

TREASURES FOR



The founders of the Minnesota Historical Society began collecting objects as soon as the institution was established in 1849. One hundred and fifty years later, the Society's museum collections contain some 250,000 three-dimensional objects and nearly 1 million archaeological artifacts. These pieces from the past speak volumes about Minnesota's social, cultural, economic, and political history.

While hoop skirts and harnesses may tell of a time forever past, other objects remind us that the past is ever present in our lives. As a new millennium dawns, six curators in the Society's museum collections department each describe a favorite object that illuminates a facet of life in Minnesota from the late-nineteenth through the late-twentieth centuries.

THE MILLENNIUM

BJELLA AUTO

No single invention has had a greater impact on life in the twentieth century than the automobile. The car changed patterns of work, play, education, residency, and courtship, setting the pace of American life for the century and beyond. Approximately 50 different makes of automobiles and trucks were built in Minnesota between the 1890s and the late 1920s, when car design ceased in the state. Of these, about 15 one-of-a-kind autos were made before 1910.

Among them was this gasoline-powered model built in 1905–06 by Ole Bjella, a blacksmith from McIntosh in northwestern Minnesota. Constructed from the carriage of a horse-drawn buggy, the Bjella was fitted with a two-cylinder, air-cooled engine that had a top speed of 20 miles per hour. Acceleration was controlled by a throttle lever on the steering column and a gear shift at the driver's side. The Bjella was appointed with a two-person, leather-upholstered front seat, a wooden rumble seat, and kerosene-fueled head lamps. Unable to secure financing to mass produce the vehicle, Ole Bjella built only one car and then returned to making sleighs and harrows. —ADAM SCHER





Ruffles and lace on the Morstad children of Boyd, Lac Qui Parle County, 1905

BOYS' CLOTHES

Though parents today would not think of putting their toddler boys in dresses, ruffles, or lace, that was the fashion throughout the nineteenth century. Boys and girls alike wore styles that we, today, would consider feminine.

This child's suit with its sailor collar and short pants probably belonged to Erling Christopher, who was born in 1900. Its heavy, corded cotton pique fabric, belted jacket, and short pants are typical of boys' suits from early in the twentieth century. So are the ruffled collar, gathered sleeves, and lace-trimmed cuffs—all details that were gender neutral at the time. If this outfit looks feminine to our eyes, what, we might wonder, would early nineteenth-century observers think of little girls in bib overalls or spandex shorts?

—LINDA McSHANNOCK

DAN PATCH, SUPERSTAR

This sterling-silver trophy was presented to Dan Patch and his owner, M. W. Savage, by the Kentucky Trotting Horse Breeders Association in 1905 to commemorate Dan Patch's feat of pacing a mile in 1 minute, 55 seconds—a new world record. The trophy may seem a quaint symbol of a bygone time when sports fame was minor and the rewards were modest; however, Dan Patch's life indicates just the opposite. This pacing horse was the sports superstar of his era, every bit as cosseted and pampered as any professional, overcompensated athlete of today.

Marion Willis Savage, president of the International Stock Food Company, purchased Dan Patch in 1902 for \$62,000—approximately \$1 million today. While in residence at the Minnesota State Fair, where his exhibitions of speed were legend, Dan Patch was housed in his own tent near the grandstand. He traveled in a private rail-





road car, and his home stall at the International Stock Food farm was large and well appointed: he had monogrammed blankets, and one wall was lined with photographs of his accomplishments. The stable that he shared with several other well-known horses of the day was called the Taj Mahal for its size and onion dome.

Patch also became a “spokeshorse” for Savage’s company and endorsed other products, as well. The champion’s name was associated with consumer goods as diverse as manure spreaders, knives, washing and sewing machines, gasoline engines, and stop watches—as well as cut plug tobacco in fancy tins. Savage was a savvy entrepreneur—instead of charging a flat fee for his horse’s appearance at an event, he negotiated a percentage of the gate receipts. One fair promoter was astonished to discover that he owed \$21,500 after one of Patch’s appearances. Savage is surmised to have made almost \$2 million on Dan Patch directly, and the horse’s endorsements may have brought in many millions more. Perhaps it is no wonder that in 1916 M. W. Savage died within one day of his famous horse.
—CLAUDIA J. NICHOLSON

BANDOLIER BAG

In the early 1890s many Minnesotans were busily gathering together the best that the state had to offer for display at the World’s Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago from May through October 1893. The state

won 614 awards in 14 categories, two-thirds of them in agriculture, livestock, and flour. Most of the exhibitions were consumables such as honey, agricultural products, fish, dairy, and poultry that were eventually disposed of or returned to their farm homes after the fair.

