

Don't know much about history

Written by Rachel Kaub Guest Columnist
Friday, 27 September 2019 09:34



Gallup group looks at the decline in history education

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” - George Santayana

Some would argue that whether we learn our planet's written history or not, we may very well repeat the worst mistakes. But area historian and archaeologist Martin Link hopes to open up a discussion on the mounting crisis in history education (and arts education, music instruction, and more) that is increasingly lessened by a focus on vocational training, economic development, and the ensuing loss of critical thinking skills.

The impact of “High Stakes Testing,” or “Teaching to the Test,” has had some unfortunate impacts, particularly for low-income rural and inner-city students, mostly minority, and in our neck of the woods, often with Native heritage. Fewer students in these higher-risk circumstances are as likely to move on to the next grade, consistently, with traditional programs, including such classes as art, dance, music, geography, history, literature, biology, et. al., giving way to heightened promotion of STEM programs.

There are instances where Native arts and crafts are given their due, but Professor Link, who was a co-founder of the Navajo Nation Museum, Red Rock Park, and once taught courses in Navajo and Hispanic history, mourns the lack of history education:

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"A recent article in the Sun discussed the increasing popularity of STEM challenges...I have no quarrel with that, except...when it has to replace everything else."

Link noted that the New Mexico State Fair has featured student art, with a designated spot for "McKinley County," though nothing from this area has been featured in several years: "Art should be a part of a student's education. So should music."

Martin recently got a letter from Jim Lighthizer, the president of American Battlefield Trust, who noted that test scores measuring knowledge of American history from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that over two decades, no more than 18 percent of U.S. 8th graders scored at or above the "proficient" level in history.

Reference:

Another recent study by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) found that less than one-third of the top 75 colleges and universities ranked by U.S. News and World Report magazine even require U.S. history as a graduation requirement for history majors.

Reference:

Indigenous communities, including those of the Navajo Nation, Zuni, and many other entities, have cultural traditions of oral history, passed from elder to youth, but Link cautions that:

"The thing about oral history: It is always one generation from extinction. I mean complete extinction." Link went on to note that where children once learned, through games and songs, recent generations spend time on screens. Many indigenous cultures and languages, locally and worldwide, may be lost in this generation.

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Martin Link led history projects over the last 60 years, most recently in an effort to preserve the old Ft. Wingate military grounds that include the dormitories and classrooms used for a BIA school. Navajo Code Talkers were sworn in there, and Navajo Scouts matriculated soon after their return in 1868 from Hwéeldi (Navajo language or Diné Bizaad for Ft. Sumner or Bosque del Redondo). The "long walk" of the Navajo from imprisonment there was the only U.S.-driven Indigenous "round trip" - other tribes were escorted on long walks to permanent exile. Link hopes that the Ft. Wingate site could become a living history museum, as has El Rancho de las Golondrinas, near Santa Fe. Link's Gallup home is a 3/4 model of that house.

There will be a discussion about history (and other education issues) starting at 2 pm on Sunday, September 22, 2019, during the next meeting of the Plateau Sciences Society, taking place at the Red Mesa Center, 105 West Hill Avenue, in downtown Gallup, just East of Octavia Fellin Public Library (for more information or questions, you may call Martin at 505-863-6459.)

Writer's disclaimer: Rachel Kaub is the GM for Gallup Public Radio's KGLP, and, fair disclosure, is the current president of the Plateau Sciences Society.

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