

TEACHING KANSAS HISTORY: THE STATE OF THE STATE

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Because I teach courses in the history of Kansas at the state teachers' college, and because I do a good bit of historical lecturing around the state, I used to get telephone calls from teachers, school administrators, school board members, and irate citizens, some of whom are former students of mine. A caller would say he was involved in some type of curricular review, and he had heard that there was a state law mandating the teaching of Kansas history in the public schools. Eventually, I composed a handout sheet that I distributed to my classes in Kansas history and gave to anyone who asked about the state requirement. This handout explained that although the legislature of Kansas had enacted laws requiring that the history of Kansas be taught across the state, the injunction was imprecise. Here is the law I quoted (from *Kansas Statutes Annotated*):

72-1101. Required Subjects in Elementary Schools. Every accredited elementary school shall teach reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, English grammar and composition, history of the United States and of the state of Kansas, civil government and the duties of citizenship, health and hygiene, together with such other subjects as the state board may determine. The state board shall be responsible for the selection of subject matter within the several fields of instruction and for its organization into courses of study and instruction for the guidance of teachers, principals and superintendents.¹

There persisted about the state a suspicion that despite the law, schools were neglecting to teach the history of the state. State Representative Richard L. Harper of Fort Scott introduced during the 1985 legislative session a bill to require "every accredited school which is maintaining any or all of the grades four through eight" to "provide and give to all pupils attending any of such grades so maintained a complete course of instruction in the history of the state of Kansas." The House Committee on Education took testimony on the bill, but never reported it out.²

One objection to Harper's bill was that the legislature should not require a subject for which there might not be qualified teachers. During the 1986 legislative session, therefore, Representative Elaine Hassler of Abilene introduced a bill providing that the State Board of Education should require every institution on its accredited list for preparing teachers "to include in its course of study not less than two semester hours of credit in the subject of Kansas history."

Moreover, the proposed bill specified that "applicants for initial issuance of

¹K.S.A. 1985, Vol. 5A, Art. 11, Sec. 72-1101.

²Carolyn Rampey, Legislative Research Department, to Representative James Lowther, 15 November 1985; "Supplemental Note on House Bill No. 2074"; House Bill No. 2074, Session of 1985. Copies of all these documents provided by Rep. Lowther.

certificates to teach at the elementary, middle or junior high school level shall have satisfactorily completed at least two semester hours of study in the subject of Kansas history at an educational institution on the accredited list of the state board." This bill did not even go to hearings.³

Instead, on the request of the leadership of the House Committee on Education, Hassler and Harper co-sponsored a milder measure that passed the legislature without appreciable opposition. This non-binding resolution asserted "that very few school districts place an emphasis on the teaching of Kansas history which is commensurate with its importance." It commended those that taught such history well; urged the State Board of Education to strengthen the study of state history; and urged the State Board of Regents to see that prospective teachers be trained in the subject at the state universities.⁴

These bills and resolution showed that certain legislators and at least a few supporters believed that the existing law was insufficient and that the schools were either ignoring it or paying it mere lip service. As best I can determine, there has been in Kansas no categorical defiance of state law. There has been, however, considerable neglect of responsibility in regard to it. This neglect eventually moved the state legislature to action--a bill specifically requiring that a course in Kansas history be taught throughout the state. Whether their motives were pedagogical, patriotic, or political, the legislators eventually insisted that state educational authorities abide by their wishes, expressed in statute.

The legislative history of this matter is persistent but not too illuminating. The statute I cited in my handout derives from a general legislative reform of school law passed in 1903. There was no substantial debate over curricular provisions, although I note here incidentally that this was the first time the law of Kansas required any history at all in the curriculum. The 1903 wording required "history of the United States, and history of the state of Kansas," a wording that gave Kansas history statutory equality with American history. Another revision of school law in 1943 changed the phrasing slightly to "history of the United States and of the state of Kansas," seeming to make Kansas more of an afterthought, but it is unclear whether the intent here was a change in emphasis or just conciseness.⁵

Like Harper and Hassler recently, past legislators have sought to strengthen the legislative mandate for the history of Kansas. In 1941 Representative Benjamin O. Weaver of Mullinville and Senator William J. Wertz of Wichita introduced a bill calling for a more specific requirement.⁶ The Weaver-Wertz bill attracted editorial attention and generated an intriguing supportive argument from the *Topeka Capital*: "Other generations had no need to study Kansas history for thru their parents and grandparents they formed an actual link with the making of the state," its editor

³House Bill No. 2688, Session of 1986 (copies provided by Rep. Lowther and Representative Elaine Hassler); Hassler to Tom Isern, 7 April 1987 and 2 May 1987.

