

History, slighted in the 70s, is back

By HOWARD LaFRANCHI
Christian Science Monitor

BERKELEY, Calif. — Clio must feel slighted. In the push to reform public education, the muse of history has been left in the wings, as her sister subjects of math, science, and English have moved center stage.

Historians and educators say the late 1960s and '70s witnessed an erosion in the teaching of history, as traditional, chronological courses (beginning with the Greeks or the American colonists and focused on Western man) began to give way to courses based on individuals, ethnic groups, or current events. Increasingly courses related to the students' immediate world. Required history or social studies courses lost out to electives on such up-to-date topics as consumer affairs, contemporary life styles, and the nuclear threat.

Julie Love, public affairs director of the Council for Basic Education, notes: "There's some awareness that history has been neglected" in the drive to strengthen education, "but not a lot is being done about it."

Yet there are indications that the teaching of history in primary and secondary schools is beginning to recover. Concern that students aren't getting the history they need — to understand how Americans came to be who they are, or how they fit in the puzzle of today's world — is leading to action.

A number of states are tightening their history requirements, mandating tougher social studies curricula for high schools. Since 1980 at least 17

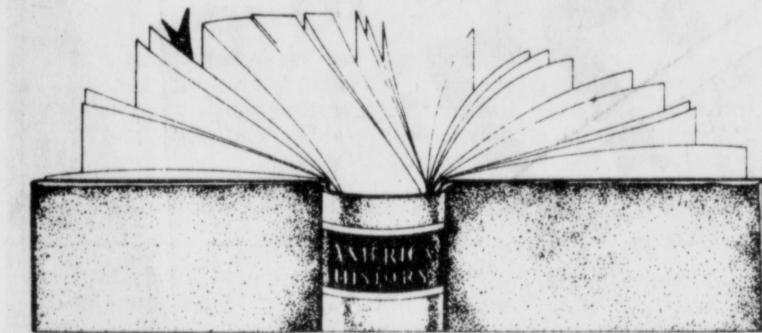
a definite need for students to be exposed to a "common core" of knowledge. "We have taken a stand for a chronological study of history," he says, noting this is reflected in a new social studies curriculum.

But from there he expounds on what he expects the teaching of history to accomplish — an area as rife with debate as the question of what history should be taught.

"We need to develop the students' emotional connection, so they feel a part of the place they live in," says Mr. Honig, seated beneath oak trees on the University of California campus here. He adds that there are "certain things about the American character — both the good points and the bad" — that should be addressed. "Then there's the citizenship argument — we need to give kids a sense of their role in a democracy."

Both are essential

The lanky commander in chief of the country's largest state education system admits that "we're trying to do two things at once that are somewhat at odds: develop that emotional connection at the same time as a critical ability to analyze what we are." But he says he believes the two are necessary "if democracy is to survive." This utilitarian view of the teaching of history fits well with the current upsurge in patriotism and, according to Mr. Honig, with "95 percent of the parents out there." But not all teachers and historians agree with it. Diane Ravitch, adjunct professor of



states have increased the required number of social studies semesters. And, although it is difficult to determine how much of this is the result of a recent upswing in civics courses, educators say there is a slow but noticeable trend away from "current events" courses to teaching more traditional narrative history.

With this happening, the question asked with increasing frequency is: What history should be taught? That was the subject of a conference held here at the end of August, and, judging by comments from teachers, historians, and state education officials, it's a question that will not be answered easily.

As Kae Matila, an eighth-grade US history teacher from Arcata, Calif., commented to the spirited applause of 200 conferees, "We came with the question, 'What should we be teaching in history?' Well, we've been here three days, and I don't really know!"

Much confusion

Much of the confusion, both in California and elsewhere, stems from continuing disagreements over how history should be taught and why. "A major problem is that the history profession doesn't know what it wants," says William McNeill, president-elect of the American Historical Association and professor of history at the University of Chicago. "For the past 30 years we've moved toward a fragmentation of history, with little thought given to pulling it all together."

But there are signs of a return to teaching what Dr. McNeill would call "mainline" history — the kind of chronological, "major events" history he says is needed before students can make sense of history based on individuals or special-interest groups.

California is one state that is prodding the teaching of history in that direction. State superintendent of public instruction William Honig believes there is

history and education at the Teachers College of Columbia University, told the conference that "history should not be expected to teach virtues, morals, and patriotism." Rather, she added, it should teach a "respect for differences, and the pursuit of truth."

Mrs. Ravitch says that, since early in this century, public schools — then concerned with the assimilation of immigrant children into American life — have made "social efficiency" the chief goal of their social studies courses. At the same time private schools, less concerned with making Americans of the masses and more intent upon providing a well-rounded liberal education, have stuck with teaching chronological history.

The result, she says, is that history is still "fighting for its existence" in the public schools and "continues to be left out in the cold" as teaching of the basics is strengthened.

Complicating the uncertainty among California history teachers is the fact that the question of "what to teach" is being debated even as students sit down in newly mandated history courses.

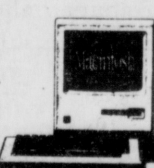
New history course

The state's recently approved curriculum standards call for a new world history course and a civics and economics course in high school — making some history or social studies course work a part of every year from kindergarten through high school. This in itself is cause for elation among the state's history teachers. But it also raises a number of concerns, ranging from questions about who will teach the new courses to fears that history courses will become increasingly standardized.

The concern over standardization arises because, beginning next spring, social studies will be phased into annual assessment tests. Many teachers are concerned that course content will be determined by the statewide tests — resulting in less innovative, less interesting teaching.

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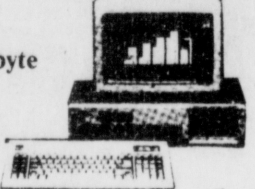


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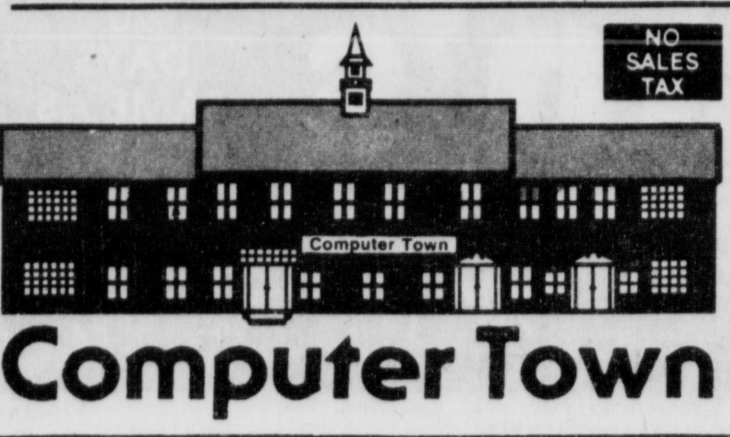
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