

Reaching Out to Young Scholars in Minnesota

By Kathryn Otto

History Day is BIG in Minnesota. The Minnesota Historical Society is a co-sponsor, along with the University of Minnesota, of the statewide program for sixth graders through seniors in high school. Each year more than 700,000 students participate nationwide in History Day. In Minnesota, it is the fastest growing social studies enrichment program with nearly 30,000 students participating statewide. The library and archives of the Minnesota Historical Society sees about 2,000 History Day kids per year on site. Altogether, twenty-five percent of the History Day kids that participated at the state-level said they used the Minnesota Historical Society's library and archives.

To help with the History Day crowds, we hired an intern to work with the youngsters coming in, to help them pick a topic or narrow down their topic, and to help them find materials and use those materials. The intern works Tuesday afternoons and evenings and Saturdays during the History Day peak of mid-January to early April.

Six years ago, we decided to get ahead of the rush that year and brainstormed some topics that would fit with that year's theme. Those initial Minnesota History Day Topics have since morphed into a website, now simply called Minnesota History Topics http://www.mnhs.org/library/tips/history_topics/index.htm. We very quickly dropped the word "Day" to give the site broader appeal because we found right from the beginning that college students were using it too.

The webpage and our initial handful of topics were designed to help *us*, to save the Reference staff time when students came in asking for the same topics year after year. Those initial topics were a collection of frequently-asked-for topics in Minnesota history that we could either support well with primary and secondary material, or they were topics that we did not have much on but got asked about every year. So the criteria, originally, was a little different than it is now. To get added these days, a new topic has to be something that our library and archives *can* support well, both with primary and secondary material.

The topics are arranged into large subjects and topics can be listed under more than one subject. Each topic has always consisted of what we call the "blurb"—a short description of the topic to help students decide if they are interested in it—and then a list of secondary sources to get started with, and a list of primary sources. The secondary

sources include little helps for students not used to reading catalog records, such as when something is an analytic and the item they want is actually found inside a larger publication, for example, one chapter in a book or an article in a journal. Any books published by the Minnesota Historical Society Press include a link to the online store where students can purchase a copy if they want, which can be especially useful if they live outside the Twin Cities metropolitan area and their local library does not have a copy.

The primary resources include a brief description of the collection, focusing on what in the collection is useful for the particular topic and notes such as “there are 500 boxes in the collection, but only 3 relate to this topic.” We do not want to scare off the students! We also try to give the students a little help in physically locating the inventory notebooks in the reading room by telling them what color notebook they are looking for, because there are always students who will not ask for help! We also tell them if there is an electronic inventory available and provide a link to it.

We always point out items that are available on interlibrary loan for those students across the state that cannot come to Saint Paul to do research. The list of primary resources always ends with a list of newspapers that might be helpful for an individual topic, a link to the photograph database and some useful subject headings, and a link to the main catalog to search for other sources. For some topics, what is listed is all we have; for other topics we have lots of resources and the topic includes merely a selection of sources.

Reference staff created all of the initial topics. Most topics since then have been developed by a series of volunteers, mostly undergraduate students, usually working for us during the summer, usually history majors, although our Education department loaned one of their summer interns the year they had specific topics they wanted added. We have also had retired teachers as volunteers. Sometimes we have given them a list of topics we want done, sometimes we have turned them loose on topics of their own choosing, once approved by staff, of course.

Once we had the initial concept down and had a nice set of topics up on the web, we began to think about how we could provide off-site access to materials by digitally scanning documents and adding them to the appropriate topic. (See the “Dakota War of 1862” http://www.mnhs.org/library/tips/history_topics/94dakota.html or the “1892 Republican National Convention”

http://www.mnhs.org/library/tips/history_topics/137rnc.htm for examples that have some digitized documents.) Finding a relatively short document that fits a topic and that can stand-alone and still be useful can be difficult. Many of the digital documents we have up are the result of a reference question rather than a concerted effort to find appropriate documents.

Several of our History Topics have come from already existing paper handouts developed on specific topics. Conversely, several of our History Topics have become handouts or been used by other parts of the organization when they tied in with a museum exhibit, as happened with the American Presidency traveling exhibit.

You may be asking yourselves: “does anybody use our History Topics”? The answer is “yes.” We knew right from the beginning that both the History Day-age K-12 students and the college students were finding and using the History Topics because they would show up in the library with a printout of the Topic they were interested in and ask how to find a particular resource. Using web statistics we can say that the History Topics pages receive over 140,000 visits per year.

What are some tips for doing this yourself? We have learned to make great use of volunteers. College students looking for summer internships; retired teachers or teachers looking for something to do for the summer; college professors; archives, library, and museum colleagues in schools, colleges, and community libraries or museums; and History Day educators are all potential assistants for either suggesting ways to reach out to students or for helping you to create the tools to reach out with. *You* do not have to know how to do everything yourself, nor do you have to actually do it all yourself.

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