

## THE LOCAL HISTORIAN AND THE NEWSPAPER<sup>1</sup>

Because of the newspaper's strategic position as a chronicler of events, as an historian of the contemporary scene, it is interesting to examine the relationship between the local historian and this agency which "records the ephemeral happenings of the days, and the great and small events of the weeks and years." Two or three points of contact between the interpreter or scholar and the recorder may be suggested: the significance of the newspaper as a source of historical data; the value of historical articles and features to the newspaper; and the relationship between the local historian and the newspaper in achieving a common objective.

That the newspaper is an important source of historical materials is doubtless well enough established in the minds both of members of the Minnesota Historical Society and of the newspaper men of this state to need little further emphasis. This is particularly evident when it is recalled that the first newspaper in Minnesota, the *Minnesota Pioneer*, was established in St. Paul by James M. Goodhue as early as 1849, nine years before Minnesota became a state, and that virtually each of the chief points of settlement in the territory boasted a newspaper. Seventy-six newspapers, of which a number still survive, were started in territorial days and hundreds have come with the intervening years, some of them to continue for half a century or longer in the service of their respective communities. Today there are approximately six hundred and fifty daily

<sup>1</sup>A paper read at the twelfth annual conference on local history work in Minnesota, held in connection with the eighty-third annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in the Historical Building, St. Paul, January 11, 1932. *Ed.*

and weekly newspapers in Minnesota. It is apparent that in the development of Minnesota, as of the entire West, the newspaper was an agency of progress and civilization early established by the settlers; and that as time went on and the settlements grew and multiplied, the newspapers also prospered and increased. It would be next to impossible to find a Minnesota community that has not had the service and advantage of its own organ of expression, its own agency for the printing of news and of advertisements, its own recorder of local history.

No better evidence of the value of newspapers as important recorders of the history of the state could be offered than the fact that the Minnesota Historical Society has one of the largest and most comprehensive collections of newspapers in the United States, a reference library of bound volumes of representative Minnesota newspapers dating from the beginnings of the territory to the present. The gathering of this collection and its careful maintenance and extension certainly represent an invaluable service on the part of the state society. The development of the newspaper collection indicates that experienced historians look upon the newspaper as indeed a fruitful source of historical material.

Further evidence in support of this fact may be gathered from the statements of those whose experience in search of local or state historical data has led them to newspaper files. One Minnesota writer, Martin W. Odland, in his *Life of Knute Nelson*, states that the country editor — and this may be assumed to be true of the metropolitan journalist as well — “is the faithful historian of his community. From day to day, from week to week, he records the events that seem almost ridiculously trivial at the time, but which decades, generations and centuries hence will be searched with eager interest by future historians and investigators.” Claude M. Fuess, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* on sources of material for the biographer, testifies that “con-

temporary newspapers . . . are of the highest importance, as showing the immediate popular reaction to significant occurrences." Among the foremost expert witnesses whose experience with and knowledge of the newspaper as a source of history make their comments authoritative is Dr. Solon J. Buck, former superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, who has said: "The press of a people, when this press is carefully interpreted by experienced scholars, is an invaluable source of information."

Only recently Dr. Buck, viewing with alarm the fact that "tons of history" are being swept up from the floors of American libraries every day because of the disintegration of the paper, urged the American Council of Learned Societies, meeting in Minneapolis, to consider the need for preserving newspaper files as invaluable research materials. He suggested photographing news pages in reduced facsimile on special paper of lasting quality. The magazine *Time*, in referring to this problem of "vanishing history," particularly in the publications for the periods following the seventies, when woodpulp paper began to replace costly rag paper, notes that the *New York Times* prints two hundred and fifty copies of its regular daily edition on rag paper; that the New York Public Library coats with thin Japan tissue every page of every paper in its files published since 1916; and that the Library of Congress keeps its eighty thousand bound newspaper volumes in a room where the temperature is seventy and the humidity forty.

Whether all local historians are sufficiently experienced to make the best use of the press as a source may be questioned. That newspapers would contain exhaustive historical material on every subject is not to be expected. Yet surely they are worthy of examination, for they yield not only historical data of a definite character but also, to use the words of a member of the staff of this society, of "the type of record invaluable in piecing together the story of the normal life of the past." Emphasis upon the use of news-

paper sources in reconstructing the normal life of the past is important, not only because that is precisely the sort of record that the files of every newspaper will yield both in its news and advertising columns, but also because such use conforms to the position taken by most historians today. They believe that the true history of a state consists not merely of a chronicle of wars, elections, the brief hour of prominence of the leaders, and the curious or unusual departures from the normal life of the commonwealth, but rather the story of the people. How did they live and how did they make their living? What did they think and what did they believe? What were their economic and social problems? These are some of the questions today's historian is asking. Can he rely on newspaper files to assist him?

