

THE 1936 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

About sixty people gathered in the auditorium of the Historical Building in St. Paul on the morning of January 13 for the sixteenth annual conference on local history work in Minnesota and the opening session of the eighty-seventh annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society. Representatives of about a dozen local historical societies attended the conference, which was called to order at 10:00 A. M. by Mr. Dudley S. Brainard, professor of history in the St. Cloud State Teachers College and president of the newly organized Stearns County Historical Society. He remarked upon his special interest in the theme for discussion — “Co-ordinating State and Local History Work in Minnesota” — and then called upon Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the museum of the Minnesota Historical Society, for a survey of “Developments in the Field of Community History in 1935.”

An “increasing historical consciousness,” said Mr. Babcock, was exemplified in Minnesota during the past year by the organization of four new county historical societies in Stearns, Watonwan, Wilkin, and Winona counties and of a town society at White Bear Lake. The activities of local historical societies, old and new, in 1935 were described by the speaker, who pointed out that unusually successful summer meetings, attended by several thousand people each, were held in several counties, including Marshall, Martin, Otter Tail, and Roseau; that a historical tour, modeled upon that conducted by the state society, was held under the auspices of the Hutchinson and Glencoe historical societies; that the newly organized Winona County society began its existence with 255 charter members; that museum work, as a phase of local historical activity, is increasing in

importance; that local newspapers are giving an increasing amount of space to articles on community backgrounds; that a number of local history essay contests have been arranged by historical societies and other local organizations; and that plans for the publication of county histories are being forwarded in several communities. Mr. Babcock expressed the opinion that the publication of a special section in MINNESOTA HISTORY devoted to "Local Historical Societies" will "facilitate the exchange of ideas," and he spoke of the "possibilities for forwarding historical work in the localities under the Works Progress Administration" that have been opened up during the past year.

The methods by which these possibilities are being made a reality were discussed by the next speaker, Mr. Jacob Hodnefield of St. Paul, supervisor of the state historical survey under the WPA. Among the objectives of the survey mentioned were the listing of cemeteries, monuments and markers, unmarked historic sites, and historic buildings; the listing of public archives, including such state and county records as have not been canvassed in previous surveys, and municipal, township, and school district records; and the listing of manuscript materials in private hands and in the possession of local historical societies. Historical surveys also are being conducted in many local communities, where efforts are being made to locate, list, repair, arrange, copy, and otherwise care for manuscripts and records of value for a study of local history, to compile lists of early settlers and to record and preserve their reminiscences, to map historic trails, to compile lists of soldiers buried in the locality, and the like. In conclusion the speaker pointed out ways in which the state and local historical projects can co-operate.

The chairman next called upon Miss Mildred Sebo, secretary of the Winona County Historical Society, to explain how her section of Minnesota had met the problem of "Organizing the Rural Community for Local History Work."

She told how a pageant of early life in the Whitewater Valley, planned and staged by the youthful members of a 4-H Club, had aroused an interest in local history throughout the county. In fact, said Miss Sebo, "this pageant has been the key to most of the historical work in our county thus far," and she reported that it had much to do with inspiring the recent organization of the county historical society. Judge Julius E. Haycraft of Fairmont, president of one of the most active local historical societies in the state, followed Miss Sebo on the program. He undertook to tell "What the Local Historical Society Needs from the State Historical Society," suggesting that some errors might be avoided if an individual from the state society could visit the local organizations each year. "There is no conflict and very little duplication between the work of the state and local societies," said Judge Haycraft. The local society should deal with detailed information such as can be gleaned from newspaper files. He reported that the Martin County society is well prepared to furnish such material, for it has in its collections nearly two hundred and fifty volumes of local newspapers.

In the audience was Dr. Mabel Ulrich of Minneapolis, who was called upon to explain the writers' project under the WPA, for which she is director in Minnesota. She revealed that unemployed writers in the state are engaged in the preparation of a guidebook which, when published, will supply visitors to the North Star State with information about places of interest not only in the cities but in the rural communities. "We don't want this guidebook to read like an oil station guide; we don't want it to be merely a book of directions on how to reach places," said Dr. Ulrich; "we want to make it a living document" with information about Indian backgrounds, old settlers, racial groups, and other matters of historical importance.

