

## HIGHWAYS AND HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

Among the many enterprises for the promotion of interest in and knowledge of Minnesota history undertaken by the Minnesota Historical Society in recent years, perhaps none eventually will reach more people than the highway marking project that is being carried on jointly by the society and the Minnesota highway department. During the past year, according to the estimates of the highway department, an average of 375,000 vehicles of all kinds used the trunk highways of the state daily. Of these a considerable percentage were machines from outside the state. The value of the Minnesota tourist traffic annually runs high into the millions of dollars. A marking project that will reach even a small part of these people and remind them of Minnesota's past is very much worth while. Incidentally, the markers are a commercial asset to the state in attracting the tourist trade.

People love history. Many, perhaps most people, use some other name for this interest, for "history" has a formidable sound. In the past the historian too frequently has been pictured as a remote individual, whose time was spent in unearthing information of no direct interest to the average man and publishing this material in weighty tomes, replete with learned footnotes which few ever took the trouble to read. The average person is likely to express his historical interest in telling stories of his boyhood and the "old swimming hole," in perusing the home-town newspaper, in comparing past economic and political conditions with those of the present, or perhaps in working out his family genealogy.

<sup>1</sup>A paper presented at a stated meeting of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society, held in the Historical Building, St. Paul, October 10, 1932. *Ed.*

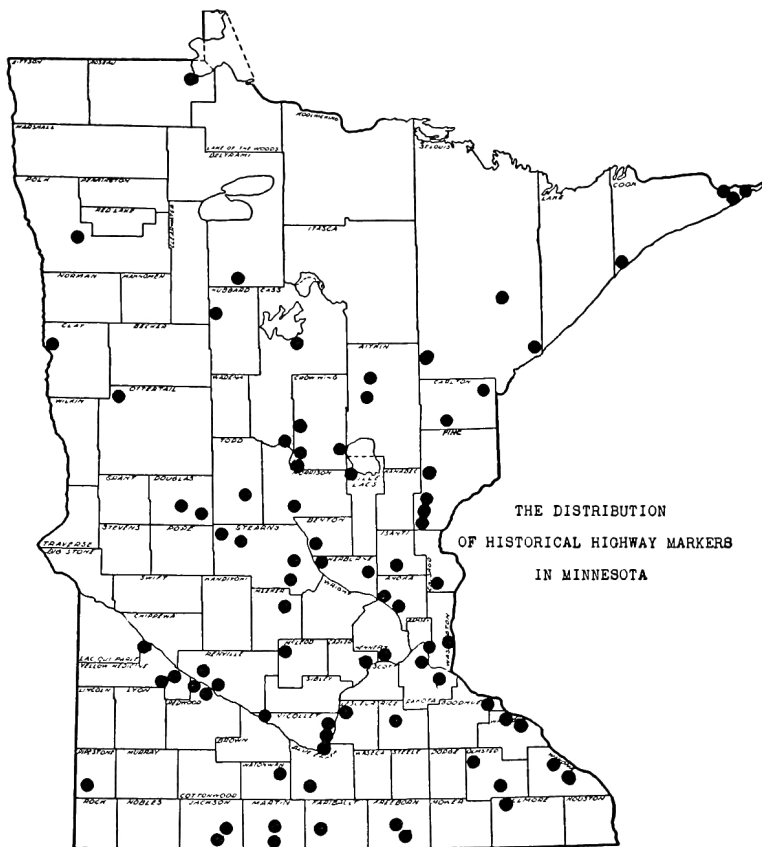
The popularizing of scientific history must have an important place among the historical activities of institutions that are dependent upon public support. The present highway marking project is an attempt to popularize history in a time when travel has become very common. It aims to give the traveler on the highways a concise and accurate statement of the historic significance of the locality through which he is passing. A given site may have national, regional, or local significance. In the present stages of the marking enterprise an effort is being made to select for attention points that have more than a narrowly local interest.

