

THE STATE HISTORICAL CONVENTION OF 1936

Last year members and friends of the Minnesota Historical Society who participated in its historical tour penetrated far into western Minnesota, traveling up the Minnesota Valley to Lac qui Parle. This year, for its fourteenth annual state historical convention and tour, the society turned its attention to a river valley in the eastern part of the state, the St. Croix, which marks part of the boundary between Minnesota and Wisconsin. Some of the oldest communities in Minnesota were visited by the tourists of 1936, who, on June 27, traveled from St. Paul to Hastings and thence followed the St. Croix as far north as Taylor's Falls.

Three chartered busses and about thirty-five private cars, all crowded with tourists, left the Historical Building in St. Paul at 8:45 A.M. for the one-day tour. After passing through the Dayton's Bluff district, which embraces such interesting historic sites as Carver's Cave and the Indian Mounds, the caravan left St. Paul over a highway which follows the route of the old Point Douglas road. On or near this historic highway are Battle Creek Park, the site of a Sioux-Chippewa battle of 1842; Pig's Eye, where Pierre Parrant settled in 1844; Red Rock, an ancient Indian place of worship and the site of a Sioux mission of 1837; Grey Cloud Island, where Colonel Henry Leavenworth and his troops encamped in 1819 when traveling up the Mississippi to found Fort Snelling; Langdon, a village near which a pioneer butter and cheese factory was established in the seventies; and Nininger, Ignatius Donnelly's "dream city." Brief historical sketches of these and other places of interest in the region visited during the day's trip were made available to the tourists in a multigraphed sheet entitled "Glimpses of the History of the Route." As the busses could not cross

the spiral bridge at Hastings, the passengers were transferred to private cars furnished by courtesy of the citizens of Hastings and were driven across the bridge to the Hastings High School, where the opening session was held.

About three hundred people had gathered in the high school auditorium at 10:30 A. M. when the session was called to order by Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, superintendent of the society. He introduced the presiding officer, Professor C. A. Duniway of Carleton College, Northfield, president of the Rice County Historical Society, who called first upon Mr. Ralph L. Harmon of South St. Paul for a paper on "Ignatius Donnelly and His Faded Metropolis." This interesting summary of the history of Nininger, in which emphasis is placed upon Donnelly's efforts to attract to his embryo city the trade and commerce of the St. Croix Valley, appears in full in the present number of MINNESOTA HISTORY. In this issue also is published the second paper of the Hastings session, an account by Mr. Willoughby M. Babcock, curator of the society's museum, of the St. Croix Valley as viewed by pioneer newspaper editors who visited the region and wrote narratives of their experiences and observations.

From Hastings, the long line of busses and cars, now numbering nearly a hundred, proceeded over a winding road, through Afton, to Stillwater, where a noon luncheon was served to about three hundred people at the Lowell Inn. Since the hotel could not accommodate so large an assemblage of people at one time, arrangements were made to hold the session that followed the luncheon in the Auditorium Theater, near by. About four hundred and fifty people gathered there at 2:00 P. M. to listen, while enjoying the comfort of an air-cooled interior, to the program of talks arranged for this session. Mr. Edward C. Gale of Minneapolis, president of the society, who presided, called attention to the fact that Stillwater, one of the first villages incorporated in Minnesota Territory, could trace its early pros-

perity to the development of the St. Croix Valley lumber industry. Some phases of the growth of that industry were discussed by the first speaker, Miss Agnes M. Larson, professor of history in St. Olaf College, Northfield. She began by pointing out that the St. Croix Valley offered not only millions of acres of white and Norway pine, but one of the "great highways for transporting logs" and water power at St. Croix Falls with which to transform logs into lumber. The activities of the pioneer lumberman of the St. Croix, Joseph R. Brown, who began operations in the region after it was opened to settlement by Indian treaty in 1837, the building of the first commercial sawmill in the valley at Marine in 1839, the coming of the "men from Maine," and the development of rafting for the transporting of logs to down-river markets were among the subjects discussed by the speaker. Stillwater, said Miss Larson, "was the local log emporium, where the buying and selling of logs was done." There, in 1860, "twenty-five hundred men were employed in booming and rafting." The "real workshop" of this busy community was at the St. Croix Boom. In concluding, the speaker revealed that, though the early loggers thought the forests of the St. Croix inexhaustible, on August 12, 1914, the "boom master hitched the last log that came through the St. Croix Boom. . . . The great empire of white pine of the St. Croix had been moved to build a greater empire, the prairies, the midland empire of America."

