

Comment by the Editor

UNCONSCIOUS HISTORIANS

Blessed is the man who writes history unconsciously — who has other occupations and other purposes in life, yet leaves without realizing it a record often more illuminating, because more direct, than that of the formal historian.

To a large extent the newspaper man falls in this class. His mind is preoccupied with the present. Day before yesterday is out of his realm — so is the day after tomorrow. It is for his evening subscribers that he writes his editorials, recounts his news, and sets forth his advertisements; but the historian a half century later rejoices as he reads in the old sheets the political spirit of the time, the fresh account of current events, and the intimate presentation of the food and clothing and accessories of life of his grandfather.

Most pamphleteers and many propagandists and some diarists are unconscious historians. In letters preserved in attics, in old photographs and views of buildings and towns, in railroad time-tables and in maps and advertising literature we find history unconsciously and invaluable recorded.

AN OLD ATLAS

The other day we came across an old atlas of Iowa, published in 1875. We remember the book

from our boyhood days when we used to pore over it by the hour. Dog-eared was the leaf where spread the map of the old home county, with every creek and patch of wood and swamp, and every jog in the road clearly shown. All the farm houses were indicated by tiny rectangles with the name of the farmer alongside. Here and there were microscopic drawings of schoolhouses and churches; and mills and blacksmith shops and cemeteries each had their symbols until the whole page was luminous with landmarks. These maps were meant for contemporary use, not for the historian of years to come. Yet how graphic is this record of the countryside in 1875.

And how we fed our eyes upon the pictures with which these pages of maps were interlarded. Here the artist and lithographer had nobly portrayed Iowa. We found the residences of the leading citizens of our town — and of other towns. There were pictures without end of farm residences in every county in the State. Everywhere trim wooden fences enclosed those gabled houses of half a century ago, and almost everywhere the lightning-rod salesman had made his visit.

Then there were the pages that showed forth the State institutions. The three modest buildings of the State University of Iowa were far outshone by the magnificent facades of the insane asylums. Happily in the intervening years the State has come to realize that it pays to put better stuff in the making of a citizen and so save on repair work.

The book was listed as an historical atlas because of the pages of formal history in the back. But this material is easily found in other places. The historical data of prime importance was that which the atlas makers presented with no idea of recording history — the detailed maps of the counties in 1875, and the pictures of the homes and business houses and public institutions of a day that is gone.

IDEALS OF 1875

To be sure, one must make allowance for certain distortions due to State and community pride. For example, in the pictures of Iowa farms there were pigs, large and round, who did not wallow or lie asleep in the mud, but stalked about in stately and dignified fashion or gazed reflectively at the gigantic cows, who, disdaining the grass, stood at attention in the foreground. The horses were of the prancing variety with upraised hoof and everflowing mane and tail. They drew brand new wagons up the road, or buggies in which rode be-parasolled and curiously dressed ladies.

I used to wonder why cattle and horses and hogs were always drawn with their fat profiles toward the front of the picture — as if a strong wind had blown straight across the page lining them up like weather vanes. Now I know that the glorified live stock was an expression of Iowa ideals in 1875 — and that fact in itself is of historic importance.

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