History of Volunteering

Just how old is the concept of volunteering? While it can be argued that it has always been part of human nature to help each other in need, what we think of today as typical volunteering is a fairly recent phenomenon. Even so, how it has developed and where it is going today is such a broad topic and so international in scope that to do the subject justice would take a large volume. This article seeks to get your intellectual feet wet and perhaps inspire you to look further.

How old volunteering, or as it is coming to be widely called, voluntary action, is depends on how you define it. If you think of it simply as people helping people out of a desire to help, without expectation of material reward, then “in all pre-industrial societies – and still today in many, mainly third world nations – mutual self-help was/is vital to the survival of rural communities, e.g. to bring in harvests, to build homes for the aged and invalid, to maintain roads.” [Gillette – see Sources below.] Think barn raising in farming communities as late as... well, now in some societies and groups.

Perhaps the first formal institutions of volunteering were the monastic orders of the early Christian church and their equivalents in other religions. While in the general community people helped people out of a sense of mutual need, monastic orders, in particular the Franciscans and Poor Clares, whose primary mission was to go out into needy communities and serve. Franciscans worked with lepers, who were shunned by all others. During the many outbreaks of plague during the Middle Ages, it was often only the Franciscan monks who would go in to victims’ homes and take care of them. We are all familiar with stories of orders such as that of Mother Theresa whose lives are dedicated to helping poor and sick people.

One might argue that the sort of volunteering we think of today, the organized volunteering of institutions like hospitals, the Red Cross, and so forth, grew out of industrialism and the resulting development of the middle class. Thanks to a shift away from a combination of an agrarian economy and, in the towns and cities, whole families working in trades and so forth, especially in Europe and North America, a new concept was born: leisure time. People who worked in the factories, of course, did not have this, but those who derived income from owning or running them did, at least members of their families did. The leisure that spawned the popularity of the novel and mass book publishing also gave rise to women in particular developing and joining voluntary societies.
This ongoing shift to more formal volunteering had its downside. One was that it was just one part of the development of even more class division, and in particular of what Karl Marx described as “the development of “the industrial bourgeoisie.” And more specifically it signaled the decline of the "barn raising" traditions. “Perhaps mainly in the 19th century, industrialization, the generalization of money as a means of exchange, and the "de-socialization" and anonymity that accompanied urbanization undermined such values as solidarity and mutual assistance.” [Gillette]

How much volunteering went on both before and for a long time after the Industrial Revolution we may never know. One reason for this that applies not only to when history was not as carefully recorded but after it became a formal discipline of its own is that a large segment of the population of these countries was simply not included in the research and record keeping: women. As historical societies are poring over the newsletters and meeting minutes of “ladies’ societies” that would have in their own time been regarded as trivial, they are finding out a great deal more about the daily lives not only of the women involved but of communities with scant historical or usually limited view documents. Much more is being learned, therefore, about how much community service was done in a town, and the character of that service. In Australia, as an example, “Until the late 1960s, for example, we had 'neglected' the history of half of our population - the history of women was largely ignored until the second wave feminist movement revolutionized how we view history. Here in Australia, Anne Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police; and Beverley Kingston's My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Anne both published in 1975; and Miriam Dixon's The Real Matilda (1976); irrevocably changed the way we view Australian history, by focusing on and including the experiences of women.” [Oppenheimer]

In spite of this, it was interesting how much I found when doing just an initial search for articles on the history of volunteering. I expected at first to find them only covering that history in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain and Australia, in part because those are all English-speaking countries, and that’s what I – and much of the web – speak, but also because of my own presumption that the type of volunteering I was investigating came out of British industrialism and thence to countries that have a British heritage. While much of what I found fell into that category, it was definitely not all I found.

One of the earliest instances of organized voluntary action I found was in Québec in 1688 when "after the great fire that ravaged Québec City, citizens created the Bureau des pauvres, an
office for the poor composed of volunteers, who provided money, food and clothing to the destitute.” (Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale) The same article mentions the development of religious societies dedicated to provide services for the affected population.

The mid to late 1800s saw the rise of many of the institutions that are almost synonymous with voluntary action. All were created to serve the needs of people in crisis of one kind or another. Some actually specialized in addressing specific causes. The Salvation Army focused on unmarried people and on alcoholism. The YMCA concentrated on improving men’s economic opportunities. The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul developed voluntary services for the poor and homebound elderly. These organizations grew most obviously from the social and class shift that industrialization brought about. In addition to there being a class now with time to volunteer, this group had more disposable income than ever before and sought to use it in philanthropic (for the love of mankind) ways.

