

MINNESOTA LOCAL HISTORY ACTIVITY IN 1933¹

It has often been said that "history repeats itself," and to a certain extent the depression period through which we have been passing bears out the adage. The depression of 1929-33 has been strikingly like that of 1857-61, and, as before, the country will come out of the crucible purified of some of its dross and prepared for greater things.

Historically, the depression that began in 1929 will take its place with 1837, 1857, 1873, 1893, and other critical periods in American history. Upon us, who are living through this time of economic, social, and political stress, falls the duty of taking active steps for the collection and preservation of material that will permit the historian of the future to evaluate properly the movements of which we today see only a part. The problem is similar to that which historically-minded citizens faced in the years of the World War. The earlier need was met by the creation of the Minnesota War Records Commission, which included among its activities the supervising and guiding of the activities of many county units. As a result of its work the state has an adequate history of its participation in the World War, and priceless manuscript, library, and museum collections of materials relating to the same subject; and many counties, like St. Louis, Stevens, and others, have splendid local collections and special studies of the part which they played in the great conflict.

Today the county is the natural unit for the collection of local materials relating to another national crisis. How can an adequate study of the farmers' revolt, manifested in

¹A paper read at the fourteenth annual conference on local history work in Minnesota, held in connection with the eighty-fifth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society in the Historical Building, St. Paul, on January 8, 1934. *Ed.*

such ways as the "holiday," be made some twenty or thirty years hence unless the counties most concerned have preserved the records of farmers' meetings, copies of addresses and statements, broadsides, newspapers of various political complexions, and all kinds of significant ephemeral material? Daily there have been long lines of unfortunate men and women seeking food, coal, and shelter at the offices of public welfare agencies in the cities; there have been "hunger marches" upon the state Capitol; and the federal government has spent vast amounts of money to provide work for the unemployed. We are facing significant labor problems, and unquestionably the methods adopted in solving them will be recorded as part of the history of the state and of the nation.

Enough has been said to indicate the vital importance of collecting and preserving history while it is being made, and the significance of the county as the collecting unit. Artificial lines drawn by politicians mean little, however, and regional coöperation is necessary if the work is to be fully done. It is with pleasure, therefore, that we have witnessed the steady growth and development of the annual North Shore Historical Assembly. For five years the three North Shore historical societies have staged a joint summer meeting. The writer had the privilege of attending a session of the 1933 gathering, held at Lutsen on August 21, and found something like a hundred and fifty people at this somewhat isolated resort. Among the guests were representatives of the Thunder Bay Historical Society in Canada. A splendid spirit of coöperation was manifest everywhere. Farther west the Roseau County Historical Society of Minnesota and the St. Boniface Historical Society of Canada also are working together on joint problems.

The writer believes that regional joint meetings offer splendid opportunities for the interchange of ideas, the promotion of historical enterprises that might involve problems

too great for a single local society, and the coöperative study of regional problems. Curiously enough, the spread of the county historical society movement has proceeded by regions, with one county influencing its neighbors. County historical interest is evidently contagious.

Are people interested in historical studies during this critical period? It would seem so, for five new county historical societies—in Polk, Hubbard, Nobles, Douglas, and Marshall counties—and one town society at Glencoe have been organized in 1933; and at least five more counties—Anoka, Pennington, Red Lake, Scott, and Waseca—have given serious consideration to the possibility of local history organization in the past year. Thirty-two counties, more than one-third of the state's total, now have historical organizations. Listen to this report from the Nobles County society, dated December 11: "After paying all of our bills we had a surplus of \$4.90. . . . We now have a membership of 27 paid members with 80 on the list to call on." And this has been achieved since September. This society sent two delegates to the local history conference held in connection with the eighty-fifth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society. The Marshall County society, the baby of the lot, which was organized the middle of December and became an institutional member of the Minnesota Historical Society a short time later, has worked out a substantial program calling for a school essay contest, the erection of historical markers on sites in the county, and the active collection of historical material under the direction of township secretaries.

