

A VIEW FROM THE TRENCHES: ONE JUDGE'S ADVICE

By Thom Rosenblum, National Park Service

As a historian with the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, I've been privileged to serve as a foot soldier in the NHD program for the past eight years. I've worked with students and teachers from across the country, also judging projects in Kansas and Missouri.

As an NHD judge, I of course appreciate projects that are visually appealing and well organized and presented. But the key to producing a top-notch project is a good topic and strong primary source research that displays a thorough knowledge of the subject and its significance in history.

The teacher's role in getting students involved in NHD cannot be overemphasized. First, for students to meaningfully engage in a project, they must be inspired by history. Second, they need to learn to think like a historian. Students must locate events in time and place and then determine how to gather information about past events and lives. They then must not only pull together this body of knowledge but derive meaning from it about a historical event or past life.

One of the most challenging parts of putting together a project is also one of the first steps: selecting a topic. Topics can come from just about anywhere—a textbook or other reading, something the student saw on TV, or from listening to a family member tell about his or her experience. In selecting a story to tell, while it is normal to choose a well-known turning point, such as the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, students should be careful not to dismiss other topics that might at first glance seem far less momentous. One of my favorite projects was an exhibit on how the invention of the bar code changed the world. At the outset, you could seemingly not find a more mundane and less awe-inspiring story to tell than how the first scanner came to ring up the sale of a 10-pack of Juicy Fruit gum in 1974. Yet the story that unfolded clearly showed how that ubiquitous beep forever altered our lives.

Don't overlook local history, where you can often discover stories that, although less well known, might have wide-ranging effects on individual lives and also societies. While the *Brown* case was played out on the national stage, in the end desegregation was experienced in individual schools and changed the lives of students, teachers, administrators and their communities. Choosing an intriguing topic right in their backyards might enable students to focus on an event that has been largely bypassed in textbooks. It might also help students better grasp the significance of community, as they place what happened in their own neighborhood within the context of sweeping events in history.

Students should choose a topic carefully. Researching an uninteresting subject can make for a very boring project. As a former history student, I can't recall how many times I chose a topic for a research paper early in a semester only to discover several weeks down the road—thanks to something a professor said or I read—a far more interesting subject I would really have enjoyed sinking my teeth into. If a student is going to spend time working on a project, then it should have some meaning.

Students should also make sure the topic they're interested in is workable. Even the most interesting thesis can remain elusive if the research material needed isn't readily available. Say that a student in Natchez, Mississippi, wants to focus on the dramatization of the 1913 Paterson, New Jersey, silk workers' strike written and staged at Madison Square Garden by John Reed, best known for his firsthand account of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook the*

A View from the Trenches:

One Judge's Advice

Don't overlook local history, where you can often discover stories that, although less well known, might have wide-ranging effects on individual lives and also societies.

World, and as the central character of the 1981 Warren Beatty film *Reds*. No doubt it's a great topic. But if the student doesn't have access to sources like the local Paterson newspapers of the time and collections such as the John Reed Papers, he or she will have a hard row to hoe.

Another common pitfall is choosing a topic that is too wide. The subject of *Brown v. Board of Education* has great appeal for students eager to learn about an event that truly transformed the United States. But it is a very broad, complex topic. I cannot recall how many times I have been asked by a student, "Can you tell me what you know about the *Brown v. Board of Education* case?" More often than not I end up advising the student to do a bit more research and develop a list of questions that will shed light on specific aspects of this important U.S. Supreme Court case.

Plan on narrowing your focus sufficiently so that you can completely explore it—and hopefully teach the judges something new and fresh in the process. One way to look at it: it would require a book-length essay or an entire exhibit gallery, at the very least, to do justice to the full story of the *Brown* case. That much information will not fit into an NHD project. A good way to know if a student has come up with a workable topic is whether he or she can state it as a question—such as "What impact did the *Brown v. Board of Education* case have on African-American teachers?" or "How is the *Brown* case related to the Fourteenth Amendment?"

As important as choosing a good topic is finding the sources to help tell the story. No project should be attempted on the basis of just textbooks or a couple of sources. At the outset, students should read as many secondary sources on their topic as they can find. This preliminary research will not only provide an overview of the topic but help to place it in historical context. However, students should also work toward developing a critical eye when deciding what sources they can trust and which ones should be questioned. A good example of where a student needs to tread carefully is the sea of rapidly proliferating websites. Sometimes these can be very helpful, especially if they are archival websites, which can provide direct access to primary documents. But websites must always be carefully evaluated, since many are filled with inaccurate information and ill-founded opinions. The most telltale sign of a trustworthy site as opposed to one that's questionable is whether the author provides footnotes, showing the sources for the facts and ideas included in the online work. Much the same can be said about secondary sources. If annotation is not provided, a book or article should not automatically be viewed as a reliable source.

In addition to a critical use of secondary sources, primary source documents are of primary importance to successful NHD projects. First, of course, the student needs a clear understanding of just what a primary source is. I have had more than one student tell me and other judges that their primary sources were textbooks, articles and websites, and I've seen secondary sources such as these listed in bibliographies under primary sources. Such students have obviously misunderstood the true definition of primary sources. While secondary sources such as textbooks or biographies can provide information based on primary sources, they remain the product of somebody else's research and interpretation. The Supreme Court transcripts of the *Brown v. Board of Education* case are a primary source. Richard Kluger's book on the case, *Simple Justice*, while an excellent historical account that quotes from the case transcripts, is not. Primary sources offer students a unique opportunity to learn from the firsthand accounts of an event, a life, a moment in time in their original form, generally without explanation or interpretation.

As with secondary sources, however, students should take care in looking at primary source documents. Just because a letter was written by a participant while an event was taking place

does not mean the information provided presents a fair and unbiased account. In addition to knowing who created the document and when and where it was created, students should be aware of factors that might have influenced the author's view of an incident—for example, what was the author's motivation for writing about the event. Another example involves political cartoons, which can be a great source that offers insight into attitudes toward key figures and events. Through cartoons, students can learn much about public opinion on topics ranging from the presidents to suffragists. Yet as researchers, they must keep in mind that any cartoon is slanted, to reinforce the artist's opinion or a newspaper or magazine's view. They cannot be treated as evidence of the way things actually were nor even of how everyone felt about the way things were.

One final word of advice: Never be afraid to ask for help. Teachers, librarians, archivists, historians and other staff members of local and state museums and historical societies will dive right in to help anybody working on an NHD project. You might find an expert on a certain topic right in your own hometown. And if there is a National Park nearby, give the staff a holler. The National Park Service is a vast system, and it would be hard to find a topic that some park doesn't have information on—which they will gladly provide to anyone who asks for help.



Courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, Kansas