

THE 1937 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

For seventeen successive years the Minnesota Historical Society has set aside sessions of its annual meetings for conferences on local history work in Minnesota. These conferences have not attracted large audiences; they have caused no undue emotion or stir in the hearts of newspaper reporters; and yet it is doubtful that any historical sessions sponsored by the society have been more fruitful of results. The story is a simple one: local history leaders and workers have come together to exchange ideas, to ask and answer questions, to spread the contagion of interest and enthusiasm; and their conferences, one each year for nearly two decades, have been a considerable factor in a significant state-wide movement. Only about fifty people gathered in the auditorium of the Historical Building in St. Paul for the seventeenth conference, which opened the society's eighty-eighth annual meeting on January 18, but the audience that turned out for this morning session included representatives of some fifteen or more local historical societies, and it was drawn from many parts of Minnesota. The presiding officer was the president of one of the state's local societies—the Reverend M. Casper Johnshoy of Pope County—and the general theme of the conference was of direct and practical interest, "Progress and Problems in Local History Work in Minnesota."

Mr. Johnshoy called first upon Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society, who presented a stimulating survey of "Local History Work in Minnesota in 1936." People have learned that the "record of one community, multiplied hundreds of times, with local variations, is the history of the state and of the nation," said Mr. Babcock. That Minnesotans are

rapidly learning this lesson and are organizing for the study and preservation of local backgrounds was graphically illustrated on a map of the state presented by the speaker. Blocked off in colors were the counties and communities having local historical organizations, and it was gratifying to note that they occupy well over half the area of the state. Three of the societies indicated on the map, in Chippewa and Morrison counties and in the village of Cass Lake, were organized in 1936, according to Mr. Babcock; a society has been planned in Yellow Medicine County; and signs of interest are evident in Grant and Kittson counties. "Active, energetic leadership by younger business and professional men and women" was characteristic of the local historical movement in 1936, according to Mr. Babcock. Under the new leadership, membership campaigns have been conducted by several societies with notable results. The Winona County Historical Society, for example, reports 255 members at the end of its first year of activity. Among the evidences of interest in local historical work described by the speaker were the publication in community newspapers of numerous articles furnished by local historians, the presence of as many as ten thousand people at summer meetings sponsored by local societies, and the establishment of county and community museums for the preservation of historical material assembled by local workers. The part played by the WPA in forwarding the latter type of activity was stressed by the speaker, who mentioned the interest of the state historical society in local museum projects and announced its willingness to co-operate in the work.

The supervisor of the Stearns County museum project, Miss Marjory D. Carter of St. Cloud, followed Mr. Babcock on the program. She took as her subject "Interviewing the Pioneer and Writing His Biography," telling how to locate pioneers who might be interviewed, how to gain their confidence, what types of questions to ask, and the like. She suggested that an interviewer "gather from every

available source all the information that can be found about the pioneer, his family, work, and interests" before starting an interview, that this information should be verified during an interview, that leading rather than direct questions should be used, and that questions should "suit the experiences of the individual pioneer." Included in the notes made by an interviewer, said Miss Carter, should be listed the "pictures, museum articles, diaries, plats, letters, and other historical papers" in the possession of the pioneer, and any information about people and places that can be gleaned from birth certificates, marriage licenses, and family Bibles. She also made the interesting suggestion that "dates of births, marriages, and deaths, and locations and dates of claims or homesteads should be checked against records in the county courthouse."

After thanking Miss Carter for her practical suggestions, the chairman called upon Mr. Ralph D. Brown of Minneapolis for a discussion of "Problems in the Historical Records Survey," of which he is state director. He reminded the audience that the survey was inaugurated in December, 1935, as a WPA project under the sponsorship of the Minnesota Historical Society. The program of historical work undertaken by the survey included the making of inventories of public records in Minnesota, papers of organizations and business concerns, manuscript materials in public and private hands, and the holdings of local historical societies; and the listing of churches, cemeteries, monuments and markers, historic buildings, historic trails, and historic sites. Mr. Brown presented figures to show what had been accomplished in carrying out this program. As a result of the survey, he said, many additions have been made to the collections of the state historical society. He pointed out that in connection with this work, excavations at Grand Portage and at old Fort Ridgely had been supervised, and the storage space for archives in every courthouse in the state had been examined. The final speaker