⁴Hassler to Isern, 7 April 1987 and 2 May 1987; House Concurrent Resolution No. 5033, Session of 1986; "Supplemental Note on House Concurrent Resolution No. 5033." Copies of last two items provided by Rep. Hassler.

⁵*Laws of Kansas*, 1903, Ch. 435, Sec. 1; *Laws of Kansas*, 1943, Ch. 248, Sec. 37.

⁶Card index to bills introduced, Legislative Library, Kansas State Capitol.

asserted. "A new generation, however, is farther away from the scene."⁷ (I call this the "lost-generation argument.") After the Weaver-Wertz measure died in committee, an interim legislative council considered the issue, but concluded that such a bill was unnecessary, because "virtually all" the schools in the state already taught Kansas history.⁸

This stilled the waters until 1965, when two representatives proposed a bill that merely urged the schools to teach state history. Representative Glee Jones of Hamlin (later Hiawatha) was not so timid. In 1973, 1975, and 1976 she introduced bills requiring all schools to teach "a course" in the history of Kansas.⁹ None of these bills passed; the farthest the House Committee on Education was willing to go was to require the State Board of Education to "consider" recommending a course, and even that failed of passage; but the debate grew lively. "I think that people over the state are not aware that Kansas history is not being taught," complained Jones. The press took up her cause, with the *Topeka Capital* reviving the lost-generation argument: "Few pupils now have relatives who can tell them anything of early days," the editor mourned. An aide to Governor Robert Docking did not outright oppose the bill, but questioned "whether there are suitable texts available." School administrators testified that although they had no discrete courses in Kansas history, they touched upon it in the social studies curriculum. Legislators opposed to the bills, taking their cue from the State Department of Education, announced that the legislature would be "setting a dangerous precedent in dictating to local schools what they should teach."¹⁰

The sides lined up again a decade later over the Harper bill. Glee Jones came back to testify. Representative Melvin Neufeld of Ingalls spouted, "Have you ever seen a Texan who's not proud of his state? That's because he's had history every year." The Travel Industry Association of Kansas, the Ford County Bureau of Tourism, and the Kansas Department of Economic Development all came out for history in the Land of Ah's. On the other hand the United School Administrators and the Kansas Association of School Boards were opposed. Richard Funk, speaking for the KASB, expressed "surprise" that anyone thought the state law was not being followed adequately and said that curricular matters should be left in the hands of the state board. Fred Campbell, Superintendent of USD 234, Fort Scott, replied, "Many school districts in Kansas are teaching some kind of Kansas history, but is it truly Kansas history or is it tokenism?"¹¹

Once again, the debate was rather uninformed, and I can do only a little to make it better informed. In the first place, clear away the foggy talk about

⁷*Topeka Capital*, 5 February 1941 (clipping, Legislative Library).

⁸*Kansas City Star*, 19 March 1942 (clipping, Legislative Library).

⁹Card index to bills introduced, Legislative Library; Glee Jones to Tom Isern, 8 April 1987.

¹⁰*Topeka Capital*, 8 February 1973 (Jones quote); *Topeka Capital*, 9 February 1973 (editor quote); *Kansas City Times*, 8 March 1975 (all articles in clippings, Legislative Library).

¹¹*Topeka Capital-Journal*, 27 January 1985 (clipping, including Ingalls and Campbell quotes, Legislative Library); "Supplemental Note on House Bill No. 2074"; Glee Jones to Tom Isern, 8 April 1987; Hassler to Isern, 7 April 1987 and 2 May 1987; Fred F. Campbell to Tom Isern, 20 April 1987.

