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## Producing Local History: An Essay and Review

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## ESSAY REVIEW

### PRODUCING LOCAL HISTORY AN HISTORICAL REVIEW

*Hodgdon, Maine, 1832-1982: Sesquicentennial Album.* By Geraldine Tidd Scott. (Windham, Me.: Pioneer Heritage Publications, 1982. Pp 234. Paper. \$12.00.)

*History of St. Albans, Maine.* Compiled by Gladys M. Bigelow and Ruth M. Knowles. (Published by the compilers, 1982. Pp. 262. Cloth. \$20.00)

Publication of a history of a small town should always be cause for celebration. It is an event that can be considered something of a miracle, considering the barriers raised against it by professional historians and commercial publishers. Professional historians have little interest in writing provincial history that is not distinguished by ties to significant state or national events. Likewise, because of the prohibitive cost of printing, paper, and advertising, commercial publishers are unwilling to invest their money in books they know will have a limited market. These objectives have more than once effectively blocked publication of local history.

And yet, such history does succeed in getting into print. The catalyst is usually an anniversary marking the founding or incorporation of a town. Sometimes the catalyst is simply the hunger of a town's people for access to their area's history. Behind these publishing "miracles" can always be found dedicated local history enthusiasts for whom history is an avocation, who write or compile the history, and equally enthusiastic fellow townsmen who are willing to fund its printing.

Histories produced in this way usually do not meet the exacting standards of professional historians. They are seldom analytical. More seriously, despite the availability of guides to the methodology of history and bookmaking, local histories that are produced by amateur historians and town committees often fail to incorporate the most basic require-

ments of professionally produced history. They lack attribution – footnotes and bibliography – and often do not include even that necessary guide for readers, an index. Without the guidance of an editor, their content is apt to be organized poorly, and usually is flawed by the sentimentality that nostalgia and love of homestead breed. It is less surprising that they are often poorly written, for any reader knows that even good scholarship, the hallmark of the professional, does not insure good writing. Finally, too often they are not well-made books. The economics of publishing can dictate spiral binding of mimeographed typescript; poor quality paper, which in turn causes poor reproduction of photographs; and again, without the guidance of an editor or an interested publisher, poor design.

There are exceptions to every rule, and Maine's local history enthusiasts have produced many admirable histories. Two that come quickly to mind are *The Cove: Perkins Cove at Ogunquit, Maine* by Carrie Boyd, Kathryn Ryan, Betty and William Wills and *Manchester, Maine, 1775-1975*, which was compiled and published by Manchester's Bicentennial Committee. *The Cove* is a beautifully designed and fascinating book that successfully captures the ambience and personalities of Perkins Cove when it was a haven for nationally known artists and local fishermen rather than the commercial center it is today. The Manchester history is a handsome book and a rich compilation of the town's history, supplemented with maps, photographs, and documents. Both books have bibliographic failings, particularly *The Cove*, which is more a popular than a scholarly treatment, and yet both are valuable additions to Maine history.

Even local histories that have more serious failings are important. Unpublished history is often inaccessible and sometimes lost history. Researchers, whether genealogists, high school students pursuing history class assignments, new home owners, or a would-be town historian, discover that town officials tend to lack the time or the interest to ferret names and dates out of old records. To compound the prob-

lem, old records are often not accessible because they are in storage, are still in the hands of long-retired officials or their heirs, or have been lost. For this reason alone, even an ineptly produced and seriously flawed local history, which nevertheless gets into print lists of early settlers, a town's charter, genealogy, is important. Add to such a book turn-of-the-century photographs, pages from a local man's Civil War diary, local legends, explanation of local place names, histories of organizations, and you have a rich resource. Published history dignifies the past and stimulates interest in the present. Fortunate is the small town that has its own.

To reiterate then, those of us who value history must always celebrate the publication of a small town's history. Two that currently deserve mention are *Hodgdon, Maine, 1832-1982: Sesquicentennial Album* by Geraldine Tidd Scott, and *History of St. Albans, Maine*, compiled by Gladys M. Bigelow and Ruth M. Knowles.

Scott's sesquicentennial album of Hodgdon, in Aroostook County, was evidently inspired by and is largely made up of the reminiscences and turn-of-the-century photographs of Harry R. Williams. Williams, who was a successful farmer and for twenty years represented Hodgdon and fifteen other small neighboring towns at the state legislature, was a storyteller whose subject was Hodgdon and her people. His "stories" make delightful reading even for the reader who does not know the people or places involved. Filled with humor and liberally sprinkled with the quaint expressions of an earlier generation, they present the lifestyle of a small northern Maine town before the advent of the great leveling forces of the automobile, radio, and television. Here is an apple paring bee at Bob Bett's shed where, when all the neighbors had gathered, "the place sounded like a blackbird's Sunday School convention." Here is a description of preparations for a hunting trip, which "was a man's reward when the crops are in," and of "haying time" and the quest for "bumblebee honey." Here is the story of Dr. White, who made house calls, and Laura Dakin's belligerent sheep. There is more than

one account of logging operations, of “road monkeys” and log drivers, and the story of Charlie Stockford, who was “good on the logs” and decided to walk “the boom” in Meduxnekeag Stream on a Sunday afternoon when “just about the whole town” had gathered to watch a baptism.

Scott has supplemented William’s stories with an extensive genealogy of Hodgdon families from 1830 to 1900, histories of the town’s nine churches and its schools, and various town records including a list of Hodgdon farmers who registered in the town books between 1838 and 1887 their marks for live-stock, and the “Men of the Crew at Benn’s Lumber Mill.”

The *History of St. Albans* actually includes that of the towns of Hartland, Palmyra, and even Corinna, in Penobscot County, because events in the four towns have been so interwoven that they must be considered as a unit. A solid compilation of dates and facts relating to all aspects of life in the four towns, the book has been enriched with photographs, two well-reproduced maps, and the 1865 diary of Cyrus Mathews, which covers his return from the Civil War and re-entry into life in his hometown. A lengthy section of biographical sketches and genealogy will make this a valued resource for genealogists. One of the strengths of this history is the information it includes about St. Albans and its environs today, including a list of businesses in 1982. That is the kind of information researchers even twenty-five years from now will prize.

Both of these books are well made, printed on good quality paper in clear type, with sturdy and attractive covers. Bibliographically both have problems, but partial success, too. The Hodgdon history gives sources within the body of its text and has a name index. Happily, the *History of St. Albans* includes a list of references.

We applaud these efforts and rejoice with the people of Hodgdon and St. Albans and its environs who now have their history at their fingertips.

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