A few illustrations of the use of newspapers for reference purposes may answer the last question. For the December number of *MINNESOTA HISTORY*, Richard B. Eide wrote an article on a subject that is quite pertinent to this discussion: "Minnesota Pioneer Life as Reflected in the Press." In his opening paragraph, Mr. Eide says:

An excellent picture of the frontier of the fifties is provided by the Minnesota territorial editors, who, between 1849 and 1858, observed and recorded the moving life of the upper Mississippi Valley. In the faded numbers of their papers appears news that was as momentous in the precarious days when Minnesota was a territory as it is interesting today. These papers are rich in accounts of travel, adventure, expansion, and festivity. From such sources, therefore, can be drawn a picture of a period, less than a decade in length, during which Minnesota marched steadily toward statehood and higher social levels.

Another example suggests that the field of possibilities is not limited to a general study of the life and manners of any given decade, but may be quite specific. A few years ago an outline of source material relating to "Floods on the Upper Mississippi and Its Tributaries" appeared in *MINNESOTA HISTORY*. "The value of newspaper mate-

rial was tested by taking the *Daily Pioneer Press* of St. Paul and Minneapolis for the spring months of 1881 as a sample," since in that year there were severe floods on the upper river. The result was that "practically every issue from the middle of April to the middle of May was found to contain valuable material."

As the editor of the *Northfield News*, the writer has had a number of experiences recently that have demonstrated the importance of its files. To find data about the life of the late Thorstein Veblen, the economist, who studied at Carleton College in the eighties, a graduate student at Columbia University recently traveled all the way to Northfield. He carefully perused every issue of the *News* for the period of Veblen's residence at Northfield to find even the most casual references to the latter's family, which lived not far from Northfield; and to obtain information about social, oratorical, athletic, or other college activities that would shed light on influences in the early life of a country boy who later became a noted scholar. The hometown newspaper did not know that one day Veblen would be a famous teacher and a noted theorist in the field of social problems, but it recorded events in his life that in their impersonal way, interpreted in the light of subsequent events, showed some of the thought processes that were later to distinguish him.

More recently requests have been received from libraries and students all over the United States for copies of the issue for November 13, 1931, containing the story of Professor O. E. Rølvaag's death and a biographical sketch of the author of that great epic of pioneer life, *Giants in the Earth*. Two hundred extra copies of the number had been printed, but the edition was soon exhausted, and it was necessary to appeal to readers to replenish the supply. The response to this request was surprising, indicating that the public itself appreciates newspaper material of lasting and significant interest. A Northfield minister wanted to write

a pageant for an anniversary celebration in his church, and he sought out articles on local history and descriptions of events published in the local paper to obtain many of the facts for his historical scenes. In another case members of a local group were assigned the task of preparing sketches of the lives of certain builders of their society. Nearly every one of them turned to the obituary notices in the local paper for part of his material, and the editor and his assistants were kept busy digging out the old files. These illustrations serve to show some of the possible uses of newspapers as sources of historical information. Although the state historical society is doing a noteworthy work through its newspaper collection, a duty devolves upon every newspaper publisher to preserve the files of his paper and to make them accessible, either at the local public library or at the publication office. The local historian often is unable to find the material he needs to make his studies lifelike and vivid. Quite as often the material lies almost under his hand in files of his home-town paper, if he but knew how to grasp it.

Every newspaper man knows that a newspaper confined to straight news, editorials, and advertising would not be sufficiently interesting to hold its readers. A newspaper must have variety in its contents; hence "features," with all their varied treatment and appeal, take a place of prime importance in the making of a newspaper that will be read. Probably the most frequently used type of feature is the historical and reminiscent article, for it offers possibilities that few progressive newspapers entirely neglect, but that many do not cultivate to the fullest extent.

Every anniversary of importance is the occasion for the publication of historical material that serves the dual purpose of recording valuable material in somewhat more permanent form than would ordinarily be possible and of awakening increased interest in things historical. The sensational and picturesque happenings of a former day are

certain to find a receptive audience when presented as interesting feature material for the same reason that news has sometimes been inadequately described as "departures from the normal life of the community." There are other avenues of interesting historical research for the newspaper; in fact, they are almost innumerable, ranging from odd bits of local history to more pretentious, illustrated historical articles that require care in preparation.