observances of Kansas Day in the elementary schools. These are nice rituals, but they do not constitute historical study. The elementary student in Kansas commonly gets his first dose of Kansas studies in grade 4 or 5. The local shapers of elementary curricula generally inject a unit on Kansas, three to six weeks in duration, at this level. I use the term "Kansas studies" here, not "Kansas history," because this is in the elementary social studies framework. I have examined quite a few course materials at this level, and what I see is about half physical geography and about half history. Generally the teachers generate their own study materials and incorporate prepared materials from outside sources (such as those of the Kansas State Historical Society); most teacher-generated materials are good, and many are excellent. The historical content, however, is confined to the nineteenth century and earlier--explorers, Indians, cowboys, and "pioneers," whatever they are. The neglect of the twentieth century obviously excludes from state history such important ethnic cultures as the Mexican and the Vietnamese. A survey of teachers conducted by Emporia State University's Center for Great Plains Studies in 1983 partially confirmed my impressions of practices at this level, but also disclosed such a diversity of grade levels and units as to render my remarks here applicable to probably a majority, but not an overwhelming majority, of elementary schools in the state.¹²

As for addressing the state requirement of Kansas history, it is more important to look at grade 7 or 8, for it is here that schools commonly have placed a course, unit, or body of content which confesses to be history, not just social studies. Here I have found some teachers devoting a semester or most of it to Kansas history; some including a Kansas unit in American history; and some integrating Kansas content into an American history course. Until quite recently those who taught a semester on Kansas had a problem with textbooks, for there was no textbook in print at this grade level. Some hoarded old copies of Bliss Isely's *Story of Kansas* or Ed Moreland's *Land and People of Kansas*.¹³ Others had their students read or read to their students from Bob Richmond's *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts*, which is more suited for higher-level readers.¹⁴ The lack of a suitable textbook was a major reason why so many teachers at this grade 7-8 level presented only a unit or integrated content rather than a course on Kansas. This problem may be solved hereafter, however, for in 1988 Gibbs-Smith Publishers of Layton, Utah, published a new textbook by Raymond Wilson and me, entitled *Kansas Land* and written at seventh-grade level.

The Center for Great Plains survey of 1983 confirmed that grade 7-8 was the level for Kansas history in the state, but disclosed only a plurality of schools teaching a course. The rest generally had a unit or integrated content, but a few had no Kansas history at all. Nor did high schools fill this vacuum. The finding of two

¹²Survey summary provided by Patrick G. O'Brien, Director, Center for Great Plains Studies, Emporia State University.

¹³Bliss Isely and W. M. Richards, *The Story of Kansas* (Topeka: State Board of Education, 1953); Edwin C. Moreland, *The Land and People of Kansas* (Fenton, MI: McRoberts Pub. Co., 1976).

¹⁴Robert W. Richmond, *Kansas: A Land of Contrasts* (Second Edition, Arlington Heights, IL: Forum Press, 1980).

researchers from Fort Hays State University in 1984 that less than 10 percent of high schools teach courses in Kansas history matches my perception of the situation.¹⁵

Besides the lack of textbooks, there was another reason that certain school districts did not conform to state law. This was that the Kansas State Department of Education, in its recommendations for social studies curricula, did not encourage them to do so. Such omission is of recent origin, for after the law of 1903, the curriculum guidelines from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction consistently and scrupulously adhered to the letter and spirit of the statute. Remarkably, the teaching of Kansas history (and to a lesser degree Kansas geography and Kansas government) as an identifiable and discrete subject survived the homogenization of subjects that came with the advent of "social studies" in the curriculum. Even when during the 1950s the state superintendent blended the social studies into "studies in social living," Kansas history remained an identifiable subject at the seventh-grade level.¹⁶

Whereas previous generations of guidelines from the state superintendent or department specified varying amounts of Kansas content, the most recent *Guidelines for Program Development in Social Studies* (1986), in their "Illustrative Scope and Sequence," include nothing whatsoever that may be construed to satisfy the state requirement for the teaching of Kansas history. At grade 4, they say, during a study of world regions, "Where the local school district requires a study of the state, . . . the state should be studied as a political region," whatever that is. No Kansas content is recommended for later history courses. No course in Kansas history is listed as a suggested elective for high schools, but "Future Studies" is. To be fair, I should admit that although this first scope and sequence omits Kansas history, as does a second, "Option A" sequence, still a third, "Option B" sequence provides for "United States and State History" at grade 8.¹⁷

Two circumstances prompted the state department to devote a bit more specific attention to Kansas in 1986. The first was the 125th anniversary of statehood. Under the "125 and Coming Alive" slogan, the department put out a brochure entitled, "125 Years of Kansas History: How Should Educators Approach It?" This brochure, issued in January, recommended that teachers not teach about Kansas as an entity at all, but rather "approach studying the state with two kinds of community study--case studies and family and local history activities." Then, after passage of the Kansas history resolution of 1986, the department prepared a response to the

¹⁵Allan Miller and Raymond Wilson, "History Teachers View Their Profession: A Close Look at Kansas," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 9 (Fall 1984): 79-80.

