

"Clearing House"
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AMERICAN HISTORY 1937

in VERSE

By LEONARD S. KENWORTHY

ALMOST any morning in the 1850's, 60's or 70's the one room schoolhouses throughout the United States were the scenes of choral singing or group chanting of American geography. As soon as the order was given out, the pupils would begin en masse the "sing-song" arrangement of state capitals or other geographical information in the particular version familiar to that community. In unison they began:

Maine, Augusta, on the Kenebec.
New Hampshire, Concord, on the Merrimac.
Vermont, Montpelier, on the Onion River.
Etc.

And so it continued, with each line repeated twice, until the entire country was covered.

Today we smile when we recall the pedagogical methods of former times. We marvel at the progress that has been made in emphasizing comprehension rather than memorization of subject matter.

Is it not possible, however, that we can still make use of the rhythmic pleasure and factual memory of the old fashioned method of singing geography, by introducing historical verse to our students? Surely the study of American history justifies some recognition of the poetry of our nation, especially when that poetry bears a special relationship to incidents and persons ordinarily studied in history courses.



EDITOR'S NOTE: *The author suggests a number of ways in which historical verse can be studied in connection with American history, including the integration of literature and history. He also discusses groups of historical poems dealing with various periods. Mr. Kenworthy teaches in the Brunswick School, Greenwich, Connecticut.*

Nor would the slight variation in our approach to history by the introduction of such poetry be at all disreputable. Indeed, it might be extremely interesting and profitable to students and teachers alike.

That there is an abundance of available materials cannot be denied. Poems describing historical events and persons are numerous. The task before a teacher, therefore, is one of selecting rather than assembling data. This selection depends chiefly upon the aims in view and the method of use. Several plans suggest themselves for treatment.

In some of our progressive schools the experiment is being tried of fusing or integrating the American history and American literature courses. This is a notable step if the teachers chosen to direct such a study are capable of handling this new approach, if the time allotted to the course is sufficient, and if the balance between these two aspects of American life is maintained sufficiently. Such plans include, of course, some historical poetry as one place in which both history and literature are combined.

A less elaborate plan and one more feasible in most schools is the close correlation between the work of the history and English departments so that the work in both courses will dovetail or supplement each other.

If that is not possible, the assignment of special topics or supplementary reading of poems with historical themes would be interesting as well as helpful in arousing and furthering interest in English and history and in fixing in the students' minds the story of our nation.

Even this scheme may involve too much time or for other reasons not be practical in many situations. There are other more sim-

ple and yet effective means of presenting American history in verse. In history clubs, classes, and in assembly programs shorter units may be presented easily and successfully. A meeting or series of meetings might profitably be devoted to a poetical history of the United States, to a study of the historical poetry of certain men and women, to the poetry of various periods in our national history, or to the poems characterizing the cities of our country.

General introductory poems for us in any of these schemes are numerous and include such favorites as Katherine Lee Bates' "America the Beautiful"; Stephen Vincent Benet's "Invocation," from his classic "John Brown's Body"; Walt Whitman's "I Hear America Singing"; Henry Van Dyke's "America for Me"; Sidney Lanier's "Dear Land of All My Love," his centennial meditation of Columbia; and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "The Building of the Ship."

A history of the United States in verse might well begin with the poems dealing with the Indians, such as Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha," Lowell's "A Chippewa Legend," and Thackeray's "Pocahontas."

The fact that these are partially based on legends and myths should not lessen their significant portrayal of Indian life. Following these might come the numerous poems on the explorers, including such familiar titles as Lanier's "Columbus," similar ones by Joaquin Miller and Annette Wynne, and Longfellow's "Sir Humphrey Gilbert." After a portion from the legendary and partially historical "Courtship of Miles Standish," would follow Guiterman's vivid story of "Young Washington" on his trip to the French forts in 1753, and Lowell's more inclusive poem on "Washington."

In the same period would be found Bryant's "The Green Mountain Boys," Wilson's "Ticonderoga," Emerson's "Concord Hymn" and Lowell's "Concord Ode," and with them Sidney Lanier's "Battle of Lexington."

