H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Loris C. Troyer. *Portage Pathways.* Kent, Ohio and London, England: Kent State University Press, 1998. ix + 370 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-600-5.

Reviewed by Frank J. Byrne (Department of History, Ohio State University)
Published on H-Ohio (February, 1999)

Remembering Bygone Days in Portage County

Writing in offices strewn with books or teaching in cavernous lecture halls, professional historians can easily fall prey to the conceit that they are the sole practitioners of their craft. Of course those men and women employed in historical societies or the thousands of people belonging to Civil War roundtables and book clubs know better. Everyday history is being written, studied, or reenacted in ways many professors and their graduate students rarely notice. Occasionally interesting historical accounts even make their way into daily newspapers. For the past sixteen years subscribers to the *Record Courier* published in Portage County, Ohio, have had the good fortune to read about the history of their county in Loris Troyer's weekly column "Portage Pathways." Since 1982 Troyer has written more than seven hundred columns regarding the founding and growth of Portage County. *Portage Pathways* consists of more than one-hundred and thirty of these columns. While this format makes the narrative difficult to sustain, Troyer provides a very readable account of a Western Reserve county that is likely to appeal to his target audience as well as some historians.

Troyer organizes his columns within six broad chapters covering landmarks, institutions, business, county historians, and of course people. The timeline of the collections spans from prehistoric Portage to the modern-day. The expressed intent of the columns is to "bring readers pleasant stories about people, places, and events." (p. 344) Troyer achieves his goal. The reader is regaled with the exploits of Portage County's great men and women, the overwhelming emphasis on the former. The contributions of such local legends as Captain Samuel Brady, an Indian scout and Revolutionary War army officer, and twentieth-century businessman-politician Martin L. Davey, are admirably described over several columns. More prominent historical figures with ties to the county are given special attention. Abolitionist John Brown spent much of his childhood in the village of Hudson which at that time was part of the county. Poet Hart Crane also hailed from Portage County while future president James A. Garfield attended and taught at one of the county's few institutions of higher learning, Hiram College. These historical profiles represent Troyer's attempt to make sure these individuals "receive their rightful place in local history."

As a compilation of newspaper columns, *Portage Pathways, lacks an overarching thesis. This said, several themes in the work might be of interest to scholars of Ohio history. Though hardly breaking new ground, Troyer's columns testify to the great impact immigrants from New England and New York had upon the Western Reserve. For the most part Yankees built the county. Troyer also provides several excellent anecdotes describing the growth of local civic and business institutions. The tension between this development and the traditional mores of many residents makes for interesting reading. Perhaps the greatest strength of* Portage Pathways_ lies in Troyer's familiarity with the subject matter. As a longtime resident, newspaper editor, and founding member of the Kent Historical Society, Troyer is personally acquainted with many of the leading people and institutions in the rural county. Unfortunately, this study in local history also contains some shortcomings.

Since *Portage Pathways* is a collection of essays designed to appeal to a newspaper audience, it includes a degree of basic historical background and repetition that many historians will find oppressive. Much of this is intrinsic to the book's format yet one wonders whether some of these problems are rooted in the divide between antiquarian and scholarly history. Troyer relates an amount of folklore and rumor that some historians might find troubling. One the basis of "hearsay," he suggests Portage County served as an important stop on the Underground Railroad in antebellum Ohio. (p.25) Troyer believes "history speaks for itself, and facts are facts," but sometimes it is impossible to discern the sources for his accounts of fugitive slaves, frontier settlers, and

other historical incidents. (p.146) Additionally, *Portage Pathways* offers several confusing or simply erroneous passages. For example Troyer describes how General William Hazen, a brigade commander in the Federal army during the Civil War, fought in the battles of Pittsburgh Landing and Shiloh. Troyer fails to tell the reader that the battles of Pittsburgh Landing and Shiloh are one in the same. Describing the 1830s-40s political career of Portage County resident Seabury Ford, Troyer declares like "most Whigs, Ford was a devout opponent of slavery." (p.102) I suspect Zachary Taylor and thousands of his fellow southern slaveholders would have been shocked to learn they belonged to a party supporting rank abolitionism. What to the casual devotee of a local newspaper columnist may seem trivial poses a more severe concern to the historian.

The occasional errors found in *Portage Pathways* do not diminish the work's relative merit. Troyer should be applauded for encouraging his readers to learn about local history. One hopes that the intriguing historical anecdotes he deftly relates in his breezy prose will inspire *Record Courier* and *Portage Pathways* readers to broaden and deepen their intellectual explorations of Ohio history.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Ohio and H-Net. All rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational uses if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact the Phillip Payne ppayne@sbu.edu or 716-375-2460.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Frank J. Byrne. Review of Troyer, Loris C., *Portage Pathways.* H-Ohio, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2762

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.