

THE PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS OF LOCAL HISTORY WORK IN MINNESOTA¹

One of the most interesting signs of cultural growth in Minnesota in the last decade is the local history movement. Back of it is an enlightened and civilized point of view. The study of history from the bottom up is in harmony with modern historiography. Indeed, some of the most promising work now being done in the field of American history represents what Dr. Joseph Schafer calls the "microscopic method" brought to a focus upon small units of organized society.² It is not improbable that this method, so applied, will yield important contributions to the understanding of American civilization.

While scholars thus indorse the study of the locality on scientific grounds, educators favor it because it is "interesting, practical, and typical of the world in which we live" — interesting because "immediate, concrete, and personal"; practical because it contributes to the appreciation of one's neighborhood and its backgrounds; and typical because it brings under the microscope cross sections of movements that are proceeding in the larger units of society.³ Though the locality may thus illuminate forces active in state and nation, the student

¹ This paper was read in somewhat briefer form at the tenth annual conference on local history work in Minnesota, held in connection with the eighty-first annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul on January 13, 1930. It is based in part upon a questionnaire sent to the various local historical societies in Minnesota.

² Joseph Schafer, "The Microscopic Method Applied to History," *ante*, 4: 3-20 (February-May, 1921).

³ An address on "The Significance of the Local Approach in Education," in which these ideas were developed, was given by Mr. R. B. MacLean, president of the Moorhead State Teachers College, at the summer convention of the Minnesota Historical Society at Detroit Lakes in 1924. A brief report of it is published *ante*, 5: 582 (November, 1924).

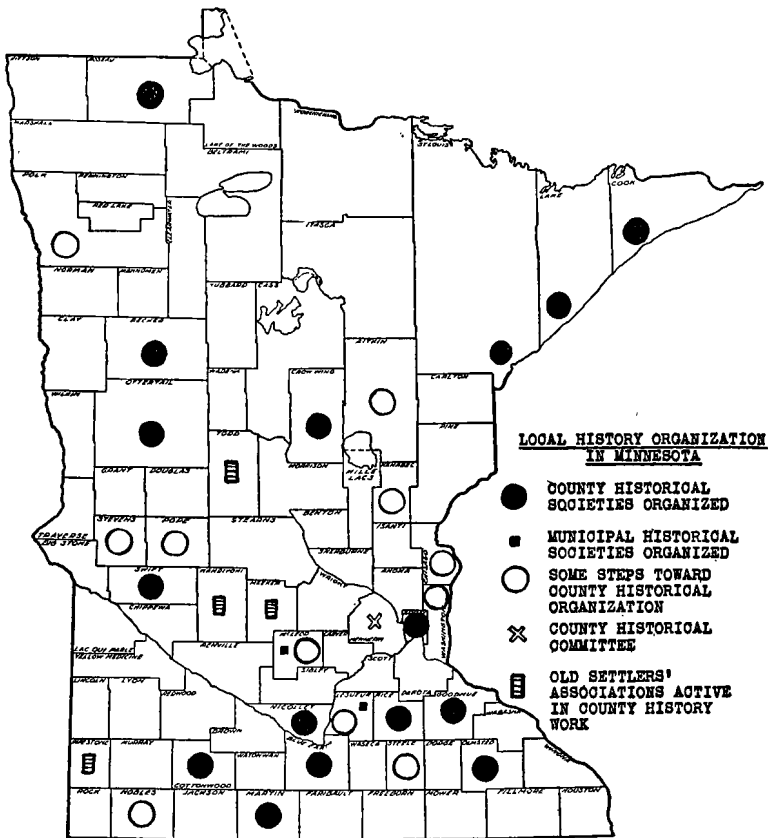
quickly discovers that it also has an individuality and color of its own. Ignorance, not misanthropy, probably accounts for the view sometimes disconsolately exploited in fiction that local communities are all alike. The differentiating factors do not reveal themselves to the casual wayfarer on Main Street nor to the car-window tourist. The key to understanding lies rather in the study of geographical and historical backgrounds.

The interest of the Minnesota Historical Society in promoting the organization of local history work is fundamentally related to its central purposes — those of collecting records, disseminating historical information, and developing a wider appreciation of state and local history. This interest has found expression in the series of local history conferences of which this is the tenth, in a succession of summer tours and conventions during the last eight years, in the drafting of a model constitution for county historical societies, and in co-operation in too many ways to mention with local historical workers throughout the state of Minnesota.

