RONALD E. BUTCHART

HISTORIAN DESPITE THE ODDS

My first contact with the history of education was inauspicious. I was a senior at a small college in Idaho’s Treasure Valley enduring a required education course, a portion of which purported to cover the history of American schools. As a history major, I looked forward to that portion, expecting to gain some historical leverage on my own impoverished education. By the end of the course, I had reached the reluctant conclusion that the history of education must be one branch of my discipline that explained little, since it clearly did not explain the schools my friends and I had attended.

I spent twelve years in schools scattered across the Northwest, from fishing and mill towns on the coast through agricultural market centers in eastern Oregon and southern Idaho to a small college town south of Portland. My schooling bracketed the 1950s, when school-book mothers maintained impossibly clean houses in cocktail dresses, school-book fathers in suits came cheerily home from unexplained occupations, and school-book children in gender-appropriate clothing rode scooters down tidy streets. The only correspondence between the world of my school-books and my world was that the mothers, fathers, and children in the books were, like me, all pallidly white.

I was a latch-key child before America obsessed about latch-key children. So were nearly all of the children I knew. Our mothers and fathers both worked; they had little economic choice in the matter. My mother worked at a variety of office jobs, though, given her era’s socialization, to the day she died she never recognized herself as a member of the labor force. My father labored as a teacher, carpenter, and fisherman until the Cold War-inspired revolution in science teaching finally pulled him back to high school chemistry labs in my final years of high school. If my parents’ college educations put my family technically in the middle class, the economic realities of poorly paid waged labor put it solidly in the working class.

The working class and its children did not exist in our school books. The social aspects of American life deemed worthy of portrayal to American school children included, in my fifth grade year in Nampa, Idaho, the study of “community.” To better understand our community, we visited a bank and a fire station. We wrote short pieces on our churches, though we never talked about the social class differences among them; we were tested on the geographical determinants of the placement of communities, though the explanations did nothing to explain Nampa, Idaho; we read that communities were places where cooperation and civility were valued, though the schoolhouse we occupied valued competition and hierarchy, maintained in the schoolyard in social relations that mocked civility. By the fifth grade, working class children had found that the best salve for the indignity of
Being at the bottom of the academic hierarchy was to beat up the kids in the clean clothes. A skinny child, I avoided participating directly in the sport, but took no little vicarious pleasure in silently applauding from a distance. We were all schooled well, though the lessons we took from that schooling were not those enshrined in the year’s learning objectives.

Every day, in every grade, as regular as clockwork, we rose, placed our hands over our hearts, and pledged our allegiance to the flag, “with liberty and justice for all.” Our allegiance having been pledged to the nation-state, as regular as clockwork we and our teachers studiously avoided asking awkward questions about the flag or about the nation for which it stood. We memorized the names of explorers and the dates by which various colonies were founded but were not encouraged to enquire about those who already inhabited the lands on which the colonies lay. Our books and lessons celebrated the Spanish-American War yet fell silent on the subsequent American half-century subjugation of the Philippines. Slavery found a discreet place in our lessons, though its racial character was acknowledged only by indirection; abolitionism did not merit even that. There was no labor movement worthy of the name, no imperialism, and if poverty had been a problem once upon a time, it made no appearance in our lessons on the contemporary world.

Our third-grade social studies textbook, Our Neighbors, asked us to memorize the major crops of our neighbor, Mexico. We ate tacos and learned La Cucaracha and the Mexican Hat Dance, then went to recess and taunted our neighbors, the sad, shy little brown children of Mexican migrant laborers, as dags and wet-backs. No teacher ever intervened or made our unthinking cruelty the subject of a social studies lesson about community. And even in that far-off world of the Pacific Northwest, with a minuscule black population, no lesson, no book, no teacher breathed a word to us of the condition of our young black peers in Alabama or Georgia or Mississippi. For we had already pledged our allegiance; we knew there was liberty and justice for all; nothing more needed saying.

I did not succeed in my classrooms. No teacher expected me to. Most were probably not even aware I was there, except when they reprimanded me for filling the tedium by socializing. I was part of that half or more of every classroom that...