SOME SOURCES FOR NORTHWEST HISTORY

PROBATE RECORDS

The opening of the new National Archives in Washington, the recent movement to organize an Institute of Archivists, and the inventories of local archives that have been carried forward with emergency funds during the past two years are all indicative of a general appreciation on the part of historians of the importance of archival collections as source material. Many students, however, are not familiar with the different categories of records and do not utilize the resources that are at hand. Dr. Grace Lee Nute has pointed out in the pages of this quarterly the wealth of detailed information that is a largely hidden treasure in our county courthouses (see ante, 15:194–199). The purpose of the present article is to suggest more specifically some of the many possible uses of one important series, the records of the probate judge. While the pages that follow are based mainly on a study of materials in the Coles County Courthouse at Charleston, Illinois, and the Marion County Courthouse at Indianapolis, Indiana, they are offered not as a catalogue of data relating to those localities, but as a description of what may be found in probate records generally, as they are preserved throughout the Northwest. Students of Minnesota history will find their local depositories equally rich in source materials.

Inventories of estates contain many significant details that add life and color to our picture of the frontier home. Featherbeds, quilts, rugs, brass clocks, Windsor chairs, breakfast tables, Dutch ovens, washboards, tubs, and smoothing irons—furnishings for every room in a house—are included in these itemized catalogues of personal property. Often appraisers' valuations and the prices for which
pieces were actually sold appear. The household goods left by one Margaret Gray, who lived in Coles County, Illinois, during the forties, were appraised at $27,675, but they brought only $18.72.

The pioneer farm, which was a fundamental economic unit in frontier society, is clearly delineated in records of wills. Barns, cribs, and chicken coops are mentioned. Farm tools are enumerated, and crops and domestic animals are listed. Coles County records for the forties show the different kinds of plows and harrows that were used there during that period. Reap hooks, grain cradles, and several varieties of hoes, rakes, and forks are cited as part of a good farmer's stock of implements, and wagons and saddles, ox yokes and harnesses are other items of basic equipment that are frequently mentioned.

The inventory of the personal property that belonged to Thomas O. Roberts includes the following items and represents the varied agricultural interests of an Illinois farmer: "14 head of cattle, 110 head hogs, 23 head sheep 5 hay stacks, 1 stack wheat, 3 head of Horses, lot of Sheaf oats in the Barn, hay in the barn 1 wheat fan Supposed to bee One thousand bushels of Corn in the crib ½ of ten acres in the field ½ interest in an Englis(h) Or Durham Bull."

References may be found to the keeping of bees, the cultivation of fruit trees, and the growing of flax and hemp. Other special interests and sometimes professional talents are indicated. Blacksmiths' and wheelwrights' tools are listed in inventories. A description of store furnishings and stocks of goods, recorded in a later period, suggests the successful trade of a hardware merchant. Sets of medical reference books, possessions highly prized, are noted as bequeathed to appreciative heirs.

Significant information is set forth regarding investments. The list of real-estate holdings of one Baltimore resident who died in Will County, Illinois, includes several urban lots
in his home city, and farms in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Evidence may be found in the records of later years which shows the trend away from the ownership of real property and a preference for mortgages and the more liquid forms of wealth, such as stocks and bonds. Generalizations in this regard must, however, be advanced with caution.

Records showing the disposition of property reveal data of interest to the historian. The extent to which estates were broken up is indicated in the terms of wills or in administrators' reports. Favorite charities are often suggested. The will left by one resident of Will County, Illinois, stipulates that several thousand dollars be applied to the construction of a new church building in which he was especially interested. Other illustrations include the bequest by a citizen of Marion County, Indiana, of a respectable sum to a "Home of the Friendless," and the listing of a certificate of stock (noted as worthless) in Dr. Strong's Sanitarium at Saratoga Springs, New York, among the securities left by a one-time resident of that city. The custom of remembering namesakes in wills accounts for bequests of Bibles, gold watches, and in some instances money.

The frequent failure of persons of means to make provision for their wives and children led to the passage of several state laws on the subject. In Illinois certain specified items of property were considered to guarantee a reasonably comfortable livelihood, for a short time at least. Other states stipulated a fixed amount as a statutory allowance for the widow. Such legislation is plainly reflected in the administrators' reports.

The importance attached to proper burial and the expenses incident to it are strikingly shown in these same reports. In some instances mortuary fees are recorded which exceed the amount allowed to the widow. In other cases the records show large sums spent on cemetery lots or headstones. The fees paid to the attorney and to the adminis-
trator are also set forth, and accounts may be found that indicate the sums deducted as inheritance taxes. Through the latter charges, society's claims on estates may be studied.

Outstanding credits and obligations, which are significant evidences of soundness in the management of personal affairs, are often listed. On some accounts comments appear opposite a debtor's name. Words like "good" or "hopeless" or "desperate" give clues as to the prospect of the accounts being paid. In the case of a small locality such notations contribute to an estimate of the reputations of many of the townsfolk.

The provisions of trusteeships set up for the benefit of heirs not equal to the management of complicated financial affairs show some of the difficulties of transmitting wealth from one generation to the next. Petitions for the sale of securities by trustees are common. The records of a trust fund established from the estate of an Indiana grocer show that the trustees were forced to dispose of a block of stock in his retail store in order to secure the necessary income for his heirs. A petition signed by other Indiana trustees requests authorization to sell a share of the capital stock of the Marion Club, a local organization, on the grounds that a buyer had been found, and since purchasers for the stock were scarce the opportunity to dispose of it was too good to lose.

A survey of guardianships ordered by the court indicates further the efforts made by society to provide for the material welfare of children and of adults suffering from mental infirmity. Some details relate to the expenditure of funds for the clothing and support of wards. Other records show that persons were appointed to care for the affairs of habitual drunkards who owned real property but were incapable of administering it. In other instances guardianships are indicated which were established to care for World War veterans who were incapacitated in service overseas.
From these illustrations it should be clear that the records of probate judges constitute an important body of source materials for the historian. Once the student masters the system that is used to classify and index these archives, he will ferret out many bits of information that will better his understanding of the social and economic development of the Northwest.

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