¹⁶This paragraph is based on examination of these state documents: *Course of Study for the Common Schools of Kansas* (Topeka: Crane & Co., 1905); *1922-1927 Course of Study for Rural and Graded Schools* (Topeka: State Printer, 1922); *Unit Program in Social Studies* (Topeka: State Printer, 1936); *Suggestions for Teaching Social Studies in the Elementary Grades* (Topeka: State Printer, 1946); and *Studies in Social Living: A Handbook for Teachers* (Topeka: State Printer, 1950).

¹⁷*Guidelines for Program Development in Social Studies* (Topeka: Kansas State Department of Education, 1986), 6-9.

legislature. This written response insisted that Kansas history should not be a discrete subject, but should be infused into various courses and grade levels.¹⁸

It remains to consider whether the colleges and universities of the state are doing their part to encourage the teaching of Kansas history. It was embarrassing in 1946 when the Board of Regents inquired as to how many of the state colleges and universities under its jurisdiction offered a course in the history of Kansas. President David McFarlane, for Kansas State Teachers College, and Professor James C. Malin, for the University of Kansas, replied that they did so; none of the others did, their executives explaining that "by the time a student reached the college level his interests were presumed to be of a broader nature than just the state alone"--certainly a true statement, but not one addressed to the question at hand.¹⁹

Were the regents to survey the situation today, they would be better gratified. They would find courses in the history of Kansas taught at Emporia State University by Tom Isern; at Kansas State University by Homer Socolofsky; at Fort Hays State University by Raymond Wilson; at Pittsburg State University by Tom Walther; and at Wichita State University by Bill Unrau. The University of Kansas evidently is not currently teaching a regular course in Kansas history, but has correspondence offerings. In addition Washburn University routinely has conscripted Bob Richmond from the Kansas State Historical Society to handle Kansas history, and several of the state's community colleges offer it: Lois Nettleship teaches it at Johnson County, Louise Venneman at Labette, Linda McCaffery at Barton County, James Whaley at Neosho County, and Barbara Pierce at Hutchinson. (I do not know the status of Kansas history at other community colleges. So far as I know, Johnson County is the only community college where a regular, full-time faculty member teaches Kansas history; the others employ part-timers.)²⁰

Hereafter many more prospective teachers and practicing ones, ready or not, will find themselves teaching Kansas history. Unlikely as it may have seemed, given its record on the matter, the legislature in 1988 took action. The first indication of what lay ahead was in December 1987: nineteen students of St. John Junior High School (St. John is a county-seat town in central Kansas) wrote to Governor Mike Hayden, complaining that they needed a new state history book. The governor publicized their plea; he already was thinking about the Kansas history issue as part of a general campaign to boost the image of the state. When the 1988 legislature convened, therefore, Hayden's message to the body condemned the inadequate treatment of Kansas history as "a major educational shortcoming in Kansas," scored

¹⁸Richard D. Leighty, *125 Years of Kansas History: How Should Educators Approach It?* (brochure, Topeka: Kansas State Department of Education, 1986); Richard D. Leighty, "Status Report on Kansas State Board of Education/Kansas State Department of Education Assignments in House Concurrent Resolution 5033 and Proposed Schedule for Future Activities," 16 June 1986 (copy provided by Leighty).

¹⁹*Kansas City Star*, 16 February 1946, (clipping in Library, Kansas State Historical Society).

²⁰This paragraph is based on conversations with the regents faculty named and with Richmond, as well as on correspondence with the deans of all community colleges in the state. Many of my informants provided helpful syllabi of the courses taught.

the schools for ignoring the legislature's earlier resolutions, and asked the legislature for a bill mandating "a comprehensive course in Kansas history."²¹

Those legislators who had worked on the issue earlier were delighted when, spurred by the governor, fifty-eight representatives joined to co-sponsor a new Kansas history bill, House Bill 2725. The governor and his allies sought to ensure that a course of a full semester would be taught at some level. This was to be a required course, the requirement to be ensured by a high-school-graduation net, and it was to be a discrete course on Kansas, not just Kansas content infused into various courses. The governor's aides hustled votes and marshaled witnesses for hearings, while the governor pled for the bill in his weekly newspaper column.²²