Leaving the early history of the states on

the seacoast, the poetic history of the United States would follow the great migrations westward as described by Walt Whitman in "Pioneers! Oh Pioneers!", in Guiterman's "Daniel Boone," "The Oregon Trail," and "The Pioneer," in Joaquin Miller's "Crossing the Plains" and in Vachel Lindsay's dramatic piece, "The Ghosts of the Buffaloes."

The conflict which they encountered with the Indians and the wilds of nature might then fade out as the poems begin to narrate the conflict between the states as a result of the question of slavery, a question so stirring handled in the historic poems of Longfellow and Whittier, such as "Massachusetts to Virginia," "The Slave Ships," "The Slave in the Dismal Swamps," and "The Slave Singing at Midnight."

The war itself is dramatically told in scores of poems. Particularly well known ones are Baker's "The Black Regiment," Read's "Sheridan's Ride," Thompson's "High Tide at Gettysburg," Pike's "Dixie," and Work's "Marching Through Georgia." Poems about Lincoln would fill a volume.

Turning to less familiar themes connected with our later history, one would find that the type of poetry changes with the topics handled.

Vachel Lindsay's "Santa Fe Trail" and his "General Booth Enters Into Heaven" are both historical in their content and at the same time characteristic of a later type of American poetry, some aspects of which are included in Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," in which he describes the great stockyards of the world. James S. Tippet's "Building a Skyscraper" and Clara Lambert's "Skyscraper Is a City's House" indicate something of the spirit of the metropolitan areas and the mechanization of the nation.

There are several poets who have chosen as their themes men whose names are eternally linked with American history, or events which are closely associated with American history. Longfellow, Whittier, Guiterman, Miller, Lindsay, Sandburg, and

Whitman are names that immediately come to mind. Entire club and assembly programs or individual class reports can be made on any of these men, as to the reasons for their interest in these themes, the motives behind their writing on these historical ideas, and their influence on the thinking of their times as a result of their crusading pens.

That the mass of this material could easily be broken into a study of American history by periods should be evident to everyone. The poetry dealing with Discovery and Exploration, Colonization, the Revolution, National Development, Civil Conflict, Industrial Development, and Present-Day Life is fascinating, varied, and colorful.

No period seems to have been covered unduly unless it is the Civil War era, which brought forth an astounding volume of poetry with historical themes.

Other methods of presenting this and similar material will come to the minds of those who have some knowledge of American literature or who have the interest, time and facilities to investigate the materials for themselves. One illustration should suffice. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Boston," Carl Sandburg's "Chicago," Amy Lowell's "St. Louis," Walt Whitman's "City of Ships" (New York), and Marguerite Weed's "New York" would form a view of the metropolitan centers of the country that should interest many types of children.

American history in verse has great possibilities for effective use in our schools. It is

not limited in its scope or in its method of presentation as was the "Singing Geography" of former times. Its effectiveness depends upon the knowledge, enthusiasm and ingenuity of its advocates.

That its use may be more widespread and its supporters more numerous, the following references are given as "leads" into this slightly explored field:

Books Especially Recommended

Stevenson, Burton, *My Country*. Houghton Mifflin, 1932. An American history in poetry with a prose narrative account running through the book. *American History in Verse* is the textbook edition.

Stevenson, Burton, *Great Americans As Seen by the Poets*. Lippincott, 1933. Includes such sections as Presidents, Statesmen, Soldiers, Sailors, Writers, Riders, and Adventurers.

Books Recommended

Wallington, Nellie Neurer, *American History by American Poets*. Dodd, Mead, 1911.

Benet, Rosemary and Stephen Vincent, *A Book of Americans*. Farrar and Rinehart, 1933. A book illustrated in color for small children.

Holland, Rupert S., *Historic Poems and Ballads*. Jacobs, 1912. Deals with famous events in world history but includes many from American history.

Special Sections in Books

"Sidelights on Our History" in *Adventures in Literature*, by Smith, Lowe, and Simpson. Doubleday, Doran, 1930. Junior-high-school English text. Good bibliography included.

"My America" in *My Poetry Book*: An anthology of modern verse for boys and girls, by Huff and Carlisle. Winston, 1934.

"New World and Old Glory" in *Golden Numbers*, by Wiggin and Smith. McClure, Phillips, 1902.



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