

THE 1934 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

On January 1, 1850, the Reverend Edward D. Neill delivered the first annual address of the Minnesota Historical Society, entitled "The French Voyageurs to Minnesota during the Seventeenth Century." In so doing, he was making history as well as recounting it, for this early territorial assemblage inaugurated a series of annual meetings that has continued unbroken for more than three-quarters of a century. In accordance with precedent and the terms of its charter the Minnesota Historical Society convened its eighty-fifth annual meeting on Monday, January 8, 1934. Its members assembled not in the old Market Street Methodist Church facing Rice Park, but in a handsome granite building erected by the state for the society in a section of St. Paul that in Neill's time was open country. The society's meeting in 1850 consisted of a single morning address; that of 1934 occupied an entire day, with a morning session, a noon luncheon, an afternoon meeting, and an evening gathering for the annual address.

Reflecting one of the outstanding movements in Minnesota history during recent years, the morning session at the Historical Building was given over to the fourteenth annual conference on local history work in Minnesota, a discussion of the general subject of "Progress and Problems of Local History." Senator Victor E. Lawson of Willmar, an active worker in the Kandiyohi County Old Settlers' Association, presided and opened the conference with a few well-chosen remarks upon the importance of local history. He then called upon Mr. Horace W. Roberts of Mankato, president of the Blue Earth County Historical Society, to tell of recent developments there.

"Our society," said Mr. Roberts, "is thirty or forty

years old, and has been incorporated for, I think, twenty-four years." Under the guidance of Judge Lorin Cray, material was collected and stored in the attic of the Mankato State Teachers College, but when that structure burned ten years ago many valuable papers were destroyed. This loss made leaders like Judge Cray, Mr. Thomas Hughes, and Mr. William H. Pay reluctant to ask people to give up their relics until fireproof quarters could be obtained. Two years ago rooms were procured in the library building, a custodian was put in charge, and they are open to the public three afternoons a week. About the same time the use of an old pavilion in Sibley State Park was obtained and "we got the city council to fix it up so that material could be placed on exhibition there." Twenty or thirty people visit the library rooms each afternoon, and on Sundays and holidays several hundred inspect the exhibits in the pavilion. Last summer, continued Mr. Roberts, a local history essay contest among the school children, with modest money prizes for stories dating back to 1870, was announced, and some interesting material should come to light. "Recently I talked with a teacher who a few years ago wanted to get some local history material for her fourth grade pupils and collected a lot of material. She suggested that she rewrite and edit the material gathered. We are wondering whether we can publish this local history and place it in the hands of the school children."

Senator Lawson, after expressing his approval of the plan to have school children gather local history material, went on to state that "a great deal of the history of the world has been recorded by churchmen." He cited the way in which the Catholic church had preserved important records through the centuries, and then introduced the Reverend William Busch of St. Paul Seminary for a talk upon the Catholic Historical Society of St. Paul. Father Busch pointed out the fact that this society is "related to the

Minnesota Historical Society in much the same way as the county societies are related to the state society. That is to say, we are a group that is interested in the general history of Minnesota and at the same time in a particular topic within that general field, namely, the history of Catholic activities, just as the county societies have a special interest in their particular areas." The Catholic society has for its field the area included within the original ecclesiastical province of St. Paul, comprising the states of Minnesota and North and South Dakota, and should therefore be actively concerned with the work of the various county historical societies. County histories have already devoted more or less space to local Catholic history, and material on various parishes has been published from time to time in book or pamphlet form. "Our Society wishes to encourage such work, and has done so of late through the Minnesota Council of Catholic Women, a statewide organization," Father Busch continued.

Prospects seem bright for the success of the Catholic society, which was founded by Archbishop Ireland in 1905 and was recently reorganized after some years of inactivity. It has maintained a library and museum at St. Paul Seminary, and it published a yearbook, *Acta et Dicta*, containing historical articles and documents, from 1907 to 1918. When the publication was resumed in 1933, it "called forth expressions of satisfaction and of high praise," according to Father Busch. "The only expression of regret that has come to our knowledge is to the effect that our yearbook ought to be a quarterly." Present plans for the society call for enlarged membership and more active workers. The speaker closed his remarks with a tribute to the work of the Minnesota Historical Society and an expression of the desire of the Catholic Historical Society for the closest coöperation with state and county societies.