In any marking project there is always danger that sites and facts of minor importance will be stressed too strongly. The society, for example, has been urged to mark the spot where the members of the James-Younger gang had their last meal together prior to the Northfield bank robbery of 1876. This sort of thing is episodic and of slight importance. The raid on Northfield, with the resultant smashing of the band of frontier desperadoes, is, however, an event of real regional importance, and it naturally will take precedence over the incident mentioned above.

What sites and events are being commemorated by these Minnesota historical highway markers? A study of the map published herewith reveals a wide geographic distribution. From Grand Portage at the extreme northeastern corner of Minnesota to Pipestone near the southwestern angle, from Warroad on the Lake of the Woods to Minnesota City near the southeastern boundary, the network of markers extends. No one county or area has been consciously favored at the expense of the others. The eighty-two markers are scattered over forty-nine counties, and at present no county can boast more than four.

There are markers for Indian villages, battles, treaties, agencies, missions, fur-trading posts, canoe routes and portages, military posts and stockades, government land offices,

stagecoach stations, "vanished towns," group settlements, a gold "discovery," the beginnings of iron mining and granite quarrying, early milling, forest fires, homes of famous



individuals, notable events, such as Schoolcraft's discovery of Lake Itasca, and many other types of historical occurrences. A few of the markers are regional in character, as for example the one at Anoka which bears the caption "Mouth of Rum River."

In the wording of every inscription an effort has been made to give the greatest possible amount of information

within the arbitrary limit of approximately fifty-five words. In a regional marker for the Lake Pepin area, now in preparation, a double-length inscription will be spread over two plates erected side by side. Because of the expense, however, it is probable that this device will be used only occasionally at important sites.

This historical marking project had its inception in March, 1929, as the outgrowth of an illustrated talk entitled "State Parks and Minnesota History," which the writer gave before the employees of the state highway department. Reference was made to the fact that there was no way of indicating to travelers on the highways the proximity of historic sites and that they consequently failed to reap the fullest benefits from their travels in Minnesota. At the close of this talk Mr. Walter F. Rosenwald, maintenance engineer of the highway department, pointed out the fact that markers calling attention to historic sites could certainly be considered as "informational," and hence might well be included in the trunk highway marking system. He therefore proposed a joint plan by which the Minnesota Historical Society should designate the sites and prepare the inscriptions, and the highway department should manufacture and erect the markers. Funds allotted for trunk highway marking could be used to finance the project. The proposal was promptly approved by Mr. Charles M. Babcock for the highway department, and by Dr. Solon J. Buck for the historical society.

In a series of conferences details were worked out, and the first five inscriptions, calling attention to such nationally known sites as the red Pipestone quarry and Fort Ridgely, were sent to the highway department in July, 1929. Considerable experimenting with types and sizes of letters, styles of markers, and materials followed, and not until January, 1930, was the first full-sized marker manufactured. At the society's annual meeting in that month the

first historical marker was displayed. It was made of wood, but it was subsequently determined to use more durable materials and the present steel plate signs were designed.

The markers now being erected are substantial steel plates, three by five feet in dimensions, into which the words of the inscriptions are deeply cut. Each inscription consists of a caption in four-inch letters, and a fifty-word descriptive statement in two-inch letters. The letters are enameled in black on a white background, since black and white are the "informational" colors used by the highway department as distinguished from the "warning" colors of black and yellow. Each marker bears the seal of the historical society and the emblem of the highway department as vouchers for its authenticity. The signs are manufactured under contract by a Minneapolis company at a cost of about twenty dollars each.