The county history movement in Minnesota is young, dating in the large from the first local history conference, held in 1921. The Blue Earth County Historical Society, it is true, was organized as early as 1901, but its recent activities spring from a rejuvenation in the past decade. Broadly speaking, the county historical societies of Minnesota have their genesis in the period between 1921 and the present. At the first local history conference arranged under the auspices of the state historical society, there was no county historical society activity to be reported. The pioneer in the group of new societies that sprang up was the St. Louis County Historical Society, organized in 1922.

Today there are sixteen county and two municipal historical societies in the state. This does not take into account several old settlers' associations — such as those in Todd, Meeker, and Kandiyohi counties — which are organized on lines and for purposes somewhat similar to those of the county historical

societies. Nor does it include certain local museum enterprises that are unconnected with societies; activities in schools that bear some relation to the county history movement; and



various marking projects that have been stimulated by it. That the development really is a movement is clear: the launching of the St. Louis County Historical Society in 1922 was followed by organizations in Becker and Ramsey counties in 1924, in Cook and Lake counties in 1925, in Rice and Olmsted counties in 1926, in Crow Wing, Roseau, Otter Tail, and

Goodhue counties in 1927, in Nicollet County in 1928, and in Martin, Cottonwood, and Swift counties in 1929. The Hutchinson Historical Society, organized in 1906, was reorganized in 1929 prior to the state historical convention. The Pioneer Historical Association of Montgomery came into existence about a year ago. In Hennepin County interested citizens have concluded that a county society is unnecessary, owing to the proximity of the state historical society, but plans have recently been worked out for the creation of a county committee to conserve the historical interests of the community and to correlate them with the work of the state society.

It is the purpose of this paper to present not a detailed account of the progress of the local history movement, but some recent indications of its vitality. Vitality ordinarily points to good leadership. A survey of the county societies reveals the fact that there is competent and vigorous leadership in this field. It is appropriate to mention here the influence of Mr. William E. Culkin, president of the St. Louis County Historical Society. Readers of MINNESOTA HISTORY are familiar with his articles on "Getting a County Historical Society Started" and "Historical Bookkeeping by Quadruple Entry."⁴ He is also the author of a *Chronology of St. Louis County*, published by his society.⁵ At his society headquarters in the court house at Duluth are some exhibits, a library, cases for historical bookkeeping, and various other items, admirably arranged and administered. Mr. Culkin has been present at most of the state conferences on local history and has preached, there and elsewhere, the wholesome gospel of local history organization. St. Louis County and the state at large owe much to him for the stimulus he has given historical work by his intelligent and vigorous leadership. Many other county historical societies are fortunate enough to have enthusiasm and intelligence effectively combined in their leaders, who are

⁴ *Ante*, 7: 233-241 (September, 1926), and 9: 39-44 (March, 1928).

⁵ A review of this work appears *ante*, 6: 63-64 (March, 1925).

drawn from diverse groups. In one county a college professor of history, Dr. C. A. Duniway of Carleton College, has imprinted upon the local society the stamp of his own zeal and scholarship. In another a business man has found in such an organization an outlet for an absorbing interest in the history of his county. Others, to mention only a few, have found leaders in a judge, an attorney, a newspaper editor, a school superintendent, a physician, a hotel proprietor.

One expects all well-behaved county historical societies to hold meetings of one sort or another. The three societies in the northeastern part of the state — St. Louis, Lake, and Cook counties — struck out on new lines when they held last August a joint meeting at Two Harbors, calling it the "North Shore Historical Assembly." They report an extremely successful convention and already have made plans for similar gatherings at Grand Portage in 1930 and at Duluth in 1931.

One of the most active societies in the state in arranging program meetings is that in St. Louis County. It holds from four to six meetings a year at various places in the county. Such county meetings with the titles of papers read are usually reported in *MINNESOTA HISTORY*, and it may be noted that at least eighty papers presented before the St. Louis County society since its organization have been thus listed. These papers have been filed in the society's own manuscript collections and in many cases copies have been sent to the state society at St. Paul.

