the last few years, however, historians, archivists, and educators have sought to change all this by creating supplementary materials that brought primary sources into the secondary school where students could get their hands on them. Each of the four projects discussed here attempts to teach what primary historical sources are and to explain how historians use them to understand the past. The authors employ very different formats and techniques, and also have a variety of other specific objectives. Taken together, these curriculum units illustrate many of the possibilities and the problems inherent in using archival resources to teach the skills of historical inquiry.

From the Ashes, 1872-1900: A Selection of Documents from the Proceedings Files of the Chicago City Council is the third collection of documents for classroom use produced by the Illinois State Archives.¹

The authors, Robert E. Bailey and Elaine Shemoney Evans, seek to increase students' interest in history by introducing them to local history "in a meaningful manner," and to introduce historical reasoning by teaching them to read historical documents. They selected fifty short documents from more than 100,000 files of the Chicago City Council. The documents sample nearly every type of record produced by city government as well as letters and petitions sent by constituents. Each document is reproduced on one side of a heavy legal-sized sheet with a printed transcription on the reverse. Teachers can photocopy them for class distribution; students will be able to read most of them easily. The teacher's guide includes an excellent overview of Chicago in the Gilded Age and suggestions for further reading, but no real lesson plans. For each document there is a short explanation of the circumstances surrounding its creation and four "points to consider" when discussing it. Some of the documents are rich in possibilities; others are routine, banal, and even boring.

From the Ashes is simple and straightforward in conception and presentation, but very difficult to use effectively. The authors warn teachers that many of the events documented have little significance in themselves and that they "were intentionally selected because they create questions which cannot be answered from their internal content alone." The teacher's guide, however, does not provide enough information on which to base productive analysis or discussion of many of the topics addressed in the documents or "points to consider." This curriculum will so frustrate already overburdened teachers that I suspect few will use it as the authors intended, particularly since textbooks, the

¹Robert E. Bailey and Elaine Shemoney Evans, *From the Ashes, 1872-1900: A Selection of Documents From*

the Proceedings Files of the Chicago City Council (Springfield: Illinois State Archives, 1990); includes a 123-page teacher's manual and loose documents.

secondary source most easily consulted, rarely emphasize urban history.

The United States Expands West: 1785-1842 is the latest in the National Archives' exemplary series of supplemental teaching units for secondary American history classes.² Students can analyze reproductions of documents from the National Archives, including, but not limited to, letters, maps, artwork and newspapers, in ten exercises developed by Jean Mueller, Wynell Schamel and Elsie T. Freeman of the Depository's Education Branch. In addition to teaching historical skills, the activities reveal to students the federal government's commitment to westward expansion, highlight the international character of life in the American West, and help them to sort myth from fact in western history. The authors exploited the strengths of the National Archives' collections while acknowledging the weaknesses, particularly in the area of women's experiences in the West.

The lesson plans are extremely detailed and on first reading may appear overly ambitious, but previous experience with earlier units and close ties with secondary school social studies teachers and administrators have taught the National Archives staff that it is usually better to give teachers too much to work with than too little. They provide exercises for three ability levels, offer simple introductory exercises in the use of primary sources, and include a sufficient range of information and pedagogical strategies for teachers who will use the materials in a variety of classroom settings.

The unit includes forty-five documents and twenty-two slides. Because the authors chose to emphasize "the sequence of and relationship between documents," as a skills

objective, some of the exercises require students to work with as many as seventeen documents. Sequence and interrelationship are important steps toward causal explanation, but exercises in chronology may be of less interest to students than they are to archivists. Moreover, the documents themselves are often poor reproductions of handwritten originals. One may question the classroom value of facsimile reproductions that are no easier to read than the originals and have none of the original's authenticity, texture, or mystique. Several of the documents are transcribed in the teacher's guide, but to use others students will spend so much valuable class time deciphering words that they will have little time left over to explore their meaning. The sheer number of documents may also overwhelm some teachers and students, particularly since many have little supporting commentary and at least one is incorrectly construed. Document 22, described on pages 55 and 58 of the teacher's guide as a "Proposed amendment to prohibit slavery in Louisiana Territory" did not prohibit slavery. It merely curtailed the speculative slave trade, and in a way that neither freed any slaves then living in the territory nor prevented slaveholding settlers from bringing more with them.

