

SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

CATALOGUING PICTORIAL SOURCE MATERIAL

The modern historian has many types of source material upon which to draw, and not the least among these, albeit somewhat neglected, are pictures. Too frequently he regards pictures, even photographs, as merely illustrative material with which to adorn his pages, instead of basic, incontrovertible evidence.

Yet a single dated photograph of a street scene will often give invaluable information about business concerns, architecture, transportation, street lighting, the condition of roads, costumes, and a half dozen other subjects of great interest. "Photography," wrote J. Fletcher Williams, secretary of the Minnesota Historical Society, in 1875, "is one of the most valuable aids in preserving history that we have." How did a policeman dress in 1881? A photograph of the great arch erected in St. Paul at the time of President Garfield's death shows a police officer in the foreground and supplies the answer. Were cable cars, other than those on the famous Selby Hill line, used in that city? A photograph answers in the affirmative, for luckily a photographer snapped a picture of the Seventh Street line about 1890.¹

"The collection of photographs of our scenery in its natural state, before it was, or will be, marred by the hand of man—of our ever changing and rapidly growing towns and cities—of our scenes and localities of historical interest and pride—of our early settlers and prominent pioneers and public men—of our Indian inhabitants, scarce noticed

¹ A request made to the Minnesota Historical Society by the St. Paul City Railway Company brought out this little-known fact in the capital city's transportation history.

by our present generation, but destined to possess a wondrous interest to those who succeed us when that strange people have passed away—all these have been among our main objects," wrote Williams in the *Annual Report* of the historical society quoted above. To give concrete expression to this idea, an official photographer was named to secure pictures of persons and places within the categories indicated.

Thus for sixty years the Minnesota Historical Society has been building up its collection of historical pictures for permanent preservation. Today the collection numbers between forty-seven and forty-eight thousand items, of which more than twenty-five thousand are pictures other than portraits. To make available to users this large collection, a detailed classification system by historical periods, states, political subdivisions of Minnesota, Indians, industries, transportation, and similar topical divisions has been developed. Portraits are arranged alphabetically by sizes. Each picture, no matter what its size, has its own call number and a specific place in the files. Filing is normally vertical, in drawers of various sizes from three by five inches upwards, with the reverse side of the picture toward the user. Upon this reverse are written the title of the picture, the call number, any available additional information about the view, and the method by which the item was acquired. Application of the museum's accessioning stamp, which includes a dating device, completes the accessioning and classification of the picture. As each picture is classified and filed, a shelf-list card is made showing the title and call number, and this card is filed in the office of the curator of the museum. Drawers cannot be used in the case of framed pictures, and a large closet takes care of them, but in other respects they are handled in accordance with the same general system.

The public has gradually become picture-conscious, if one may judge by the ever-increasing demands made upon the collection of the historical society. Requests are numerous

and varied, and naturally they do not take into account the limitations of any system of classification. "What types of fire apparatus were in use at a given date?" "What style of buggy would a young blood hire on a Sunday afternoon to take a girl out driving, and how would the young man and the girl be dressed?" A writer for the *Northwestern Druggist*, preparing a golden jubilee issue, asked for an interior view of a drugstore in 1883. A feature writer for a newspaper wanted detailed pictures of early restaurants. A graduate student writing a thesis dealing with home life and conditions in pioneer days desired pictures of houses, furniture, utensils, and the like. Many requests have been received for pictures of little-known stores and residences. A physician wanted pictures of an early hospital. Often such subjects can be found only by a detailed study of street scenes or panoramic views, for the shelf list of titles does not supply the clue to the desired information.

The personal knowledge possessed by members of the museum staff of the detail of large numbers of pictures is very helpful in meeting the many and varied demands that arise, but something more systematic and dependable than personal memory is needed. The problem of making an analytical catalogue of the pictures other than portraits, analogous to the subject catalogue of books in the library, had been under consideration for several years. Only the small size of the museum staff, the pressure of scores of other demands, and the magnitude and complexity of the task had precluded an attack upon it. The assistance of trained library workers through the Civil Works Administration finally provided the opportunity to undertake the work. Briefly, the purpose of this catalogue is to record on cards under various headings all the information that a given picture may furnish, irrespective of its title. A single picture often requires as many as a dozen entries. Unfortunately for cataloguers in the specialized field of pictures, adequate published guides such as the Library of

Congress heading lists are lacking. The Minnesota Historical Society's pioneer undertaking has been carried on in a spirit of experimentation and with a willingness to profit by the method of trial and error.