Making use of manuscripts in repositories other than the

one in which a scholar is working has presented serious difficulties to students for many years. Few students can afford to make personal visits to every place where material may be found. The typewriter and the photostat have come into use in recent years, providing processes that simplify the problem of supplying transcripts. In using photostats, however, there must be considered the elements of cost, say twenty-five cents per sheet; of bulk, since each side of a letter must be copied; of legibility, which varies greatly with the character of the paper and ink; and, finally, of the availability of a photostat machine at a given institution. To meet these difficulties, said the next speaker, Dr. Grace Lee Nute, curator of manuscripts for the Minnesota Historical Society, "scholars in the past ten years or so have been trying to devise an apparatus that should have all the advantages of the photostat print without its objections." The Minnesota Historical Society has been coöperating with other institutions in such an effort. The solution apparently lies in the development of a high-grade copying camera of short focal length that uses motion picture film, combined with a special projector of high magnifying power that throws a reproduction upon a small screen at a convenient distance from the eye of the operator. A "frame of negative film" costs from two to five cents, depending upon the size of the manuscript and the quality of its ink. The copying outfit is entirely portable, and can be used anywhere. By the use of films a tremendous number of manuscripts can be copied and stored in an incredibly small space, a factor of importance, since space is always a problem in a library. Miss Nute, with the apparatus recently acquired by the society, demonstrated for the conference the operation of the machine; and, in response to questions of Mr. Henry N. Benson of the Nicollet County society, Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society, asserted that the state society would be glad to make these facilities available to local societies.

Mr. Walter F. Rosenwald, maintenance engineer of the department of highways, was the next speaker. He reported to the conference upon the progress made in the erection of historical markers along trunk highways. Under the joint arrangement by which the Minnesota Historical Society designates historic sites and prepares inscriptions and the highway department manufactures and erects markers, distinct progress has been made. "During 1930, which was the year of the inception of this plan, forty signs were erected. In 1931, twenty were erected, and during 1932, twenty-one were put in place. This made a total of eighty-one markers erected from 1930 to 1932." During 1933, partly because of lack of funds, none were erected, but inscriptions are on hand for a number of signs that will be erected during the coming season. With the enlargement of the trunk highway system by approximately forty-five hundred miles, hundreds of additional sites will become available for marking under the plan, and the work is expected to go on for a number of years. Local interest in the project has been manifested by the staging of dedicatory celebrations and by the demand for more elaborate mounts than those normally provided. As a step toward meeting this demand, special designs have been drafted and copies of these are available on request. A question by Mrs. W. J. Jameson of St. Paul, past state regent of the Daughters of the American Revolution, regarding vandalism in connection with these signs elicited the reply that steel plates, because of their weight and lack of intrinsic value, offered little attraction to vandals, as compared with bronze tablets.

Mr. William G. Dorr of Minneapolis, district officer of the Historic American Buildings Survey, next presented an appeal for coöperation by the county historical societies in the survey's Minnesota project. The department of the interior is making a nation-wide survey of historic buildings which are in danger of being destroyed or are fast becoming dilapidated. Accurate drawings and photographs of

such structures will be made, and the records will be published in some form by the government. "I am appealing to you to assist us in locating our historical buildings—old houses and buildings of any kind which will add to the historical and architectural knowledge of the country," said Mr. Dorr. "Houses in which prominent persons have lived will, of course, be most valuable. We should like to have suggestions, including the date, the origin, and purpose for which a suggested building was erected."

Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society, then presented a survey of developments in the local history field during 1933. Despite the depression, the community historical movement has gone forward steadily. Five new county societies and one town society were formed last year, and plans for organization are under way in many more. The speaker stressed the necessity for greater activity on the part of everyone to counteract the "defeatist" attitude, and he emphasized the part which leadership should play in historical work. His paper is published in this issue of MINNESOTA HISTORY. Dr. C. A. Duniway of Northfield, president of the Rice County Historical Society, heartily seconded Mr. Babcock's sentiments, gave illustrations of what volunteer work could do in a community, and emphasized the importance of preserving the records of the humanitarian phases of the present crisis. Senator Lawson then called upon Mr. Benson for a few words about activities in Nicollet County. He brought greetings from Judge Henry Moll and told of plans for the celebration next summer of the anniversary of the signing of the treaty of Traverse des Sioux. Mr. Thomas J. Meighen of Preston then expressed his determination to bring about the organization of a county historical society in Fillmore County. The session then adjourned to the St. Paul Athletic Club for the noon luncheon meeting, which was attended by about a hundred members and friends of the society.

