

What Is History?

If an inquiring reporter should take the trouble to ask, "What is history?", it is probable that most of the answers would run something like this: "History is a record of the past." But what record? Who wrote it? And who reads it?

In this centennial year, Iowans have a renewed interest in things historical. An ox yoke, a grain cradle, a candle mold, or a hackle lying in a display window, oldtime songs on the radio, pageants, and parades, women with bonnets and men with whiskers — all these recall the life of the pioneers. The present looks at the past, old records are made into palimpsests, and we ask once more, "What is history?"

A ten-ton dinosaur with a three-ounce brain once left a footprint in the mud. He had no thought of writing history, but millions of years later that footprint was recognized by a geologist as a part of the history of the earth. The laws of Hammurabi were not history to those who had to obey them, but centuries later they became a mirror of the life of the Babylonians of that age. The letter one receives, reads, and lays aside, the newspaper which is read and discarded, the ad-

vertisement which is tossed on the doorstep — all these are unintentional history, ephemeral but invaluable in understanding the life of the people.

Some records there are which are made for preservation — laws, journals of legislatures, reports of courts, accounts kept by officials of the government, records of societies, corporations, and churches. Official documents are presumably to be kept permanently, but courthouse basements are often crowded with old papers which sooner or later go into the furnace or a waste paper drive. Unofficial records are often stored in homes and are forgotten until housecleaning, a fire, or the sale of the house ends in their destruction.

But there is inherent in all people, even in the most primitive, an instinct to perpetuate the memory of persons, events, and ideas. A rude drawing on the wall of a cave, the pyramids and the Taj Mahal, an inscription on a tombstone or marker, a commemorative stamp, the granite monument built around the cabin where Lincoln was born — all these are mute witnesses of man's desire to preserve the memory of those he loves and admires against the obliteration which is part of death.

Along the way man learned to substitute words for rude pictures and history took the form of tablets, scrolls, and finally printed books. Man wrote the story of his life, wrote of his friends and his

enemies, his own people, his neighbors, and the world. In spite of all these efforts, much history is unrecorded or unread. Many records are lost forever. In the words of Bayard Taylor:

“For every sentence uttered, a million
more are dumb;

Men’s lives are chains of chances, and
History their sum.”

Some records, painstakingly prepared, are found by those who cannot read them. They are to history what the subconscious mind is to memory. Some day a word or a fleeting idea may bring them into the consciousness of man. What is history? To each individual it is what he knows of the past. It is *his* story of life, family, country, the earth, and all things on it. It is also all that went to produce that individual and his kind. Conscious history is what we know of the past; real history is the foundation of the present.

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