"*From Generation to Generation: History Through Images. An Examination of Jewish Continuity in Cleveland, Ohio*, produced by the Cleveland Bureau of Jewish Education in cooperation with The Western Reserve Historical Society, uses primary materials "to teach the meaning of 'community' through the contribution of one ethnic group, the Jews of Cleveland, Ohio."³ The Learning Activities Packet

²National Archives and Records Administration, *The United States Expands West: 1785-1842* (Boca Raton, FL: National Archives and SIRS, Inc., 1990); includes a 75-page teacher's guide, 45 facsimiles, and 22 slides.

³Sylvia F. Abrams, *From Generation to Generation: History Through Images, An Examination of Jewish Continuity in Cleveland, Ohio* (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Bureau of Jewish Education, 1989); includes a 35-page teacher's guide and loose documents.

consists of ten sets of facsimiles for student use and another set with lesson plans for the teacher. The fifteen documents include an autobiography, a playbill, pages from the Cleveland city directory, and a ship's manifest. Mostly reproduced in original format, the documents look like the real thing. In a few instances, however, newspaper clippings ranging over fifty years have been assembled into a single document, collapsing chronology and thereby complicating historical explanation. In her introduction, Project Director Sylvia F. Abrams suggests that social studies teachers and Jewish studies instructors use the kit to teach cultural pluralism by exploring six community-building concepts: religion, family, immigration, neighborhoods, work, and social/cultural activities. Sample lesson plans for middle and high school students are keyed to these concepts; analytic questions, work sheets, and suggested learning activities guide the teacher in the effective use of the documents. *From Generation to Generation* also offers suggestions for extended learning activities that would require additional research.

After studying the fifteen documents individually, students return to them in the final two lesson plans to consider questions of community cohesiveness and survival, a very effective technique for introducing historical synthesis. Selected excerpts from secondary sources, including photocopied text in tiny print from the *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, provide adequate background information.⁴ The educators involved with the project all teach in Jewish schools, but this supplementary curriculum is appropriate for any secondary school setting and could also serve as a model for studies of other urban ethnic groups.

The Minnesota Historical Society's

Northern Lights: Going to the Sources, by Stephen Sandell, is the most ambitious of the curriculum projects and by far the most successful.⁵ Published as the companion volume to MHS's middle school state history textbook, *Northern Lights: The Story of Minnesota's Past*, its first objective is to teach state history.⁶ The primary materials are not packaged separately, but instead are integrated into twenty different activities in the 215-page, richly illustrated source book. The set is a bargain at \$19.95, but because each student must have one the curriculum requires a substantial investment. There is a separate teacher's edition.

Maps, photographs, business records, diaries, even quilts and canoes, are primary sources for creative activities that teach historical methodology and critical thinking. Students use these sources to test hypotheses and to answer historical questions. They learn, therefore, not just how to do historical research but why historians need archival resources to write history. Interesting and imaginative activities encourage students to evaluate and integrate a number of diverse sources in order to arrive at a conclusion. They stress multiple causation, generalization, and other higher levels of analysis. The lessons explore the history of both famous and ordinary Minnesotans: native Americans, children, immigrants, fur traders, farmers. They introduce business history and the history of technology. But best of all they are fun. *Northern Lights: Going to the Sources* is written at a sixth-grade reading level, but I couldn't put it down.

Successful primary source curriculum projects are products of close collaboration between archivists, historians, and educa-

⁴Stephen Sandell, *Northern Lights: Going to the Sources* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1989).

⁶Rhoda R. Gilman, *Northern Lights: The Story of Minnesota's Past* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1989); includes a 446-page looseleaf teacher's edition and a 215-page student's edition.

⁴David Van Tassel and John J. Grabowski, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

tors. Materials that are intellectually satisfying, historically accurate, and pedagogically sound help teachers make the study of history at once more interesting and more useful. When history becomes a participation sport, students develop skills

they will continue to use long after they have forgotten textbook facts. But until more schools encourage teachers to put down the textbook and use primary sources, many of these intriguing learning tools are likely to sit unused on library shelves.