on the morning program, Mrs. Sara D. Boyce of St. Paul, described the relation between "Minnesota Census Records and Old Age Assistance." Since last April Mrs. Boyce has been employed by the old age assistance department to locate the names of applicants in the manuscript census schedules preserved by the Minnesota Historical Society. The record of age in the census is accepted by the department in cases where the eligibility of an applicant is open to question. In the course of her work Mrs. Boyce has searched for more than seven thousand names and has successfully located some four thousand.

The general discussion which followed the formal program was opened by Mr. Johnshoy, who told something about the work of the Pope County Historical Society and its co-operation with the WPA. He distributed among members of the audience copies of a questionnaire used by workers engaged in a survey of Pope County schools, and he announced that records had been assembled for sixty out of the eighty-three school districts in the county, and the archives of more than forty turned over to the society for preservation. Similar surveys of health work, medical practice, nursing, and hospitals in the county are under way, according to Mr. Johnshoy. Upon the conclusion of his remarks, Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, rose to call attention to the fact that the forty-nine local historical organizations shown on the map presented by Mr. Babcock had come into being since 1922, that "substantially our county historical movement is a thing of the last fifteen years." He mentioned the section devoted to "Local Historical Societies" that is now appearing regularly in *MINNESOTA HISTORY* and he suggested the possibility of "some kind of bulletin of notes and information about local work." Among local leaders who spoke were Mr. Martin Widsten of Bemidji, Miss Carter, and Judge Julius E. Haycraft of Fairmont. The advisability of preserving historical material in log cabins

was under discussion, and Judge Haycraft called attention to a log building which had served as the first post office in Watonwan County and was now preserved in Madelia. "It is hardly suitable for a permanent place for records and I think it is not so intended," he said. For that purpose the Watonwan County Historical Society uses a room in the courthouse.

The annual luncheon of the society, which was held at the St. Paul Athletic Club at 12:15 P.M., was attended by about a hundred and fifteen of its members and friends. It was followed by a program of talks and papers, with Senator Victor E. Lawson, editor of the *Willmar Tribune*, presiding. The first speaker, Mr. Edward C. Gale of Minneapolis, president of the society, announced as his subject "My Father's Diary, 1858-65." Many intimate glimpses of life and conditions in frontier Minneapolis were revealed in the extracts from this journal read by Mr. Gale, for his father, Samuel C. Gale, settled in the pioneer community in the summer of 1857 and for many years kept a detailed record of events there. An idea of the effect of the panic of 1857, for example, is given in the entry for July 25, 1858, which reads: "Times here are exceedingly hard. Very little business is done except by 'dicker.'" It was not until the spring of 1858 that the diarist, after commenting upon the increase in immigration, remarked: "I think our people are feeling a little more hopeful." The slavery issue received considerable attention. On July 30, 1860, Gale recorded that "some 15 or 20 slaves, servants of visitors" from the South were to be found at one local hotel. "One escaped from his mistress last week," he records, "but was caught and smuggled off down to slave land—all contrary to our law, of course. Our policy touching these slaves is to let them alone but if they of their own will once seek and obtain their liberty and desire to keep it not the powers of Hell even shall prevail to use us to help capture them." Records of Civil and Sioux war

battles are frequently encountered in the entries for the early sixties. In the fall of 1862 the diarist noted that "white settlers throughout the State are in a panic. Even in Hennepin County nearly half the settlers have left their homes and rushed to Minneapolis and beyond . . . yet I cannot learn that an Indian has been seen within ninety miles of this town."

