

The WPA American Guide Series: Local History Treasures for the Classroom

Syd Golston

The Federal Writers' Project was an arm of the Works Progress Administration, Franklin Delano Roosevelt's massive program to put the unemployed back to work. The Writers' Project was charged with producing an extensive guidebook for each of the 48 states; and more than 6,000 local newspaper writers, novelists, poets, college professors, and local historians labored from 1935 to 1941 on these American Guide Series volumes. They are commonly regarded as masterpieces in social history, unique in the literature of the United States.

The guidebooks can be found in local libraries, and several of them are coming back into the market as paperback reprints of the original manuscripts. They make wonderful classroom assignments, leading students to community sites they may never have explored, to oral interview opportunities, and to viewing their own neighborhoods as part of the panorama of American history.

I visited one site in each of the state guidebooks and interviewed someone living there who could update the history of years ago: a farmer in Iowa, who remembered harvest suppers; a pair of sailors leaving Astoria, Oregon, for a month-long fishing trip; a firefighter across the street from the abandoned Waterman's fountain pen factory in Newark, New Jersey; the manager of the Olde Curiosity Shoppe on the Seattle pier; and an Amarillo, Texas, rancher. The example below required a simple hour's research in a library, and an even briefer interview in a Massachusetts town hall. It could have been a great project for a high school student.

Leyden, Massachusetts: The Dorrillites

At 0.6 m. is the junction with an unnumbered road. Right 4.5 m. on this road, which parallels Shattuck Brook, is Leyden (town, alt. 940, pop, 253, sett. 1738, incorp. 1784), named for Leyden, Holland, where the Pilgrims sought refuge for a time.

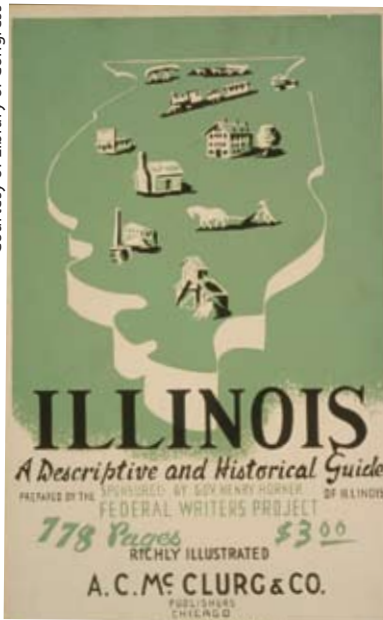
... In the last decade of the 18th century, William Dorrell came to Leyden and began to teach a philosophy of life founded on the doctrines of free love and the unalterable sanctity of life, animal as well as human. He gained followers who joined him in religious demonstrations that shocked the community until the order was extinguished by Ezekiel Foster in 1800. Dorrell continued to live in Leyden until, at the age of 94, he starved himself to death, declaring that he had lived long enough.

—*Massachusetts, A Guide to Its Places and People*, 1937, page 563

It is still difficult to find Leyden; it's too small to show up on the road atlas. At the Cushman Library in Bernardston, where the *History of Leyden, Massachusetts, 1676–1959* may be photocopied, the librarian gave us directions and we set off through picture postcard New England with autumn leaves, cows, and barns, stone walls and a covered bridge or two.

Chapter VI of the town's history is called "The Dorrillite Years," and contains a vivid description of the character William Dorrill (the original spelling). He was a giant of a man, 6 feet 5 inches tall and 300 pounds in weight. He was a Yorkshire-born Redcoat in King George's army, taken prisoner at the battle of Saratoga, who married and farmed in Massachusetts after the Revolution. He had several children and a prosaic life in Northfield and Warwick before he became the "Leyden Messiah." A revelation came to him in 1790 while he was chopping wood near his home on Leyden's Frizzell Hill—a voice called him from the heavens, he claimed, thundering: "Render yourself a fitting sacrifice."

Dorrill preached from that hillside about ideas radically different from the general Congregational dogma of the time. All days were holy, he said, so there should be no Sundays, and all animals were holy, too, so no one might cause the death of any living creature. Dorrill professed an extreme vegetarianism—instead of leather boots, his followers



above: Poster for Federal Writers' Project advertising "American Guide Series" volume on Illinois, showing outline of map of the state. (LC-USZC2-5191)



right: Frizzell graves (Followers of William Dorrill in Leyden) photo by Syd Golston

wore large wooden shoes made by one Ezra Shattuck, a member of the sect.

As the 1790s wore on, Dorrill introduced more and more radical notions. Husband and wife became "perfect" through Dorrilism, he asserted, and they then had no need for physical fidelity. His meetings on the hill were wild, culminating in "bacchanalian songs and bawdy addresses" accompanied by a black fiddler named Jack, according to a report by the Reverend John Taylor of Deerfield in the August 1798 issue of the *Franklin Gazette*. Reverend Taylor was most upset that Dorrill now proclaimed that he was the Messiah of his generation, above the law and able to do no evil, and that no arm of flesh could harm him.

Reverend Taylor's report disturbed the churchgoers of Leyden, and it led ultimately to the downfall of the so-called messiah. Captain Ezekiel Foster, who had read the article, attended as a spectator what became the final meeting of the sect. When Dorrill shouted "No man of flesh can harm me," Foster simply came forward and punched his lights out. He

threatened to continue unless Dorrill renounced his beliefs and promised never to preach again; all the followers departed in disillusionment.

When Dorrill tried to resurrect his reputation by walking on water, someone removed the planks he had secretly laid in the millpond, and he sank like a stone. Later, Dorrill admitted that he "just wanted to see how far he could go" with the people of Leyden. He did starve himself to death, just as the guide entry describes.

People in Leyden today know about William Dorrill and the Dorrilites, although all of this took place over 200 years ago. When we happened upon the end of a church tag sale in the basement of Leyden's tiny town hall, the ladies showed us how to find Frizzell Hill where he lived and preached, and the graves of Dorrill and his wife.

The tag sale women added a fascinating postscript to the tale. Apparently, this part of the world still attracts a spiritually radical fringe, and in the hippie decades, a commune was started in Leyden by one

Michael Metelica. The adherents originally lived in a tree house, which was burned down, probably intentionally. "Oh, they were druggies, no question," says one woman. "The firemen could smell the marijuana in the burned out tree house. Somebody wanted them out of here. But here's the odd part: there was a Bible in that tree, and it didn't burn."

We drove up Frizzell Hill, where the graves of the Frizzell family (original Dorrilites) lie overlooking the valley below, many of them dated from the early nineteenth century. One tall column towers crookedly among the tombstones, and although it isn't Dorrill's, it's a reminder of an episode when neighbors went way off center. 📍

NCSS President Syd Golston is an educational administrator, curriculum writer, and historian. She taught at all grade levels from 7th to college, specializing in constructivist learning experiences in local and women's history. She has been an administrator in the Phoenix Union High School District in Phoenix, Arizona, since 2000, most recently as a social studies specialist for the district.