

HISTORY FOR ALL

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"Luring the General Public into the Arms of Clio"

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Clio is our muse in trouble. Historians no longer can serve only as the anointed who receive their inspiration from Clio, examine her mysteries, and disseminate historical knowledge to eager and grateful lay worshippers. Instead, cries of alarm from our professional ranks lead us to see Clio in a position similar to the lovely maiden of the silent picture who is bound to the railroad tracks with the train coming closer and closer. "History is in crisis," reported the executive secretary of the Organization of American Historians, Richard Kirkendall, in 1975.¹ Benjamin T. Harrison described this report as "Clio's Obituary."² In a Bicentennial appraisal in 1976, Frank Freidel lamented that "there never has been a greater need for professionally trained American historians than today, and never has there been a time when so many historians were seeking employment."³ Holman Hamilton reemphasized Clio's continuing problems in his presidential address to the Southern Historical Association in Atlanta last year.⁴ Ironically, at this time of crisis, the American Historical Association, which co-sponsors this conference, nears its centennial; and the Georgia Association of Historians, the other sponsor, is only seven years old. We would not be here today if we were assembling to read the last rites for Clio, but we come here today with the hope that we can give Clio a face lift that will make her more appealing. So, what can we do to rescue Clio from the thundering train that would bury our muse in a society of instant potatoes and instant news that has largely disregarded scholarly history? I submit to you that in addition to teaching history better in the formal setting, we need to extend our teaching to selling the merits of scholarly history to the general out-of-school public.

In a pluralistic, democratic society such as ours, it is quite apparent that the attitude and interest exhibited by the

general public toward history is reflected in private donations and legislative appropriations that support our discipline. The value that the public places on history also has an effect on course offerings and requirements. Yet we have ignored the general public whom we often have not reached when they were students in the formal setting because we taught them at a period of their lives when, as children, they experienced the world, as Eugene Genovese describes it, with a "particular kind of immediacy." We taught them before they developed a "sense of their own relationship to past experiences and history."⁵ At times, we academic historians seem to prefer exchanging information by reading scholarly papers to each other rather than making an effort to reach outside our professional ranks. The general public, however, is usually not interested in our scholarly papers. They are not captives, as they often were when students, and we must lure them into the arms of Clio.

The graying of America makes the general public a factor of increasing importance to the well-being of history. As you recall, the status of history began its fall in the sixties when the war babies of the forties were just reaching adulthood. These baby-boom Americans, however, as some of you may be personally aware, are now approaching middle age, and the adults of the sixties, then in the so-called prime of life, are now the senior citizens. James Cass, who is rather contemptuous of professional historians, claims that the "demographic facts of life suggest a growing interest in the past as senior citizens look back to their contributions to society."⁶ The last available census information indicates that there are eleven and a half million more Americans fifty-five years of age or older than there were in 1960.⁷ Pensions given to senior citizens for mandatory and voluntary retirement allow them the leisure to pursue their kind of history, which is usually not our kind of history.

Carl G. Gustavson reminds us that there are many rooms in the mansion of history and that "history comes in many varieties and has many uses."⁸ A writer of Florida history and a native Georgian, Charlton Tebeau, claims that "poverty of mind and imagination arises first from a too limited definition of history that excludes anything not considered significant, not documented in traditional references."⁹ The point is that we must start at the level of historical mindedness of whomever our public might be, just as we try to start at the educational level of the student in the classroom.

No documentation is needed to impress upon you the recent vibrant growth of local and family history. However, too often you have heard professional historians snub organizations such as the Daughters and Sons of the American Revolution as anti-quarian. It is, however, their kind of history and has a tremendous appeal to many Americans today. Why not appeal to this interest to enlarge historical horizons? At Middle Georgia College, we did just that in a family history forum. The Georgia

Committee for the National Endowment for the Humanities funded the honoraria for the principal speakers who were academic historians. Our in-kind contributions consisted of the services of some of the history faculty at the college and meeting facilities. Various organizations such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, Rotary Club, Pilot Club, Delta Kappa Gamma International Society, and the local Chamber of Commerce served as co-sponsors which helped provide the nucleus of an audience. Over 125 people from the Middle Georgia area gave up pursuits such as football on a Saturday in November to participate in a forum on family history. The audience responded enthusiastically and remarked vociferously on how their historical knowledge had been widened. For months afterwards, I received letters inquiring whether or not we proposed another such forum because the first one was so stimulating. Our lure in this instance was successful.