A further evidence of popular interest in community history is seen in the fact that some four thousand people attended the annual summer meeting and picnic of the Martin County Historical Society on August 27 at Old Cedarville, one of many deserted pioneer villages and towns in Minnesota. The Minnesota Historical Society has difficulty meet-

ing the requests for speakers on Minnesota history made by business organizations, women's clubs, county groups planning to set up local historical societies, schools, and other organizations. The superintendent of the state society faced an audience of some twelve hundred at Alexandria on November 20 when the Douglas County society was launched, and the largest auditorium in town could scarcely accommodate the people who wanted to hear him. The newspapers of the region published full reports of the meeting.

The fact that 1933 was Minnesota's Diamond Jubilee year undoubtedly brought about a quickening of interest in Minnesota history throughout the state. Commercial radio stations throughout Minnesota and at Fargo, North Dakota, and Superior, Wisconsin, devoted valuable evening hours to Minnesota history programs. These stations, whose time is reckoned in dollars per minute, would scarcely have given this time if they had not felt that their unseen audiences would be greatly interested in the historical programs. Under the auspices of county historical societies and schools everywhere meetings were arranged that taxed the capacities of the halls in which they were held. Nearly three hundred people attended the special meeting held at the Historical Building on the afternoon of May 11.

The revival in 1933 of the Catholic Historical Society of St. Paul, an organization that has been inactive since 1918, is a significant historical development. The active work of the Blue Earth County Historical Society, which has been described by Mr. Horace Roberts, its president, is typical of what is being done by local historical societies throughout the state.

The activity of the federal government through the PWA and CWA projects offers possibilities for furthering community and state historical enterprises. Under the CWA, through the enthusiastic cooperation of the Otter

Tail County commissioners, who under a Minnesota law of 1929 are authorized to provide a county historical society with a room in a public building, the Otter Tail County Historical Society has obtained a fine room in the basement of the courthouse at Fergus Falls. The project was in line with the CWA idea, for most of the money spent on the undertaking went for labor, and the results will be of permanent benefit to the community. It is understood that plans for similar projects are on foot in other counties, and historical society officials may well give serious thought to methods by which government assistance under the CWA may be utilized. The Minnesota Historical Society, for example, has eight CWA assistants, all trained people, at work on special projects at the present time. Attention also should be called to the Historic American Buildings Survey, which will be carried on in Minnesota during the coming months under Mr. William J. Dorr.

Enough has been said to prove that the historical interest of the people of Minnesota is well aroused. To capitalize this interest is the thing. The immediate question is, how shall we keep local historical societies healthy in a depression period?

Though we of the Minnesota Historical Society have operated with a smaller staff and more limited funds than for some years past, we feel it incumbent upon us to be more active, more energetic, and more enterprising than ever before. Each staff member has taken it upon himself to dig in just a little bit harder, and do more with the resources at his disposal, than in previous years. Whether this is the fundamental answer to the question that I have raised I do not know, but I do know that the "defeatist" attitude will never get anyone anywhere. Military experts have said that the best defense is attack. Let me urge that the county historical societies take that attitude.

Be just a little more active than ever before. Hold fre-

quent meetings, and devote more thought to the planning of programs that will automatically attract audiences both through the subject matter presented and through the personalities of those participating. Get the local newspapers "sold" on the idea that their readers are interested in historical articles, whether they are special papers, reminiscences of the pioneers, school essays on local history, or what not. Get the merchants and business men interested in a "Minnesota Day" or a "Willmar Day," or some other special "day" with historical exhibits in every store window, parades with historical floats, and other interesting features. Make your people community conscious. Follow up the celebration with the development of a permanent historical museum as a community project, similar to the one that is being backed by the *Northfield News*. Crystallize your latent local historical sentiment by bringing as many people as possible in touch with your historical society, — preferably as members, for many will join if actually approached, — but in any event as active workers and well-wishers.

For all this, leadership is necessary, and I believe that most of you present today are leaders. Busy you all are with your daily affairs, but the busier the man, somehow, the more things he can find time to attend to by the sheer force of his personality. Aggressive activity which never lags, with leadership, is a good key with which to unlock the door of the depression.

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MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ST. PAUL



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