Mr. Edward C. Gale of Minneapolis, vice president of the society, opened the luncheon program with a few humorous suggestions for the preparation of a national code for vice presidents, and then introduced the Reverend James L. Connolly of St. Paul Seminary, who gave a delightful talk upon "American Life in the Thirties as Seen by Bishop Cretin." Father Connolly opened his address with a brief account of Father Joseph Cretin's services as a *curé* in the parish of Ferney, France. To this town in 1838 came Mathias Loras, newly consecrated bishop of Dubuque, who was searching for missionaries. He talked with Father Cretin, a former pupil, and as a result, without telling anyone, the *curé* decided to go to America as a missionary. In five closely written letters, sent to his sister from various places between New York and St. Louis in 1838, the priest records his first impressions of the New World. Cretin's letters were not written for publication, said Father Connolly, and consequently they give the frank impressions of a Frenchman coming in contact with people who had a viewpoint very different from that of the French.

While in New York Father Cretin observed the people closely, and he received the impression that they were exhausted early in life. To secure some light upon the longevity of Americans, he read the inscriptions on tombstones in the cemeteries and observed that "it is surprising how many die at thirty." After he left New York, the traveler was forced to correct some of his first and unfavorable impressions about Americans, and he commented upon the remarkable courtesy and friendliness which he encountered. Still more remarkable, he thought, was the apparent trust of people in one another. Well indeed was it for Father Cretin that such was the the case. At Philadelphia Bishop Loras, who was his traveling companion and who had the tickets, missed the train, and the missionary boarded it alone. "I assured the conductor that I had bought a ticket and explained the circumstances," writes Father Cretin.

“He said ‘All right.’” Father Cretin had similar experiences on the canal boats and other conveyances that he took on his way west.

River transportation receives considerable attention in Father Cretin's letters. Upon reaching Pittsburgh he found the Ohio River so low that no boats could leave the city, and not until eight days had passed could he continue his journey. Steamboat races and sandbars greatly worried him, and the assurance given by his fellow passengers that on an average only one boat a month sank, normally with a loss of only three or four hundred people, was no consolation. Meal times were a source of trial to Father Cretin, for he found that Americans at such periods “become very quiet. They settle down to the business of eating, and that is all there is to it.” A Frenchman, as Father Connolly pointed out, “likes a meal lasting from one to two hours; it should be a social affair, with an exchange of compliments.” At St. Louis Father Cretin met Joseph N. Nicollet, who had been surveying the upper Mississippi Valley for the United States government, and talked with him about the Indians. “They are about to open a new country that is now peopled with Indians,” wrote Cretin, “but it will probably take hundreds of years to populate that region.” The speaker concluded by remarking that it was hardly twenty years before Cretin himself, as the first bishop of St. Paul, was doing his part to organize and settle this country.

Mr. Gale, in introducing the second speaker, Mr. Merle Potter of the *Minneapolis Journal*, for a talk upon “Modern Cultural Trends in Minnesota,” remarked that Nicollet and Cretin would have been considerably surprised if they could have known that people in Minnesota only a century later would be discussing “cultural trends.” Mr. Potter explained that in preparing his talk he had followed prevalent fashions and organized a “brain trust.” He desired to consider culture particularly in the four realms of art,

music, drama, and literature, and so he had asked four authorities to write brief accounts of modern trends in these fields. He then read statements by Mr. Russell Plimpton of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, by Professor James Davies, music critic of the *Minneapolis Tribune*, by Mr. A. Dale Riley of the University of Minnesota on the drama, and by Professor Joseph W. Beach, also of the University of Minnesota, on literature.