Some notable points in the timeline of voluntary action belong to the period from the Crimean War through World War I. Florence Nightingale’s force of skilled nurses brought attention to that level of volunteerism among women in Great Britain. This no doubt explains, at least in part, the surge of volunteers among women and men who were not eligible for military service in World War I. To me one of the most interesting episodes in volunteer history involves the Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1918-19 when in Philadelphia a pioneering help line called “Call Filbert 100” for the afflicted was set up sponsored by Strawbridge and Clothier and staffed by volunteers. The Flu of 1918 by Eileen A. Lynch, The Pennsylvania Gazette, http://www.upenn.edu/gazette/1198/lynch3.html. Overwhelmed hospitals had to turn to volunteers just to keep their doors open. “Out of all the major United States cities, only Boston adequately confronted the 1918 flu. With a few days notice, the hospitals of Boston worked with city residents to form an enormous volunteer force. It worked -- the mortality rate in Boston was much lower than in other cities.” From an article on superflu modeling in MathPuzzle http://www.mathpuzzle.com/superflu.html.

Gillette mentions how in 1920 “a group of Austrian, English, French, German and Swiss volunteers -- some of them former soldiers and thus ex-enemies -- set to work to rebuild a village near Verdun” in France. This group became the Service Civil International (http://www.sciint.org). This organization pioneered in 1934 the sort of international relief that eventually spawned the U.S. Peace Corps, the British Volunteer Programme, and the Deutsche Entwikkungsdienst, and other western to third world relief groups that also according to
Gillette led to the UN Volunteers program. Volunteering became at this time an alternative to military service in some European countries, and the relief and reconstruction efforts after World War II also benefited from increased involvement by young volunteers.

These organizations represent groups of long term volunteers. More recently, say the past few decades, we have seen the increase of short term volunteerism, a product both of increasingly time-committed women and also a growing perception of volunteering as a hobby or leisure activity like watching sports, taking personal improvement classes, or any number of “extracurricular” pastimes. That is not to say that people do not care about the causes they serve, but that more than ever people see volunteering as something they do in their “free time” for all kinds of reasons, including pure recreation. This is when we see the formalization of such things as corporate volunteer programs and “volunteer vacations.” Volunteering has become in part a marketable commodity.

A major movement of the late 19th and the 20th centuries, the establishment of socialist economies in many parts of the world, had an oddly dual impact on volunteering. On one side the stated values of collective well being in socialism would seem to point to a return of the “barn raising” impulse. But in fact in many socialist countries volunteering was and is tightly controlled. In an article outlining the history of volunteering in the Czech Republic, the author explains:

The socialist era was characterized by an ideological form of volunteer work. ‘Voluntary’ manual work aimed to remould the character of ideologically unstable groups of educated people and re-educate descendants of the old upper classes. Members of these groups were obliged to work on behalf of socialism for free. It was not convenient to publicly say that one did not consider these kinds of activities to be volunteer work. Those who did not understand had to face the repressive power of the State and could forget about their careers. Volunteer work, in the eyes of the common citizen, meant either working under political pressure or ‘being servile to the regime.’

Nor is that type of ideological volunteering only part of socialist societies, as Gillette also points to how Depression-era organizations created as “means of giving unemployed young people something socially useful to do, as well as a bed and food. That it could be perverted and diverted from its internationalist and often pacifist ideals was, unfortunately, demonstrated by the Hitlerjugend Arbeitsdienst labour brigades in Germany, and similar schemes in other totalitarian countries.”
The various civil rights movements of the second half of the 20th century had their impact on how we view volunteerism as well. The women's rights movement, for example, coined the concept of “sisterhood” which referred to a belief that all women had common experiences and needs. I distinctly remember the women’s centers, women’s clinics and other grassroots volunteer programs that blossomed in the late 60s and early 70s. But the success of these selfsame rights movements has actually had one of the greatest impacts on the “health” of volunteerism since the Industrial Revolution. “Yet the virtual disappearance of home-based, educated women (at least below the age of 60) has had an effect. A path once followed by able women across the developed world led to university, teaching and then motherhood, homemaking and voluntary work. Such women are now too busy. The average amount of time that today’s British citizen, male or female, devotes to volunteer activities is four minutes a day.” [Wolf]

Voluntary action today is in some turmoil. There are groups who want to keep the 19th century model of a sort of idealized noblesse oblige, only for a broader social class. Others value the work of truly grassroots organizations that have a minimal structure to common effort. Still others want to “force” volunteering on certain groups of people, mostly young people, while others try to use community involvement of a socially responsible kind to amplify education. Still others argue that volunteering for “pay,” Americorps for example, is still volunteering.

We do face many challenges in the coming years. Certain resources the modern industrialized world depends on for its very existence are running out. In much of the world illness and starvation are pandemic. Political upheaval and military violence have become so widespread that on a recent piece on NPR’s Morning Edition a Sudanese man complained of the impact of “donor fatigue” Protesters Call for Intervention in Darfur http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5372727. How voluntary action will respond remains to be seen, but it is also important to remember that these forces impact volunteerism itself. How well we can adapt the impulse to help others so that it is effective in meeting the effects of these challenges will write the next chapter of the history of voluntary action.

Discuss this topic on VOLUNTEER-ISSUES.

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