

# SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

## MINNESOTA COUNTY ARCHIVES

With original records in eighty-seven county courthouses, what is Minnesota doing to preserve them or to use them profitably? Some of these records go back to the founding of the territory. Many of them contain important facts about our pioneers. In the probate records at Brainerd, for example, information on George Bonga has been found recently. He was of a family, partly Negroid, partly Chippewa, that played a leading rôle in the fur trade, the missions, and the lumber industry of Minnesota. His letters, preserved in several files owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, have been published in part in the *Journal of Negro History*. Anything that throws light on such a family should be preserved and made accessible to those who are interested.

Many other types of valuable and interesting documents may be dug up from basement vaults or discovered more readily on shelves in office vaults. A few months ago Mr. Robert Forrest published in this magazine a paper on "Mythical Cities of Southwestern Minnesota" in territorial days. He proved, through the use of census and other records, that a number of towns recorded for southwestern counties in the special census of 1857 were pure fiction. Had he consulted the delinquent tax records for 1857 in the auditors' offices of the several counties in other parts of the state, he might have omitted the word "southwestern" from his title. It is obvious from such records as the following, found in the auditor's office at Anoka, that the vice of inventing Minnesota towns was not confined to the southwestern part of the territory: "In regard to the

Tax of these lots in Glencarrie, your collector would respectfully report that after diligent search, he has not been able to find any town by that name."

Many persons have been interested in the transfers of ownership of the Sibley House. Few have thought to look in the most obvious repository for data on Dakota County lands, the office of the register in the courthouse at Hastings. There one will find documents showing that in 1855 Sibley got a quit claim deed to his property in Mendota; that it was sold to Bishop Thomas Grace of the Catholic diocese of St. Paul on September 28, 1868; that on June 9, 1884, it was transferred to the Church of St. Peter at Mendota; and that on February 2, 1910, the Daughters of the American Revolution obtained title to it. Ignatius Donnelly's career has been studied from many angles. Has anyone thought to look up the records touching his career and his Nininger property and activities in the county records at Hastings?

Humor was not alien to the pioneers, as one can prove by consulting unused county records. Consider the following from a paper in the Sibley County Courthouse:

This Indenture made this Sixteenth day of December in the year One Thousand Eight hundred and Sixty Three Between Albert W. Pratt and Agnes V. Pratt his wife formerly residents of the Town of Henderson, but owing to an Indian scare made a change of base and are now residents of Goodhue County and State of Minnesota, U. S. A. of the First part, and George Peasley, Esq., a young man of good moral character sober and temperate habits but a member of none of the Protestant Churches, now a resident of Henderson, Sibley County and State of Minnesota of the second part, Witnesseth, that the said parties of the first part, for and in consideration of the sum of Fifty Dollars (\$50) in Greenbacks, which "like the Jews are descendants of Abraham, anxiously awaiting their Redeemer" to them in hand well and true paid by the said party of the second part, the receipt whereof is hereby acknowledged; have given, granted, bargained, sold . . .

It is not necessary to point out the value of vital statistics for the history of any region. They, too, are kept for

Minnesota in its county courthouses. In Dakota County, for example, marriage license records date from 1853. Some records that are not formally classed as vital statistics in other counties are essentially such, though they were found mouldering in basement vaults, very much reduced in position and prestige from the regular vital statistics, which are kept upstairs in well-appointed office vaults. In the Ramsey County Courthouse one may find in a basement vault—unlike most of its country cousins a fine, airy, orderly one—a volume dating from the Civil War, in which aid rendered to St. Paul soldiers' families is recorded. The information given in the entries includes—besides the amount apportioned to the family—the name and regiment of the soldier, the name and age of his wife, and similar data for his children. Assuredly such a record has its value for future generations.

Public opinion on issues of the day has a perennial appeal. What ideas did our grandparents hold as regards slavery, Abraham Lincoln, the formation of the Republican party, and similar moot topics of their day? Had the county records of Rice County not been salvaged in the recent fire that destroyed the courthouse at Faribault, important papers on these topics would not now be available for that part of Minnesota—though stored ignominiously with unused radiators in the basement of a local church.

