

Arkansas Studies Curriculum is gold mine for pupils

For years I have been nagging anyone who will listen about the sorry state of Arkansas history education. Twenty-two years ago I joined a group of other people who believed it is important for Arkansans to have a sense of who we are as a people and how we came to be that way. During those two decades a large number of organizations, educational groups, publishers, parents, and students have labored to get good quality instruction about our state into the official curriculum of Arkansas. While the set backs have been numerous and the rancor distressing at times, I can truthfully say that we are possibly on the verge of accomplishing our goal. At a minimum, I think we are positioned to make giant strides in the near future.

I suspect the average citizen of Arkansas assumes we already give our children a good introduction to their state. Indeed, I am often accused of overdrawing the situation—for there are teachers in many schools who take it upon themselves to make sure that students in their classroom, at least, are going to learn about Arkansas. These folks are few and far between in our modern schools—and many of them retire every year.

When I review this situation historically, it seems to me that at some point after World War II, Arkansas history became an afterthought. When America celebrated its bicentennial in 1976, a survey by UALR historian Fred Williams showed that not a single school in Arkansas County—the oldest county, not to mention the home of Arkansas Post— was offering a course in state history. And, Arkansas County was not unusual in this regard.

Things began a major change in 1997 when the General Assembly enacted Act 787—a law that mandated Arkansas history at both the elementary and secondary levels of the public schools. The law also required college students who intend to become elementary or social studies teachers to complete a course in Arkansas history. Teachers are also now expected to receive two hours yearly in refresher training in Arkansas history.

All of this is encouraging, but the sad fact was that teachers have had very little in the way of quality teaching materials on Arkansas history. This was especially the case at the early grades—kindergarten through sixth grade

Recently all this changed with the introduction of the Arkansas Studies Curriculum. The Curriculum is the product of a joint venture between the Butler Center for Arkansas Studies at the Central Arkansas Library System in Little Rock and a firm called Archeological Assessments (AAI), based in Nashville, Arkansas, which

has been carrying out historical and archeological research projects across Arkansas for almost 30 years. The Arkansas Community Foundation of Little Rock awarded several grants to partly underwrite the wide variety of publications included in the Curriculum.

The kindergarten and first grade materials were authored by educator and songwriter Dr. Charley Sandage of Stone County. Sandage cleverly uses Arkansas's Big Bear and an association of Arkansas animals called the 'critter crew' to teach the alphabet using Arkansas people, places, and products, as well as to introduce students to the major features of Arkansas's natural regions and eventful past.

Materials for the second, third, and fourth grade focus respectively on Arkansas geography, government, and economics. These texts, all written by Dr. Jack Bennett of AAI, follow the familiar children's Chapter Book format and, together, prepare students for the curriculum's most ambitious offering; a full length hard cover textbook for fifth and sixth graders. Authored by historian Dr. Diane Everman of St. Louis, the textbook is almost 200 pages, complete with many original illustrations as well as vintage pictures. All of these items can be viewed at www.arkansasstories.com.

Remember, these materials are just for the elementary grades. But, there is good news on the secondary front too. This year we have not just one, but two excellent new Arkansas history textbooks for junior high school use. The University of Arkansas Press commissioned Fayetteville eighth-grade Arkansas history teacher Sahy Hopper to revise its textbook. Gibbs Smith Publishing in Utah has brought out an Arkansas history textbook by historian Tre Berry of Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia.

Alas, having this array of new Arkansas history teaching materials does not necessarily mean they will actually find their way into the classroom. I urge those who want their children or grandchildren to learn about their home state to contact local elementary schools and urge them to consider investing the less than \$25 per pupil it would take to acquire the Arkansas Studies Curriculum so that their teachers and students will have access to quality materials about their state's history.

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