The discussion was opened by Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, who asserted that the state historical society, of which he

is superintendent, should assist the local societies by preparing "some kind of manual of methods, giving suggestions about the care of manuscripts, the handling of museum exhibits, problems of display and equipment, and many other things that form a part of the work programs of the county historical society." The "job of collecting historical material for the whole state is too big for the state society," he said; as a result "we need in every community a local institution that can gather up records." The fact that nearly half a hundred such organizations are active in the state today was stressed by the speaker, and he indicated that the local historical movement in Minnesota has an "unusual vitality about it." Mrs. Alma B. Kerr, director of women's projects for the Minnesota WPA, continued the discussion with a few remarks about historical projects in rural communities. Brief comments on local historical activity in their communities by Mr. Henry N. Benson of St. Peter, Mrs. F. E. Whitaker of White Bear Lake, and Mr. Orlando Simons of Glencoe brought the conference to a close.

About a hundred and twenty-five members and friends of the society assembled at the St. Paul Athletic Club at 12:15 P. M. for the annual luncheon and a program of talks. Judge William E. Scott of Two Harbors, who presided, called first upon Dr. Grace Lee Nute, curator of manuscripts for the Minnesota Historical Society, who described the experiences of "An English Hunter on the Frontier" in 1847. She drew her material from a diary kept during a hunting expedition in the American West by Frederick U. Graham of Netherby Hall in the border country between England and Scotland. The narrative, which had been printed privately for members of the writer's family, was discovered last year by Miss Nute while searching in "Young Lochinvar's" haunts for material on the careers of the French explorers, Radisson and Groseilliers. Graham's travels included visits to the Falls of St. Anthony and Fort Snelling, where he found in command Captain

Seth Eastman, "a good sportsman, a frank, straightforward soldier, and a gentleman."

Following Miss Nute's paper, the chairman remarked that Mr. Blegen had an announcement to make. "I should like to inaugurate the custom of announcing at the annual luncheon at least one significant gift of historical materials," he said, "and today I wish to announce that the society has just received a collection of papers that will take rank with the most important collections in our possession." These, the speaker went on to say, are the papers of the late John Lind, governor, Congressman, and diplomat. They came to the society only a few days earlier as the gift of Mrs. John Lind of Minneapolis, who had been invited to be present but had been obliged to decline because of illness. She sent, however, a letter, which was read by Mr. Blegen. In it she expressed the opinion that "no better place could be found" for the papers of her late husband. "I feel relieved in knowing they are to be preserved in this society," she added.

"Some Values in History and Museum Work for the Community" was the subject chosen by the next speaker, Mrs. Kerr, who has been closely associated with the society in directing historical projects under the WPA. She described her experience at Albert Lea, where she made an effort to "discover the type of occupation which would tie the interest of both the worker and the community." The result was the opening of a local museum with ceremonies that attracted an audience of ten thousand people. Now, a year later, thirty-one museum projects have been inaugurated in the state, and "Minnesota offers an opportunity for everyone to take part in museum and historical work." Under the present federal relief program, she said, it is possible for the local community not only to build up museum collections, but to erect buildings for their display, using WPA workers on construction.

In introducing Dr. Thomas B. Magath of the Mayo

Clinic, Rochester, Judge Scott called attention to the fact that the final speaker would continue a series of talks inaugurated in 1933, when Judge Haycraft explained how "A Judge Looks at History." A businessman's and a journalist's views of history were defined in succeeding years by Mr. Hugh Arthur of Minneapolis and Mr. Roy J. Dunlap of St. Paul, respectively; Dr. Magath was now being called upon to discuss history from the physician's point of view. The speaker undertook to scan for his audience the story of the "development of steam sterilization," a development that "was necessary before modern surgery could be born" and that came as recently as the eighties of the last century. Before the decade closed, said Dr. Magath, Dr. Charles N. Hewitt of Red Wing, who had been in charge of the Minnesota state board of health for seventeen years, went to Europe to study bacteriology in Pasteur's laboratory. This was in 1889. "He brought back with him to his Red Wing laboratory a Koch sterilizer and other equipment with which to set up the first bacteriological laboratory concerned with human infections west of the Alleghenies." The speaker told how the sterilizer was installed in Dr. Hewitt's home, and then went on to describe other developments in the use and manufacture of steam sterilizers in America. He pointed out that in 1893 a device that was used extensively in Minnesota and the Northwest was invented by Dr. Edward Boechmann of St. Paul. "A sterilizer of this type was the first one purchased at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester," said Dr. Magath. St. Joseph's and the City and County hospitals of St. Paul also installed these sterilizers at an early date. The speaker, in concluding, declared that in the history of science one finds that in "earlier years before means of rapid communication had been established, men in different parts of the world independently, and often simultaneously, arrived at the same answer. They did not build so evidently on the work of others. Progress advanced discontinuously. As communi-

cations increased in speed and frequency, progress was more continuous and more co-operative."