May I take the liberty of reading the titles and describing the subjects of some of the historical features that have appeared in the *Northfield News* during the past two years? They suggest a type of material that may be used in a feature article and that I know from experience is extremely interesting to almost every reader of a newspaper: "The Founder of Northfield," a biographical sketch of John W. North; "Trails and Early Roads in Rice County"; "Early Dundas, a Famous Milling Center"; "Seventeen Thriving Mills Once Dotted Cannon Valley"; a report of the sixtieth anniversary of St. John's Lutheran Church; a list of all the mayors of Northfield with data about them; an explanation of the origin of the name of Northfield; the error made in the naming of the Cannon River; a sketch of "St. Olaf College's Founder"; "Organization of the Fire Department"; the story of Northfield's first merchant; the early years of Northfield's oldest churches; the seventy-fifth anniversary of Dundas, a village near Northfield; the Northfield bank raid of 1876; and the origin of the ten Northfields in the United States. The seventy-fifth anniversary of Northfield was the occasion for the publication of a mass of historical material, including an account of the first year of Northfield's history as recounted by the founder's daughter, sketches of "picturesque characters among the pioneers and builders of the community," a chronological list of significant events in the city's history, and reminiscences of a varied character.

These and other articles of historical interest; brief

sketches of individuals, business establishments, and institutions of the community; historical pictures; and numerous historical references used to give color and background to current news stories occupied 2,272 inches or 119 columns of space in the *Northfield News* during a period of twenty-eight months. Now Northfield is not a large city and this paper is only a country weekly, but these articles and features—some written by members of the *News* staff, some contributed by outsiders, and others turned over for publication by the Rice County Historical Society, before which they had been read—all illustrate the almost limitless possibilities that are open to every newspaper. As the state grows older and interest is quickened in the backgrounds of its communities, the field will grow; and the articles that are now being published, if well prepared, will offer source material of a definite type for the local historian of the future.

If it is feared that historical material cannot be made sufficiently inviting to capture the interest of all readers, other avenues of approach suggest themselves. Not a history of his home community and county, but reminiscences interested an Ohio publisher whose experience is described in a recent issue of the *Publisher's Auxiliary* of Chicago. This publisher found an old settler whose personal knowledge of his community ran back into the middle of the last century and who found pleasure in recounting the deeds and incidents of the past. This man was engaged to write his recollections. For example, he wrote of an early governor who was reared in the community, and in telling the life story of this man he linked with him his descendants, who are still living there. He wrote his stories as he would have told them, and each proved to be interesting and popular. He covered all kinds of subjects; he traced Indian trails and located on them the homes of people now living in the county; he followed the development of farming

from the Indian's field of maize to the highly cultivated acres of today.

Almost any newspaper can make a success of historical stories as a regular feature, for they are both popular and constructive. But like all features that have proved to be successful, careful attention must be given to details. The most important thing is to find the proper person to write the articles. This is not necessarily work for a trained newspaper writer, but it should be done by one whose interest in the work is keen. The local historian may be of genuine help in the gathering and preparation of materials, and if he is genuinely interested in local history he will welcome the opportunity to find an outlet for his labors that may result in interesting others in the field.

The work of the local historical society provides a splendid source of material for the newspaper. The latter may not only report the society's activities and promote its work of collecting materials, but may make use of its collections as a basis for articles and publish the papers that are prepared by its members from time to time. The newspaper may assist materially to create an interest in the objectives of the historical society, and it may aid the local historian by recording and preserving the narratives that he prepares. This field has great possibilities which no newspaper can afford to neglect and which many have cultivated with success.

In addition to the newspaper's functions as a chronicler of contemporary history and as the medium for the telling and the teaching of the story of the past, there is a third vital factor in its relationship with the local historian. The first responsibility of the newspaper is to print the news, but it has failed in the fullest performance of its duty if it is not a leader in its community, an advocate of sound social doctrine and a champion of all that makes for progress and the highest general good. The first re-

sponsibility of the historical society and the local historian is the collection and preservation of historical materials, but would they not also fail to meet their fullest opportunity if the results of their researches and study did not build a better society and a happier people? There are lessons to be learned from the story of every community and the history of every state. The newspaper and the historian have a common objective in making those lessons known. Equally important is the development of a proper appreciation of the heritage of the past, a loyalty to the best principles of those who have gone before, and a determination to build with vision and high purpose upon the foundations that have been laid. The local historian and the newspaper, working together, may well provide such a stimulus to community spirit that the indirect effect of their labors would in itself fully justify their hearty coöperation.

CARL L. WEICHT

NORTHFIELD, MINNESOTA



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