The cataloguing of a picture is a different matter from that of a book. As a consequence, various special problems have had to be met. It was recognized that as far as possible the catalogue should conform to library practices, and hence Library of Congress headings were used where available. In many cases, however, these headings proved too general to be used without modification for pictures. Sometimes they seemed cumbersome and therefore unsuitable. Occasionally the library headings failed to take into consideration current or local usage. A "lumberjack," for instance, is not a "lumberman" in the timber country, and no "jack" would apply the term to himself. The former is the woodsman who does the actual work in the forests, whereas the latter is the employer. The phrase "ice harvesting machinery" is scarcely applicable to the hand tools such as pikes and tongs used in harvesting natural ice. It needs to be amended to read "ice harvesting tools and machinery." In cataloguing pictures of river steamboats it was found desirable to note whether the boats were side-wheelers or stern-wheelers, because such a question has often arisen. Special architectural features such as mansard roofs on buildings and residences have been noted in headings. Detailed entries for pictures showing costumes were made, with notations concerning the sex of the wearer and the date. In cataloguing the pictures, the needs of the user have been kept foremost. Simple directness has been the aim; circumlocutions have been avoided.

Card entries about pictures have been made under the title, with notes regarding the location of a building or residence; the photographer, since one can often ascertain the date or approximate date of a picture thereby; and the special character of the item, which may be a stereoscopic view

or some other type of picture. All subject and other entries for which cards are to be made have been listed on the back of the main entry card. Many cross references are necessary. To avoid subsequent mistakes in the headings used or in form, a special subject card file has been made.

The project is a joint undertaking, involving the skill of the cataloguer—the work is being done under the general supervision of the chief cataloguer of the society—and the museum worker's point of view. The combination has worked out splendidly. The work was carried on during the last period of the CWA and has since been resumed as a project of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Already several thousand cards are included in the two sets of files that are being kept, and subject and other entry cards have been made for nearly a thousand pictures.

Some hint has been given earlier in this paper of the value of pictures as source material for history. It should be understood, however, that they constitute valuable material not only for historians, but also for workers in many other professions. Two artists working on murals under a government art project have been extensive users of the society's picture resources as a means of obtaining accuracy in their paintings. One of these artists found it necessary to rework a sketch because he had committed an anachronism by including a high-wheeled bicycle in a picture of the early seventies of the last century. A novelist spent hours examining photographs of St. Anthony and Minneapolis in the fifties in order to familiarize herself with the street life of the period. An architect engaged in the restoration of the Faribault House at Mendota had to redraft his entire roof plan as the result of a study of old photographs. The men engaged in the Historic American Buildings Survey, designers, newspaper and magazine writers, and many others have found answers to their questions in the society's picture collection.

Though it is true that there are occasional "fake" pic-

tures, such as that of the Minneapolis mill explosion of 1878, pictures as a rule supply incontrovertible evidence and sometimes information not found elsewhere. A street scene in Minneapolis, for example, the approximate date of which was known, shows a certain firm name on a prominent sign in the foreground. The street address is readable. Yet a search through the Minneapolis directories failed to show the particular partnership that is recorded in this picture, whereas three or four other combinations of one name with others, at the same address, were found. The photographer evidently has preserved for posterity a firm name which existed for only a few months. A certain large building looms up prominently in the background of views looking across the Falls of St. Anthony in the seventies, but no old resident has been able to identify it.

Since many prints, all originals, can be made from a single negative, photographs lack the uniqueness of longhand manuscripts, but visual evidence is often far more convincing than written statements and pictures convey a genuine feeling of contact with the past that can be obtained in no other way. An historical society, and particularly an historical museum, should let no opportunity slip to acquire pictures and photographic negatives that can be identified for its area, for such material will be invaluable to the historian of the future.

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ALMANACS AS HISTORICAL SOURCES

One type of publication that does not come readily to the mind of the average person as an historical source, but that is similar to newspapers and periodicals in that it records contemporary history, is the almanac. Its vogue in America began with Franklin's *Poor Richard* and has continued to this day. In fact, some almanacs have been published con-



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