At the conclusion of this interesting paper, Mr. Gale called attention to the fact that in the audience was ex-Governor Samuel R. Van Sant. As a pioneer steamboat captain whose activities were closely identified with logging and rafting, he was called upon to rise. The chairman then introduced Mr. Blegen, who chose to describe "Some Sources for St. Croix Valley History." Before proceeding, however, he asked Mr. A. B. Easton, who has been active as a newspaper editor at Stillwater since 1870, to rise. This

was particularly appropriate, since in the paper that followed the speaker emphasized the importance of newspapers as historical sources.

“The newspaper editor was a pioneer of culture, and the dates of the founding of papers are clues to the emergence of genuine communities from the straggling clusters of earlier settlement,” said Mr. Blegen. He revealed that in the St. Croix Valley newspapers were established at Hudson, Stillwater, and Prescott in the fifties, and in the early sixties at Taylor’s Falls and St. Croix Falls. Upon digging into the files of these papers, many of which are preserved by the Minnesota Historical Society, one discovers that “pioneer newspaper editors were boosters, optimists, eager to attract immigrants, to convince the East of the advantages and possibilities of Minnesota, and to build up their communities.” The speaker pointed out the value of newspapers “for the story of manners and customs, for the history of a community, for the reconstruction of manifest activities of a society.” Turning to other sources, Mr. Blegen reminded his audience that among historical records could be classed letters, diaries, reminiscences, account books, business papers, archives of churches and organizations, census records, pictures, pamphlets, handbills, and museum objects. He described a number of unpublished manuscript sources for the history of the valley. In closing he made a plea for a “state-wide attic inventory” to help state and local historical societies “enrich their collections of records.”

The reminiscences of a pioneer of the fifties, Mr. L. E. Hospes, were used by his granddaughter, Miss Catherine Neumeier, as the basis for the next talk, which bore the striking title “From War Paint to Lipstick.” In this essay, which Miss Neumeier presented as a salutatory address when she was graduated from the Stillwater High School a few weeks earlier, she pictured some of the changes that her grandfather had seen during his long residence in the St.

Croix Valley. Among the incidents of frontier times that she described were a Sioux-Chippewa battle on the site of the old prison, an early Thanksgiving celebration, and a dance at the old Sawyer House. Miss Neumeier's piquant and charming talk was greatly appreciated by the audience. The activities of the Washington County Historical Society were reviewed by the last speaker, Mrs. Daisy Foster of Stillwater, president of the society. She revealed that since it was founded in April, 1934, the society has held regular meetings, which have been well attended and have given its members the opportunity of hearing some excellent papers and talks. The need for a building in which museum objects can be displayed was stressed, for, said Mrs. Foster, "through our lumberjack celebration we found that there is a wealth of material here in Stillwater." She emphasized also the close co-operation that has prevailed between the Minnesota Historical Society and the new society of her county.

Following Mrs. Foster's talk, the tour was resumed. Busses and cars crossed the bridge at Stillwater and followed the Wisconsin shore of the St. Croix northward to St. Croix Falls and Interstate Park, where they again crossed the river to Taylor's Falls. There, at 4:30 P. M., in a natural amphitheater surrounded by the strange rock formations of the park, about three hundred people heard Dr. Louis H. Powell, director of the St. Paul Institute, discuss the geology of the St. Croix region. His address, which was entitled "Volcanoes, Seas, and Glaciers: A Retrospect of the St. Croix Valley in Geologic Times," traced the story of the region back to the time when Minnesota "was near the center of the mountain-forming movements of the continent." During this time, said Dr. Powell, there were long "periods when great masses of molten lava broke through the rocky crust," and the "tilted edges of the last of these lava flows" are still to be seen at Taylor's Falls as "dark, speckled masses of trap rock." The speaker described in

detail the "repeated invasion of the state from the north by continental ice sheets during the last ice age," and he showed how this invasion resulted in the formation of the Mississippi and St. Croix valleys. He told how the "massive pot holes in the trap rock at Taylor's Falls were cut by sand-laden water swirling and eddying over the uneven surface of the lava flows," and how that same "rushing water filled with sand . . . entrenched itself in the trap rock forming the picturesque dalles." The talk was an admirable example of the art of presenting a complicated scientific subject in clear and simple form. Following this address, many of the tourists took advantage of an opportunity to see the dalles from a St. Croix River boat.