At the 1933 luncheon session Judge Julius Haycraft of Fairmont gave a very interesting talk entitled "A Judge Looks at History." As a counterpart for the 1934 program, Mr. Hugh Arthur of Minneapolis, vice president of the Dayton Company, was asked to speak on the theme "A Business Man Looks at History." Mr. Arthur stated that he did most of his history reading for recreation. "I have an odd habit," he explained, "of reading with an atlas and a globe alongside of me. When I am reading history, I want an atlas, and when I am reading geography, I want a history. I like to know the natural history of a region I am studying." This analytical method of reading had led him to visit historic sites in the state to check up on the facts. "I am just a dabbler," he concluded, "but I have gotten a lot of fun out of it, and it has given me a plan of reading."

Mr. William W. Cutler of St. Paul, president of the society, convened the afternoon session in the auditorium of the Historical Building at three o'clock. The reading of reports by the treasurer and the superintendent followed. The superintendent's report, which is published elsewhere in this number of the magazine, indicates that though the membership had dropped to some slight extent, the loss was not as serious as might have been expected and the society as a whole was in a healthy condition. Vigorous activity in many fields characterized the society's work during 1933.

At the conclusion of these reports Miss Ella A. Hawkinson of the Moorhead State Teachers College was intro-

duced for a paper on "The Old Crossing Chippewa Treaty of 1863." The dedication by the federal government of a handsome memorial on the site of the treaty, near Huot, last summer focused attention upon this important agreement with the Red Lake and Pembina bands, which once controlled the northern sections of the Red River trails. Miss Hawkinson pictured for her audience the imposing cavalcade of "290 men, 340 mules, 180 horses, 55 oxen, and 90 vehicles winding on toward Red Lake River from Fort Abercrombie." Bishop Whipple "smoking a sweet briar pipe" and representing the "muscular school of Christians," started out with the expedition, but an injury to his hand, incurred when the episcopal carriage upset, eliminated a powerful advocate of Indian rights from the treaty councils.

On September 28, Indians and half-breeds to the number of 1,618 assembled as guests of the government, and Governor Alexander Ramsey felt the need for expediting treaty affairs lest the stock of provisions should run out. Matters dragged along, however, and on October 1 it looked as if all hopes of success were gone. The situation was saved by some energetic work by a few mixed-bloods. "What psychology they used on the individual chiefs," said Miss Hawkinson, "is untold, but the next day, October 2, Moose-Dung led the signing." Thus were ceded more than nine million acres of the Red River Valley for an annuity of \$20,000 for twenty years, and the usual special payments for traders' credits and the like. In an agreement drawn up a year later, Bishop Whipple secured a liberalization of the terms. Miss Hawkinson's paper will appear in a future number of MINNESOTA HISTORY.

Miss Esther Jerabek, head of the accessions division of the historical society's library, presented the second and final paper on the program of the afternoon, entitled "The Transition of a New-World Bohemia." This thoughtful

analysis of the development of a Czech community — Silver Lake in McLeod County — is published in the present number of the magazine.

About a hundred and seventy-five people assembled in the auditorium of the State Office Building for the final session, which was called to order by President Cutler at 8:00 P.M. The entire session was given over to the annual address on the westward movement of the printing press and the pioneer era of Minnesota printing by Mr. Douglas C. McMurtrie of Chicago, a noted student of printing and its history. After telling of the early colonial ventures in printing, he pointed out that the printing press moved westward, as did population, along two main channels of travel — one by way of Pittsburgh and the Ohio River, and the other by way of Buffalo and the south shore of the Great Lakes. A lure for printers in the West was public printing, which accompanied the establishment of territorial governments. The speaker related that the pioneers took little reading matter with them into the West. As a result, they read eagerly every column of the local newspapers. After sketching the broader aspects of the westward advance of printing, the speaker described in considerable detail the work of Minnesota's pioneer printers. To illustrate his talk, Mr. McMurtrie presented a number of slides made from rare Minnesota imprints in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. In closing, he paid tribute to the society for collecting and preserving ephemeral material during eighty-five years. His address, revised and somewhat broadened in scope, appears elsewhere in this number of the magazine.

Thus ended the eighty-fifth annual meeting of the society, a meeting which maintained the standards for attendance and excellence of material presented set by the assemblies of other years.

W. M. B.



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).