The Otter Tail County Historical Society holds two meetings each year. A feature of the summer session, held at some "strategic place" in the county, is the setting up of a bronze tablet commemorating an historical event. The 1928 meeting, at Clitherall, was attended by about two thousand people. In Rice County the local society holds quarterly meetings — one at Northfield, two at Faribault, and a summer picnic at some other place in the county. In Martin County, though its historical society is in its early infancy, an enormously successful

meeting, attended by more than a thousand people, was held last summer, and a feature of its program was a remarkable address on "The Ordeal of Pioneering," which has recently been published in *MINNESOTA HISTORY*.⁶ The Goodhue County society holds monthly meetings during nine months of the year, and some of these are conducted jointly with other organizations — on one recent occasion with the Burnside Farm Club and on another with the Vasa Community Club. This practice illustrates a tendency toward coöperation that finds other forms in some counties. The society in Martin County, for example, plans to have in every township a corresponding secretary who will coöperate with the local farm bureau.

Interesting experiments in local museums and historical exhibits are being made. The Roseau County society, allotted a room in the court house, formally opened its museum in February, 1929, exhibiting pictures, documents, newspapers, and pioneer objects. In several other counties, — Martin, Cook, and Otter Tail, for example, — court house rooms have been set aside for the local historical societies. The Rice County society will have rooms in a new library now being erected in Faribault. The Blue Earth County society, which now has quarters in the Mankato city library, expects eventually to be housed in the court house. Good prospects for museums exist in Goodhue, Lake, and Nicollet counties. The Historical Association of Montgomery plans to erect a large log cabin, which is to house a community museum, and it recently made this pleasant announcement: "Parties donating logs will be given one year's membership free." The Kandiyohi County Old Settlers' Association not long ago erected a commodious log cabin to serve as its headquarters and to house a local history museum. A similar enterprise has been completed within the past year by the Todd County Old Settlers' Historical Society. This project was financed

⁶ *Ante*, 10: 403-408 (December, 1929).

through the sale of metal name plates at ten dollars each to be placed within the cabin. An attempt is being made to include thus the names of all the county's old settlers. It was recently reported that more than a hundred and twenty-five plates had been paid for.

Special exhibits arranged in connection with program meetings sometimes serve to call dramatic attention to the riches in historical objects that a community can produce. Most of the local societies at one time or another have arranged for such exhibits. In Goodhue County a style review showing the development of women's dress in the past century was given; and on one occasion pioneer implements belonging to farmers in the vicinity were exhibited. The Ramsey County society set up an exhibit of agricultural implements and other objects at the county fair last year. A somewhat similar exhibit was undertaken by the Cook County society. The Blue Earth County society has purchased an old mill and its site, with the intention of repairing the mill and maintaining it as a permanent memorial. Some societies, for example, those in Goodhue and Otter Tail counties, have engaged in historic marking activities. And the Meeker County Old Settlers' Association has recently launched a project for the erection of a series of permanent historic markers.

All the county societies are interested in promoting the teaching of local and state history in the schools. A practical example of such activity is afforded in Olmsted County, where Mr. Burt W. Eaton, president of the local society, actively forwarded the preparation of a multigraphed outline of Minnesota and Olmsted County history for the use of teachers and classes. He has also devoted much interest and time to addressing school audiences on the history of the county. A successful essay contest in local history was conducted a year ago by the Rice County society for high school students. This year the Otter Tail County society and the county federation of women's clubs have united in an essay contest for the

seventh and eighth grades in the local schools.⁷ All the essays submitted are to be retained by the society. It is expected that this contest will become an annual event. For one of the meetings of the St. Louis County society the program for a session was furnished entirely by high school students.

A fundamental purpose of the county societies is to collect historical records — old diaries, letters, reminiscences, newspapers, and the like. This purpose is kept in sight by the various organizations. Only one or two activities in this connection need special mention. The Cottonwood County society has printed an elaborate "questionnaire on biography" for distribution to its members and others. Among the items included are these: "Make a list of old records, letters, diaries, relics, etc., in your possession, of possible historical significance." "Would you be willing to turn this material over to your county or state historical society for preservation in its library or museum?" "Do you know of old records, letters, diaries, relics, etc., in the possession of other persons?" The Nicollet County society has printed a biographical questionnaire and collects photographs of its members.