The *Wichita Eagle-Beacon* led the press in support of the Kansas history bill. George Neavoll, editor of the editorial page, opened the offensive with one long editorial hailing author-editor Bliss Isely, who in years past had kept Kansas history alive in the schools, and came back with another editorial blasting the Department of Education for "sitting on their hands all these years when they should have been promoting the study of Kansas history." His assistant editor asserted that there was "a conspiracy against history" and warned that school administrators had "shot holes" in the Kansas history bill.²³

The assistant editor, David Awbrey, also set the theme for the campaign. Although some might be concerned with patriotism or economics, he said the Kansas history bill happened because Kansans have "a special love toward their state . . . it is that affection for Kansas that is behind the effort to require state history."²⁴ Testifying before the House Committee on Education, Homer E. Socolofsky, Professor of History at Kansas State University, likewise spoke of "an ingrown affection for Kansas." He also said that over the past thirty years, he had asked his university students whether they ever had taken Kansas history before university, and "almost all" would "deny ever having had such a course."²⁵

A bill passed, despite being, as the *Eagle-Beacon* said, "opposed by virtually the entire state educational establishment."²⁶ The key section of the short bill reads:

²¹*Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 14 December 1987; Mike Hayden, "The Governor's Legislative Message," 1988, (copy provided by Office of the Governor).

²²Hassler to Isern, 5 February 1988; Al LeDoux (Legislative Liaison of the Governor) to Isern, 12 February 1988, enclosing a marked-up bill showing provisions desired by the governor; a later, amended bill, (copy furnished to Isern by Representative Jeff Freeman); "Governor's Report" in *Ellinwood Leader* (Isern's home-town paper), 18 February 1988.

²³*Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 24 January 1988, 7 February 1988, and 3 April 1988.

²⁴*Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 3 April 1988.

²⁵Homer E. Socolofsky, "Remarks on H.B. #2725," 16 February 1988, (copy provided by Socolofsky). These remarks condensed an earlier address by Socolofsky that had been published in the *Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 24 January 1988. On the request of several legislators, I testified at the same hearing. Inasmuch as I was co-author of a forthcoming textbook in Kansas history, I declined to speak for or against H.B. 2725, but offered information about prevailing practices in teaching the subject.

²⁶*Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, 8 May 1988.

Section 1. (a) The state board of education shall provide for a course of instruction in Kansas history and government, which shall be required for all students graduating from an accredited high school in the state.²⁷

Thus the bill retained the important word, "course," which legislators commonly considered to mean a semester's study. Clearly they intended it to be a discrete, identifiable course, for they made it a high school graduation requirement no later than 1990-91, with individual waivers as necessary in cases such as transfer students. The course was not necessarily to be taught at high school level, and probably would not be, but it was to be required for eventual high school graduation.²⁸

Since passage of the Kansas history bill of 1988, the subject has resurged in the schools. A task force appointed by the governor has counseled the State Department of Education that the course in Kansas history should be no less than nine weeks in duration and should be located at whatever grade level of middle or high school the local district deems best. School districts are complying with the law, most of them by implementing a semester-long course in one of the grades of middle school. All must have a course in place by the 1990-91 school year.²⁹

It has been interesting to observe how the legislative reform of the teaching of Kansas history has been accomplished. The movement began with a few loyalists--Harper and Hassler among the legislators, Campbell among the school officials, Neavoll among the newspapermen. Their motives seemed a mixture of state patriotism and practical pedagogy; they honestly believed that state history was an important subject. Hassler herself was a former teacher. Their efforts came to little, however, until the governor started a bandwagon in motion. He saw the issue as a fight for the state image, and plenty of legislators were willing to rally to his standard. This is not to say that the governor and his supporters were on the wrong side, but only to observe that when such a high state official takes up the cause, then it becomes a political movement, not an educational one.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Are other states and history departments struggling with the same concerns about state history that Thomas Isern describes for Kansas? We would invite you to send us short pieces (one page or so) on developments in other states on the place of state history in the college and school curriculum. If we get a good response, we will publish some of these statements in a future issue of *Teaching History*.

²⁷Copy of H.B. 2725 provided by Representative James D. Braden, Speaker of the House of Representatives.

²⁸Ibid. I discussed the meaning and intent of the bill with the legislators cited in footnotes above.

²⁹I have a good idea as to the progress of compliance with the Kansas history law through adoptions of the textbook, *Kansas Land*, since it is the only middle school textbook on the market.