The afternoon session convened in the Historical Building at 3:00 P. M. with Mr. William W. Cutler, president of the society, presiding, and about sixty people in attendance. After the reading of annual reports by the society's treasurer, Mr. Everett H. Bailey of St. Paul, and by its superintendent, Mr. Blegen,¹ the following thirty members of the society were elected to serve as members of the executive council during the triennium 1936-39: Charles E. Adams, Everett H. Bailey, Henry N. Benson, Theodore C. Blegen, Kenneth Brill, Ralph Budd, the Rev. William Busch, Homer P. Clark, William W. Cutler, Mrs. George P. Douglas, Clyde A. Duniway, Burt W. Eaton, Guy Stanton Ford, Edward C. Gale, Julius E. Haycraft, Louis W. Hill, Jr., Jefferson Jones, Nathaniel P. Langford, Victor E. Lawson, William H. Lightner, Dr. T. B. Magath, George R. Martin, Andrew J. Newgren, Dillon J. O'Brien, Ira C. Oehler, William E. Scott, Lester B. Shippee, Charles Stees, Royal A. Stone, and Mrs. Edward B. Young. Later in the afternoon the new executive council met in the superintendent's office and elected the following officers of the society for the next three years: Edward C. Gale, president; Ira C. Oehler and Lester B. Shippee, vice presidents; Everett H. Bailey, treasurer; and Theodore C. Blegen, secretary.

At the conclusion of the business meeting, the chairman called upon Sister Grace McDonald of the College of St. Benedict, St. Joseph, for a paper on "The Government Indian Farmer" with special reference to Minnesota. She described the early efforts of such men as Lawrence Taliaferro, the Pond brothers, and farmers appointed under the treaties of 1837 to teach the natives the art of agriculture; she told of the problems that they were obliged to meet in dealing with Indians who shot cattle when they were hungry, ate corn and vegetables before they were ripe, and

¹ The superintendent's report appears in full, *ante*, p. 49-63.

often devoured grain set aside for seed; and she defined the reasons for the failure of the system of Indian farmers. The "real cause" of this, said the speaker, "was the failure of the government Indian farmer and later of the government to recognize that the Indians' social and economic organization was based on the community and not on the individual," that his "conception of economic organization was communal ownership of land."

The annual address, which appears as the leading article in this issue of MINNESOTA HISTORY, was the feature of the evening session, at which one of the newly elected vice presidents of the society, Mr. Ira C. Oehler of St. Paul, presided. The address was delivered before an audience of about a hundred and fifty people by the archivist of the United States, Dr. Robert D. W. Connor of Washington, D. C., who took as his subject the official records of the nation and their administration in the magnificent new National Archives Building. The problems involved merely in assembling in one depository all the federal records that have been accumulating for a century and a half in Washington and in the various states were described by Dr. Connor, who recently has undertaken this gigantic task. Dr. Connor's appearance before the society aroused considerable interest throughout the state and elicited editorial comment on archives and their value in a number of newspapers. A writer in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* of January 16, for example, asserted that "when all these records are gathered under one roof for the first time, both the government and the American people are going to profit enormously," for the concentration of the archives will prove a "convenience for officialdom" and will provide a "gold mine of basic research materials in American history."

At the conclusion of Dr. Connor's address, the audience was invited to adjourn to the museum rooms to view the first public display of a number of miniature groups that are being prepared, under the auspices of the society, by

several artists employed in a WPA project. The groups shown portray vividly old Fort Snelling, trading posts on Sandy and Leech lakes, and events connected with Mississippi River steamboating. They are based upon careful research in contemporary records, and are made of plaster and modeling clay, painted to reproduce the original colors, with buildings and figures set against painted backgrounds. An inspection of these interesting representations of early Minnesota scenes brought the eighty-seventh annual meeting to a close.



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