Middle Georgia College was involved in another program where our lures proved rather unattractive to the general public. Back in the days of the Bicentennial, the college sponsored a Great Americans program which consisted of a series of film-lecture meetings held in various towns in the Middle Georgia area. The films, which we were almost forced to use because the Georgia Committee for the Humanities had purchased these films for another grant and was funding the series, contained inaccuracies which the historian conducting the meeting had to correct. In each town a few dedicated lay historians attended the meetings. Although the number attending the meetings far exceeded the attendance of the family history forum, the number attending each meeting was dismally small and not overly enthusiastic. Evidently the series lacked appeal to a great proportion of the local general public. The greatest error occurred in imposing the program on the public. The target audience should have had more input into the planning of the program so that it would have been more their kind of history. Also, in any proposals funded by the Georgia Committee for the Humanities, the historian has to work around the presentist approach of the guidelines which require that the focus must create a dialogue between the academicians and the general adult public leading toward the understanding of current policy issues.¹⁰

The NEH, however, offers an excellent source of funds for history programs aimed at the general public and should not be overlooked. Some of you may already have taken advantage of the funding of the foundation and have greater success stories to relate than mine. Judging from a recent newsletter, there is some indication that the Georgia Committee is not quite as preoccupied with contemporary problems since they are calling for proposals on social history that "explore our region's oral, ethnic, or urban history. It especially invites projects that will heighten awareness of the ideas, values, and experiences that have shaped our regional heritage."¹¹ However, only

four out of twelve programs listed in this newsletter pertained to history. These NEH grants have their drawbacks. A historian has to be willing to do "missionary work" for Clio to receive NEH funding because proposal writing is laborious, unpaid monetarily, and requires submission of twenty copies of the proposal. Directing the projects also becomes rather hectic along with regular teaching duties.

All of us at some time or another are asked to give speeches to various local clubs and civic organizations. This, of course, presents another opportunity to attract the general public into the arms of Clio. Often you encounter an obstacle, however. The subject you are requested to speak on is usually of the instant history variety. In order to enlarge historical consciousness of the group, you must do some fast juggling away from instantism to history. Yet you must start at their interest level or you will have frustrated and "turned off" your audience. If we are to revive Clio in the eyes and ears of the general public, we still must seize every chance we have. We should accept these invitations to speak, offer to change the topic so that it will fit more into our areas of expertise, and divert the audience from "hot history," as Max Lerner calls it,¹² to history with a perspective.

Another avenue open for the professional historian to beguile the lay historian closer to the Clio we admire is more participation in state and local historical societies. The mixture of amateur and professional historians is a revitalizing force that focuses on sources both kinds of historians may previously have neglected. Academic historians have much to offer such organizations in the areas of their expertise and raising historical standards. At the recent annual meeting of the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah, three of our professional historians presented excellent scholarly papers on the Georgia signers of the Declaration of Independence. Most of the audience, however, were not professionals -- just people interested in history. A word of caution should be inserted here. Although some of the amateurs in these organizations appear to have limited views of history consisting of this old house and that old house, we cannot insult them because then we will never lure them into Clio's full embrace. Nevertheless, we cannot lower our standards.

The local historical society in Emanuel County, Georgia, offers a good example of how professional historians furnished leadership for local historical endeavors. When fellow historian James E. Dorsey arrived in Swainsboro seven years ago to become librarian at Emanuel County Junior College, he found that little had been accomplished to preserve the past.¹³ Early efforts consisted of publications in the local newspaper of pre-Civil War source material on the county. The material was well-received; and John Durden, also a historian at the college, followed with a publication of tombstone records of the county. Dorsey explains that this resulted in an awareness of their work as they came in contact with many of Emanuel

County citizens. In that same Bicentennial year, they published a picture history of the county. In so doing, they contacted an even wider variety of local residents.