Minnesota’s board of world’s fair managers decided to distribute the nonperishable exhibits, furniture, and fixtures among sponsoring groups and state-affiliated agencies. According to the board’s final report, the Minnesota Historical Society received the “Indian exhibit, registers containing names of visitors to State buildings, flags, and bunting, three upright show cases, newspaper files and periodicals furnished through medium of Minnesota Editorial Association, samples of wood, wing frames containing statistics, photographs, etc.”*

Today, the Society’s World’s Columbian Exposition collection is a rich treasure of corporate, industrial, natural-resource, and creative snapshots of Minnesota, as well as a glimpse into the image Minnesotans manufactured for others a century ago. Over the decades scholars, collectors, and other researchers have studied the beaded pieces from the Indian exhibit extensively to learn about techniques, design elements, materials, and evolving regional traditions. The remarkable condition of these objects, their known dates and provenance lend them great value as historical resources.

Unfortunately, not much early documentation exists to tell how these objects were solicited to represent Minnesota. We do know that they were purchased and had been made by or acquired from Indian members of the White Earth community through an agency identified as Becker County Indian Industries. White Earth community member Theodore H. Beaulieu (Beaulieu) was one of the people involved in creating the exhibit. The exposition representative was George N. Lamphere.

One of the most unusual examples in this collection is a bandolier bag or shoulder pouch usually worn by men at special community events. This bag, one of six in the collection, is decorated with paisley designs, an atypical motif in the tradition of this region and craft form. Shawls decorated with the teardrop-shaped motif known as a cone, buta, pine, or paisley, however, were a prominent accessory for European and American women from about the 1830s through the 1880s. By the 1890s everyday printed cotton fabrics incorporated both the motif and a color palette of rust, red, orange, brown, black, tan, beige, and white. What is remarkable

* *Final Report of the Minnesota Board of World’s Fair Managers* (St. Paul: The Board, 1894), 77.



about this bandolier bag is that it inserts a European-American motif into the color scheme and form of a significant Ojibwe traditional craft.

Why did this artist select paisleys to decorate her bag and illustrate her skills? Did she know that it would be seen at the fair and choose a pattern she thought visitors would know or value? Did she view a commissioned work as an opportunity to take a chance, show off her particular talents, make a statement? Did she have an apron or pieced quilt at home that incorporated paisley fabric, and did it inspire her to create this bag? We'll likely never know, but this special bag will always arouse the curiosity and interest of those who are exposed to its charms and vibrancy.

—MARCIA G. ANDERSON



Exhibit from Minnesota, "the banner wheat state," at the 1893 Chicago exposition

PRESIDENTIAL MEDALS

Today, when people think of commemorative coins or medallions, the Franklin Mint comes to mind. At the turn of the century, however, it was the United States Mint that was producing a series of 24 bronze medals representing the nation's presidents, intended for distribution to historical societies and important government officials.

In 1919 Minnesota Senator Frank B. Kellogg, who chaired the Senate committee on national banks, received a letter from Willoughby Babcock of the Minnesota Historical Society inquiring into the price of the presidential medals. Babcock hoped to obtain a set for the MHS collections. Kellogg decided to buy and donate the medals when he learned that the MHS had no funds for the purchase.

Twelve of the bronze medals were struck from old dies first used for the silver Peace and Friendship medals made to be given to American Indian leaders. An additional 12 were designed specifically for the presidential series. While the complete set begins with George Washington and extends through Woodrow Wilson, the set at the MHS is lacking bronze medals of Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, and Franklin Pierce; Babcock thought that the silver Peace and Friendship medals of these three presidents were sufficient.

—CHARLES O. DIESEN



PITCHER AND GOBLETs

While some social critics consider today's "designer" bottled water to be a recent affectation, the tilting ice-water pitcher in vogue from the 1880s to about 1900 was a precedent of sorts. Potable water was rare in nineteenth-century cities and was valued as highly as wine at the dinner table.

Because a full pitcher could be difficult to lift, many, like this one from 1892, were suspended within an ornate frame to ease pouring. Some of the frames incorporated a circular "slop" tray to catch spills or moisture and elevated holders for the matching gold-lined goblets.



Patents for double-walled pitchers to prevent condensation were first granted in 1854; later improvements included porcelain linings and double-valved spouts. Many of these containers were mass produced in Connecticut, a national center for silver-plated holloware and flatware. This set was manufactured by Wilcox Silverplate Company in Meriden.

With their ceremonial appearance and elaborately chased and engraved decoration in Egyptian, Anglo-Japanese, or Renaissance Revival styles, these sets were frequently presentation pieces. The inscription on this pitcher, beginning with "SOUVENIR," clearly proclaims its purpose. It was presented to Minneapolis railroad contractor and milling and real estate investor George A. Brackett, who chaired the Citizen Committee at the National Republican Convention held in Minneapolis in 1892.

—PATTY DEAN

The MHS acquired the Bjella from a New York collector in 1989; all other objects pictured are in the museum collections through the generosity of donors. The photos on p.454, top, and 457, top, are in the MHS library; on p.454, bottom, 455, 456, 457, and 458 are by Peter Latner/MHS; on p.453 by Eric Mortenson/MHS.



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