The markers are placed on the edges of the right-of-way, parallel with the highway. This position has been criticized on the ground of poor visibility, and the objection is justified by the facts. It was considered when the plans for the marking project were worked out. The alternative scheme of placing the signs perpendicular to the roadway, however, would have necessitated a double plate in order that the marker might be read from two directions, and this involved an almost prohibitive cost per sign. It is obvious that a marker readable from only one direction would not be practical. To meet this objection, as well as to cope with the relatively high speed of normal highway traffic, it was decided to supplement the original marker with two warning markers placed perpendicular to the roadway and facing traffic from each direction. These signs, which read "Historic Site Ahead," are being erected from three to five hundred feet in advance of the main marker. The belief is that those who are interested will slow down sufficiently to enable them to read the principal inscription

as they pass the marker. That people are taking advantage of this opportunity to learn history as they ride is shown by the numerous comments overheard by those in charge of the society's exhibit showing the highway markers and their distribution at the Minnesota state fair of 1932. Such remarks as "We saw that one" or "We always stop to read these signs" were frequent. These comments seem to reflect the general attitude.

The warning sign idea was not put into practice until last spring and some of the historical markers have not yet been given this advance publicity. When all these preliminary signs are in place the markers will receive more attention from the traveling public. The steady increase in the number of markers, too, will gradually train motorists to watch for and read these signs as naturally as they read the "caution" signs. To make it still easier for the traveler to read the historic markers, the highway department is planning to widen the shoulders at points where they have been erected sufficiently to permit a car to draw out of the line of moving traffic and stop. This has been done at the Oliver H. Kelley marker on Highway No. 3 south of Elk River, and a double line of white stones used to form an approach to the sign makes the spot exceedingly attractive.

This Minnesota marking project is in its infancy. In Virginia, the state that was the pioneer in historical marking on trunk highways, more than nine hundred signs have been erected since 1927 under the direction of the state commission on conservation and development, and a booklet of the inscriptions, published annually, contains more than a hundred pages. Minnesota as yet has less than a hundred markers, but it is hoped that the century mark can be crossed this year. If this goal is reached, it would be appropriate to issue a special folder or handbook containing the inscriptions and a map showing the locations. The Virginia system involves a complicated letter and number

code by which each road is designated, and proceeds to mark completely each main route as a unit. Minnesota has employed no such device; its plan aims to carry the work forward all over the state simultaneously without over-emphasizing any one section, as is shown on the map. Virginia has used the two-faced marker standing perpendicular to the road; but according to the statements of persons who have seen both styles of markers, the Minnesota type, with its warning signs, despite the parallel placing, is the more readable of the two. Mr. Verne E. Chatelain, historian for the national park service, has specially praised Minnesota for its historical marking plan, which he characterized as the best he had seen anywhere.

At present this Minnesota marking project is limited to the trunk highways, in contrast to the Virginia system, which includes minor roads as well. Thus it has not been possible to recognize many of the Minnesota sites which are well worth markers. Lines of communication have changed radically in the eighty-odd years of Minnesota's corporate existence. In pioneer days the water courses were the great thoroughfares, and consequently much of the activity that today should be commemorated by markers occurred on lakes and along navigable streams. Now overland transportation is the rule, and the trunk highways strike directly across country without much regard for river systems, except as obstructions to be bridged. Many of the markers, consequently, can only remind people that great events transpired somewhere within a radius of four or five miles.

It should be stated in drawing this discussion of the highway marking project to a close, that the highway markers are not intended to take the place of the markers that are being placed from time to time by various patriotic organizations. Rather is it believed that they will supplement the usual bronze tablets by drawing the attention of a larger public to the existence of historic spots, and arouse greater

interest in their preservation. In a number of instances the highway marker specifically states that a site is marked, or comprises or is within a state park.

The society welcomes coöperation and assistance from groups and individuals and hopes that suggestions regarding suitable sites will come flooding in. A cordial invitation is extended to county historical societies to submit lists of sites. These should be accompanied by detailed information giving the legal description of the property on which a site is located, its distance from the highway, and facts that can be utilized in drafting inscriptions. The work will be carried on over a period of years until Minnesota's past is adequately set forth for the benefit of the traveler.

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