Taylor's Falls marked the northward limit of the tour; there the visitors turned southward through the Minnesota side of the St. Croix Valley to Marine. In this community, which has been a center of Swedish settlement since the fifties, a *smörgåsbord* supper was served at the Swedish Young People's Hall, and an exhibit of objects illustrative of Swedish-American life was arranged in the town hall, a quaint stone structure. Among the larger items shown were some pieces of pioneer fire-fighting apparatus. A collection of primitive rifles and other firearms, wooden shoes and the implements used in making them, books, manuscripts, early pictures of Marine and the St. Croix Valley, homespun and hand-woven linen, and table appointments of glass and silver were among the objects displayed. This exhibit proved to be a center of interest for the visitors, many of whom failed to find seats in the little Swedish Lutheran church where the evening session was held. As a result of its limited capacity, only about two hundred people succeeded in hearing the papers and talks presented at this session, which convened at 8:00 P. M.

Mr. Ira C. Oehler of St. Paul, vice president of the Minnesota Historical Society, who presided, expressed the society's appreciation of the exhibits prepared by the Marine

community, and then called upon Miss Ruby Karstad of Minneapolis for a paper entitled "Opening a Home in Minnesota in the Fifties." Her narrative was based upon information about Minnesota, "largely in the form of letters written by residents and visitors" to the region, published in the *New York Tribune* in the fifties. This newspaper, according to Miss Karstad, was not only the "most influential paper published in the United States" during this decade, but it "ranked first in its influence in Minnesota." The extent of its influence may be judged from the fact that in "1856 its circulation in the territory was 2,943, larger than that of any paper published there." Miss Karstad's paper will appear in full in a future issue of this magazine. She was followed on the program by Dr. George M. Stephenson, associate professor of history in the University of Minnesota, who spoke informally, taking as his subject "Sidelights on the Early History of the Swedes in the St. Croix Valley." He drew upon reports of the valley written by Swedes, many of them Lutheran pastors, who visited or settled in the region. Among those whose experiences were described by the speaker were Erik Norelius, A. M. Dahlhjelm, Gustaf Unonius, and P. A. Cederstam. An article based upon Professor Stephenson's talk will appear in the December issue of MINNESOTA HISTORY.

The final paper of the Marine session was read by Mr. Arthur J. Larsen, head of the newspaper department of the historical society, who discussed "Army Road-builders in Minnesota," with special emphasis upon the construction of the Point Douglas-St. Louis River road. He told how appropriations for military roads in Minnesota were obtained by the new territory's representatives in Congress, Henry H. Sibley and Henry M. Rice; and how, after Lieutenant James H. Simpson was put in charge of road work in Minnesota in 1851, the highway from Point Douglas was pushed steadily northward by his energetic corps of army road-makers. Between 1850 and 1857 the federal govern-

ment furnished about three hundred thousand dollars for Minnesota roads. "The fact that the Point Douglas-St. Louis River road received more than \$120,000," said Mr. Larsen, "is a fair indication of the importance with which it was regarded." It was, however, "never completed by the army road-makers." When the last federal appropriation had been expended in 1858, a hundred miles of the road through the St. Croix Valley had been completed from the south; "the rest had been cleared of brush and timber, and portions of it had been graded." In closing, the speaker called attention to the fact that the present tour had "traveled over a portion of the old Point Douglas-St. Louis River road."

At the conclusion of this paper, Mr. Oehler expressed the appreciation of the tourists to those who had planned the convention. The meeting then adjourned and the tourists turned homeward, doubtless taking with them not only vivid impressions of the scenic beauties of the St. Croix Valley, but an understanding of its interesting historic backgrounds.



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