Out of this grew the organization of a historical society in 1977, which presently consists of over 150 members. The society has been extremely active, sponsoring historical trips and publication of a county history and pre-Civil War legal notices. Dorsey advises that the society helped index the local newspaper and found this enjoyable. The data has been computerized and is presently being printed. Publications of these amateur and professional historians now number eight -- a prolific production for five years and one that should be helpful to other historians.

Dorsey attributes the success of the local historical society to personal contact. He lured the local people to history by giving them an opportunity to talk about their families. As a result, they shared old records and photographs. The college has started an archive of county historical material, has attracted several manuscript collections, and has received a large number of old farm and home items.

History, as all of us are aware, takes place in a place, as well as a time, but many times we err in ignoring the place. Francis Parkman insisted that historians should stand on the spot that history occurred. Americans obviously enjoy traveling very much and patronize national shrines in great numbers. If your area does not have a historical society, the historians can sponsor historical tours. In this manner, the study of history can be approached, and the historians can sort out the truth from the myths. The states that are represented here today contain many sites of historic interest such as the older cities dating back to the colonial days -- Savannah, Charleston, New Bern, Mobile. Trips can be arranged to Indian mounds, battlegrounds, and homes of the rich from the "Gilded Age." We teachers use field trips as an educational experience for our students. Why not offer the same service to the general public? When I arrange a field trip for my students and offer the same opportunity to night classes, I am almost overwhelmed at the number who are willing to take a day off from work to accompany the full-time students on a trip. A few years ago my classes visited Atlanta. Prior to this trip I had misgivings because all Georgia schools, I thought, offered trips to Atlanta. My classes, however, thoroughly enjoyed the trip, particularly the adults. They had traveled to Atlanta many times but never had the time, or took the time, to visit the Atlanta Historical Society or other places of historical interest.

During the course of writing this paper, I contacted the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Kenneth H. Thomas, historian for the Historical Preservation Section, advises that their relationship with academic historians primarily stems from the department's administration of the National

Register of Historic Places, which necessitates research of county and local records. He adds that "we have found this contact between academic historians and the local records to be an important bridge that is not often crossed by historians."¹⁴ Thomas further maintains that more historians could involve the public through this program, particularly when using the historic district concept and gathering data for a whole area. According to Thomas, "a good historian knows how to sort out the facts from fiction and should be able to instill that in the public."¹⁵

The writing of history presents another area where we can lure the general public into the arms of Clio. In the last decade, several historical voices of distinction have complained about the poor writing of history, but the quality of writing has not improved to any discernible extent. It may be presumptuous for an instructor from a junior college not even located on an interstate highway to add her voice to these more prestigious ones, but all historians are consumers of history whether they are teachers or writers, or both. We know that many scholarly histories provide almost incomprehensible reading. History, after all, was (and still remains) literature before it developed into the discipline of history, but somehow many of us have left the art of writing out of our history. The behaviorists, although their methodology adds to our historical knowledge, constitute the greatest offenders of style, often overwhelming the reader with technical jargon. Regardless of what kind of history is being written, the written word should be inviting and simple enough for the general public to enjoy. Certainly we can learn to be skilled enough in our own language to communicate meaningful history in an interesting fashion without committing inaccuracies for dramatic effects.

Also, somehow we must find means of getting our written history to the general public. Perhaps professional historians should be more active in submitting articles to popular magazines and newspapers, which the general public would be more inclined to read. Some newspapers, such as the Atlanta Constitution, have been employing writers with historical backgrounds, which certainly helps raise the level of historical consciousness. If all reporters had at least a minor in history, it would not only enhance the status of history but it would provide historians with more jobs.