The county societies thus far have devoted little attention to publication. The outstanding item is Mr. Culkin's *Chronology of St. Louis County*. The Nicollet County society aided in the publication of *Old Traverse des Sioux*, by Thomas Hughes, though the volume was brought out independently. The Otter Tail County society has issued two leaflets containing the texts of addresses given at meetings. In most counties the newspapers publish some or all of the papers read at meetings of the local society and they are thus given wide publicity. For the Rice County meeting at Morristown in the summer of 1928 the local newspaper published a special historical edition, including the papers and addresses. It should be added that the Todd County Old Settlers' Historical Society recently has

⁷ A copy of the rules for this contest has been presented to the Minnesota Historical Society.

made plans for compiling histories of all the townships in the county, which eventually will be brought together in one volume.

The membership of the local historical societies naturally varies according to the population of the respective counties, the state of the society's development, its membership dues, and other circumstances. The number of members of the various societies at the end of 1929, as reported to the state society, is Nicollet, 211; St. Louis, 175; Cottonwood, 138; Rice, 119 active and 39 honorary; Martin, 100; Otter Tail, 66; Goodhue, 60; Blue Earth, 58; Cook, 30; Lake, 30; and Roseau, 17. The Swift County society has just been organized, and no membership reports have been received from the others.

The problem of finances is undoubtedly one of the central problems of the county societies. Its solution, ordinarily, lies in county aid and membership dues, occasionally supplemented by gifts or bequests. A state law of 1929 authorizes county or city governments to provide rooms in their public buildings for the use of county historical societies and to appropriate funds for local historical work.⁸ The limits for annual appropriations are one thousand dollars for counties with a population of less than twenty-five thousand; two thousand dollars for counties with a population between twenty-five thousand and seventy-five thousand; and three thousand dollars for counties with more than seventy-five thousand people. The money is to be expended for the promotion of historical work and for the collection, preservation, and publication of historical materials and the dissemination of historical information about the county. A condition of the appropriation is that the society to which it is awarded must be affiliated with and approved by the Minnesota Historical Society. Such affiliation consists of institutional membership in the state society, with annual dues of three dollars. The principal

⁸ *Laws*, 1929, p. 131.

criterion for approval by the state society is that the organization, by its definition of purpose, its machinery, and its activity, shall have proved itself to be "the historical society of the county," as the law phrases it. Three county historical societies report county aid in 1929: St. Louis, twenty-five hundred dollars, and Blue Earth and Otter Tail, each three hundred dollars. In due time county aid will undoubtedly be extended to many other local societies.

All the county societies make provision for annual dues by members. They range from twenty-five cents in the Nicollet and Cook county societies to fifty cents in Cottonwood, Swift, and Roseau counties, and one dollar in Blue Earth, Lake, Otter Tail, Ramsey, Rice, and St. Louis counties. Some societies have provided for sustaining and life memberships; and one—that in Martin County—has only life memberships, at five dollars, and honorary memberships.

With interest in county historical society work on the increase, there can be no harm in putting before members the idea of bequests for the purpose of carrying on the good work. By the will of the late Judge Lorin Cray of Mankato, himself an indefatigable worker in local history, a bequest of ten thousand dollars was made to the Blue Earth County Historical Society; and the Crow Wing County Historical Society received a bequest of five hundred dollars from the late Leon E. Lum of Duluth.

In the light of the foregoing review a few specific suggestions may be ventured. As has been noted, little attention has been given by the societies to publication. This is natural enough, since most of them have barely begun their activities. The prospect should be kept in mind, however. A publication can be a strong link in the chain of interest that binds the members to the society. Through coöperation with newspapers, especially in securing reprints of published articles, costs can be kept low. It is worth remembering that there are numerous possibilities for publication other than papers

and addresses. Such items as an old letter or a diary not only possess interest as a general rule, but serve to call attention to types of material worth saving. It is conceivable and likely that some excellent local historical periodicals will be launched in Minnesota in the future. Wisconsin has several; there are not a few in the East; and they are common in various European countries.⁹ Special studies, edited documents, articles, and addresses emanating from well-organized county societies may be expected as a standard feature of Minnesota historical production at some time in the future.