"Old Fort Ridgely as Revealed by the Spade" was the subject discussed by the next speaker, Mr. G. Hubert Smith of Minneapolis, who was in charge of excavations on the site of this Minnesota Valley fort made late in the fall by the Minnesota Historical Society in co-operation with the Minnesota state park division of the National Park Service. "Work at Fort Ridgely was greatly facilitated," said Mr. Smith, because "information on the general location of buildings, their various construction, and, in several cases, even their original appearance was available." He told of discovering the foundation lines of the more important buildings that once constituted the fort, including the barracks, the commissary, three officers' quarters, the surgeon's quarters, a bake house, and a hospital. Brick fireplaces, chimney bases, and doorways were located, and hundreds of objects that were lost or discarded before the fort was abandoned in 1872 were found, the speaker reported. He announced that plans are being made to place guard rails around the foundation walls and cellars when the excavations have been completed, to landscape the site, and to preserve it as a state park.

In explaining how "A Novelist Looks at History," Mrs. Darragh Aldrich of Minneapolis, the final speaker on the program, declared that "if the novelist has done his work well, he has produced a story that may have no foundation whatever in fact but reflects truth even more accurately than history." Mrs. Aldrich, who is a well-known writer of fiction, admitted, however, that the modern novelist "draws the very breath of his life from history," that "in

order to find any significance in the present he must study the past." In concluding her talk she announced that "We who are Minnesota novelists are honestly trying to give true pictures of life here—past and present—pictures of significance and possibly distinction. And it is we who realize most clearly the infinite value of the work of the Minnesota Historical Society. Without its 'facts,' we should be unable to present Truth." Mrs. Aldrich's interesting talk was the fifth in a series of professional and business people's views of history discussed before the society. Since 1933, when the series was inaugurated, a judge, a business man, a journalist, a doctor, and now a novelist have presented their reactions to the subject.

The president of the society, Mr. Gale, called the afternoon session to order at 3:00 P.M. in the Historical Building. About fifty people were present. After the reading of annual reports by the treasurer of the society, Mr. Everett H. Bailey of St. Paul, and by the superintendent, Mr. Blegen, a letter from Mr. Charles Stees, a member of the society's executive council, was presented to the audience. "It has been a pleasure to serve the Historical Society for over fifteen years as Auditor," wrote Mr. Stees, "and never to have found an error in the accounts of our Treasurer, Mr. Everett H. Bailey. The Society owes Mr. Bailey a vote of thanks for his long and faithful services." A rising vote in appreciation of Mr. Bailey's devoted service to the society followed.

Two historical papers were read after the close of the business session. The first, presented by Miss Gertrude W. Ackermann, assistant curator of manuscripts for the society, dealt with the career of a picturesque figure in early Minnesota—"George W. Northrup, Frontier Scout." She drew upon a collection of Northrup's letters in the possession of the Minnesota Historical Society for the story of this venturesome youth, who left his home in New York state in 1853 and went to Minnesota and the

West. There he worked for a St. Paul fur trader, taught in a mission school at Pembina, hunted buffaloes on the plains, served as government farmer for the Indians at Yellow Medicine, joined the Union army for Civil War service, went to the upper Missouri with Brackett's Battalion, and, when he was but twenty-seven years of age, met his death in a battle with the hostile Sioux. Miss Ackermann's paper will be published in a future issue of MINNESOTA HISTORY. In the present issue appears the second paper presented at this session—"A Footnote on Fire Steels" by Milo M. Quaife, secretary and editor of the Burton Historical Collection at Detroit, Michigan. In Dr. Quaife's absence, his paper was read by Mr. Babcock.

The closing session, held in the evening at the Historical Building with an audience of approximately a hundred people present, was marked by a challenging and timely annual address. Dean Guy Stanton Ford occupied the chair and introduced the speaker, Dr. Robert C. Binkley, professor of history in Western Reserve University and chairman of the joint committee on materials for research. Dr. Binkley grappled with a big theme, "History for a Democracy," and in his treatment of it he ranged over broad fields of history in a probing, questioning, appraising, and distinctly modern spirit. The discussion came to a head in his analysis of the potential role of family and local history in American democracy and in his conclusions with reference to new ways of making historical narratives of limited appeal available at nominal prices to those interested. The address goes to a wider audience through its publication in full in the present issue of this magazine.

After the conclusion of Professor Binkley's discussion many members of the audience lingered in the museum rooms to view the society's varied exhibits. Ten miniature historical groups made by WPA artists aroused much interest, as did a collection of objects unearthed during the recent excavations carried on at the site of Fort Ridgely.



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