A month seldom passes that someone of Indian descent does not call at the Minnesota Historical Society to seek proof that his forbears were Indians and that he is entitled to certain remuneration from the government of the United States. In the register's office of Becker County are two volumes that would doubtless be of great service to such persons—a roll of the Chippewa Indians allotted within the White Earth Reservation by act of June 30, 1913; and a book giving the degree of Indian blood of persons holding land on the White Earth Reservation, December 31,

1910. Similar records are to be found in the archives of Clearwater County.

Old township records are among the most difficult to find. It is impossible sometimes to find even the names of the individuals who held office at a given time. In the clerk of court's office in Beltrami County is a register of town officers from 1904 to date, giving the names of justices of the peace, constables, and town clerks for each township, village, and city in the county. This record was kept by the clerk for his own information and not as a required part of his duties. Similar lists for some years were found in Clearwater and Fillmore counties. Kandiyohi County has perhaps the longest and most complete list of this type; it dates from the fifties and sixties and comes down to the present.

Court records have been used throughout the ages for many historical purposes. They are full of surprises for the historian. Suddenly in the midst of extraneous material, he finds evidence that settles for all time a moot point. When definitive histories are finally written for Minnesota, the court minutes of the various counties will surely be used. In Dakota County, for example, seventeen handwritten volumes of these minutes, in excellent condition, tell to no slight degree that county's history since 1853. Ramsey County also has excellent source material in her court records.

One expects to find certain church records here and there in county archives. Property records of churches, such as deeds and mortgages, are to be found with similar documents for other property. It is something of a surprise, however, to run across the pew book for St. Boniface Church, Hastings, from 1893 to 1904, in the courthouse of Dakota County.

The Minnesota Historical Society has made a rather diligent search for old hotel registers, especially for the

period when stagecoaches were still the usual mode of transportation. Until recently its search has not extended, however, to county courthouses. Now it is discovered that in the office vault of the clerk of court for Dodge County is a register that had escaped notice. It is that of the Hubbel House of Mantorville from 1867 to 1879.

Even family and firm papers sometimes stray into county archives. Thus, in the office vault of the clerk of court of Fillmore County are three old business journals for the years 1856 and 1884 to 1886. They give interesting data on prices of such staple commodities as butter, sugar, and candles. In the same courthouse are census schedules of the county for 1880 and 1885. Though the Minnesota Historical Society has some schedules for the state census of 1880, they do not include population schedules. These newly discovered records may therefore prove of unusual value.

The archives of the state department of education filed with the Minnesota Historical Society do not go back beyond 1888. Fillmore County records include, however, for the office of the superintendent of schools, a volume of records of teachers' examinations for as early as 1864. It covers the period to 1894.

These references to newly discovered material in county archives are made possible as a result of a recent venture of the Minnesota Historical Society. One of its CWA projects in the early spring was a survey of county and state archives. The contents of sixteen courthouses were listed in an earlier survey, made between 1915 and 1917. Consequently, only seventy-one new lists were made. One county, Washington, was resurveyed in order to determine how much alteration had taken place in seventeen years.

With a worker in each of seventy-two county courthouses, the society was able to get a better perspective on the contents and conditions of local archives than at any previous

time. Though the survey lasted only three weeks, several smaller courthouses were completed, and a great deal was accomplished even for the larger buildings. The inventories were made on cards, three by five inches in size. The amount of information now on hand for these archives may be judged by the fact that the cards practically fill a steel filing cabinet of twelve drawers. Since each drawer holds approximately twelve hundred cards, and each card usually summarizes a series of documents—not a single document—some idea of the extent of these neglected county archives may be obtained.

“Neglected” may seem a strong term. Yet it applies with force to these papers. They have been neglected both by their keepers and by their owners, the residents of the counties of Minnesota. Office vaults are usually well kept, but basement vaults were found to be in shocking condition. Must, dirt, overcrowding, mold, dampness, rain, mice, fire, and human vandalism have contributed to make these vaults models of all that they should not be. If the citizens of Minnesota were interested in these records of their localities and showed their interest by consulting them, the keepers also would soon place a proper value on them and give them proper care. Even overcrowding, the most prevalent condition in the courthouses, would be overcome, for citizens who care for their local records appropriate funds for building additional vaults when needed. Moreover, as in older states, like Massachusetts and Connecticut, provision would be made by statute for proper supervision of these precious old papers. These states have learned through a richer—and sadder—experience than Minnesota has had that once a manuscript record is gone or badly mutilated, there is no remedy.

GRACE LEE NUTE



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