This last point concerns the media and is a challenge to you. How often have you shuddered over the historical inaccuracies and distortions of a television documentary, or even a news report? We all have, but what have we done about it? In the AHA Newsletter of April 1980, DeLloyd Guth describes the situation in this way: "Media merchants of a chaotic, myopic, 'instant history' are not the history teachers but rather, the competitors of history teachers."¹⁶ Yet, have we not abrogated our responsibility to the "media merchants"? I complain about

the media's historical faults; we complain to each other about these errors; we hear speeches from distinguished historians bemoaning this same situation. Thus far, nothing substantial has been done. Now and then the media throws some crumbs in Clio's way by employing a historian as consultant. Hamilton advised in his presidential address to the SHA that in his preliminary draft he advocated that historians demand that the television networks employ consulting historians for every production.¹⁷ He was told, however, that historians do not have that kind of influence. We are the professional historians, but we meekly stand by and allow the "quacks" to peddle our wares. One must admire the medical profession; they make war on the "quacks" and demand respect for their medical knowledge. Do you have the courage to call a medical doctor Mister? Anyone on the program of a talk show interprets history, but have you noted that the director calls in a medical doctor for health hints. I do not have any formula for convincing the media to use trained historians to correct historical errors. Many times I mentally composed letters to the media, but have never actually written them, considering such letters only futile gestures. Perhaps if we worked on the media in a concentrated fashion on various levels we could obtain some results. Our local historical organizations could monitor and contact the local media; the national organizations could do the same with the national media. My challenge to you is how best we can do this because if we continue to allow the "media merchants" to distort history to the general public, then we can never lure them to realize Clio's full charm.

Yes, we are here today to rescue Clio, unbind her from the railroad tracks, give her a face lift, a 1980 hairdo, and some new garments. As Frank Freidel advised the Organization of American Historians in 1976, "Out of this crisis, out of adversity, there comes the opportunity for a fruitful redirection of our professional energies."¹⁸ Let us rededicate ourselves to Clio and lure the general public, as well as our students, into Clio's warmest embrace.

Notes

1. Richard S. Kirkendall, "The Status of History in the Schools," Journal of American History 62 (September 1975): 557.
2. Benjamin T. Harrison, "Clio's Obituary: Organization of American Historians Report on the Status of History," Clearing House 50 (October 1976): 87-90.
3. Frank Freidel, "American Historians: A Bicentennial Appraisal," Journal of American History 63 (June 1976): 5.

4. Holman Hamilton, "Clio with Style," Journal of Southern History 46 (February 1980): 3-16.
5. Eugene Dominick Genovese et al., "Is History Dead?" American Heritage 28 (December 1976): 86.
6. James Cass, "Does the Past Have a Future?" Saturday Review, May 1976, p. 30.
7. U.S., Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1978, p. 29.
8. Carl G. Gustavson, The Mansion of History (New York:McGraw-Hill Paperbacks, 1976), p. 7.
9. Charlton W. Tebeau, "History Is Where You Find It," Broward Legacy 1 (April 1977): 4.
10. Committee for the Humanities in Georgia, "Proposal Format and Guidelines for Grant Applications: 1977-79," p. 1.
11. Committee for the Humanities in Georgia, Newsletter, 7 (August 1979): 2.
12. Max Lerner, "Writing 'Hot History'," Saturday Review, May 1976, pp. 16-19.
13. James E. Dorsey to author, April 1980.
14. Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr., to author, April 1980.
15. Ibid.
16. DeLloyd J. Guth, "History as Epistemology," AHA Newsletter 18 (April 1980): 6.
17. Hamilton, "Clio with Style," p. 10.
18. Freidel, "American Historians," p. 20.

"The City Historian as History Teacher"

By Grace Hooten Gates, City Historian of Anniston, Alabama

Anniston, in the neighboring State of Alabama, has enjoyed a century-long reputation as "The Model City." Although the title had differing meanings for different people, the nickname was popularized by Atlantan Henry Grady for the town's pioneering effort in the New South industrial mentality.¹