In the constitutions of most of the county historical societies in Minnesota mention is made of the purpose of bettering the care and attention devoted to county and local archives — that is, the official records of the counties and their constituent parts. These archives are sources of valuable historical information, all too little utilized; too often their care and administration by local officials leave much to be desired. Something would be accomplished if officers and members of the county historical societies expressed their interest in the matter to the proper local officials.¹⁰

Close as are the relations between the county societies and the Minnesota Historical Society, there are possibilities of coöperation that thus far have been relatively little exploited. For example, the state society has much manuscript material that could be made available for use in the county by means of the photostat and at small cost to the local society. There are, to mention one group of papers, the manuscript census schedules, original compilations that purport to contain the names of every person in every community of Minnesota at the time for which the statistical material was compiled. The state society has the federal census schedules for the Minne-

⁹ An admirable example of a midwestern local historical magazine is the *Green Bay Historical Bulletin*, issued at Green Bay, Wisconsin.

¹⁰ Many practical suggestions are made in an article by Grace Lee Nute on "The Preservation of Public Records," published in *Minnesota Municipalities* for July, 1928.

sota parts of Wisconsin and Iowa territories for 1840 and for Minnesota for 1850, 1860, and 1870, and part of those for 1880. It also has the state census schedules for 1865, 1875, 1885, 1895, and 1905. It would be a simple matter to photostat the material in one of these schedules for a given county. It is true that much of the statistical results of these compilations has appeared in print, but the printed reports do not give the names of individuals. From the manuscripts, on the other hand, one can get detailed information about the people of the county—their names, their nativity, sometimes that of their parents, the number of acres of land and the number of head of stock they owned, and many other facts of interest to local students desiring to reconstruct the economic or social situation as it was at a given time.

Another possibility of coöperation has to do with housing and related problems. Societies that are coping with the difficulties that arise out of housing and equipment are tackling matters that the state society has had to meet. The assembling of records makes filing boxes or cabinets necessary; a museum needs display cases. All county workers are cordially invited to correspond with the state society with reference to such matters and to examine the various types of equipment used in the Historical Building at St. Paul. Closely allied with this problem is that of methods of classifying, filing, and cataloging materials. This is a subject to which much attention is devoted by the Minnesota Historical Society, which is at all times ready to be of help to officials of local societies in this matter. The state society has demonstrated, through the publication of Mr. Culkin's account of the ingenious method of historical bookkeeping that he has worked out, its interest in making available also the results of experiments and new ideas originated by local historical societies.

It takes no mysterious gift of prophecy to perceive that there is momentum in the local history movement and to say

that the time is coming when every county in Minnesota will have an organized local historical society. Thus far only about one-fifth of the state's counties boast such societies. There are sixteen county societies, but Minnesota has eighty-seven counties. In at least eleven counties now lacking historical societies, movements have been started toward local history organization. The activities of the societies now in existence speak for themselves. As they become better known, groups of citizens in neighboring counties will have their interest aroused and desire to embark on similar ventures. Those who have participated in the movement during the past decade are pioneers in a cultural development that may come to have large meaning in the life of this commonwealth. It is perhaps too early to interpret that meaning, to appraise the social and cultural significance of the types of activity that have been set in motion in the counties, but it is clear that the thing involved is no empty antiquarianism. It is not a matter of "old-timers" slapping one another on the back. It bears a relation to the business of knowing and interpreting the meanings of community and commonwealth backgrounds. It has something to do with the not unimportant matter of adding to the interest and significance of life. Perhaps the most interesting thing about it is that the initiative, the interest, the driving force, and the funds to sustain and carry forward the movement come from the local communities themselves. All this implies an activity that, apart from its concrete results in the collection and preservation of the records of the past, is bound to leave its characteristic marks upon these communities. Is it fantastic to believe that in America today the "historical societies . . . and various scientific and literary clubs are standing for the development of civilization as did the societies of the Italian Renaissance"? An Indiana scholar, after surveying the situation in the Hoosier state, offers this view. He believes that the organizations to which

he alludes are keeping alive and increasing "that broad, intellectual grasp of the evolution and the organization of our present day civilization which is the basis of any progress which we may hope to make in the future."¹¹

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MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL

¹¹ C. B. Coleman, "Emphasis in the Work of Historical Societies," in Southwestern Indiana Historical Society, *Proceedings*, 1928, p. 10 (*Indiana History Bulletin*, extra no. 3, August, 1929).



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