

## SOME POSSIBILITIES OF HISTORICAL FIELD WORK<sup>1</sup>

Historical field work, as considered in this paper, is a form of organized historical effort which, in middle western communities at least, has only of late years achieved the dignity of a distinctive name. Historical societies and institutions have always engaged more or less in field activities, but field work, that is, systematic attempts to exhaust all the practical possibilities in this direction, is a recent development. So defined, field work has to do with the thoroughgoing conservation of the vast, yet unexplored or neglected, historical resources which abound, widely scattered, in every community. Its immediate object is to make known and permanently accessible, preferably in public depositories, all the discoverable materials of history in a community. Its ultimate aim must be to arouse the interest and to secure the coöperation of the community itself. Its successful prosecution, particularly at the beginning, requires the services of special workers whose business it is to go afield into the community highways and byways in search of the hidden document and of the citizen indifferent to the value of historical work, and to compel them, as it were, to come in. Its ideal is a community placed in permanent possession of all its historical treasures and made permanently mindful of their value.

Among the most potent of the factors which are serving to call attention to field work and to spur societies to serious effort in its prosecution, is the influence of changes which are taking place in our conceptions of history and of the function of historical societies. The demands of history, as we are com-

<sup>1</sup> Read in part at the stated meeting of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, April 9, 1917, and at the tenth annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, Chicago, April 26-28, 1917.

ing to conceive it, greatly increase the variety and extent of the materials necessary to its production. The "vast ongoing common life" of a community, as one writer has expressed it, as well as the careers of outstanding individuals, must be represented among the sources. The thousand and one insignificant traces and indications of widespread movements and conditions must not be neglected for the one or two records of important events. No phase of the community life, whether it be political, social, economic, or otherwise, can be overlooked. Every period must be regarded as in its way equally important with other periods, and the present must be looked upon as a future past. In other words, there is a new realization of the fact that the ideal history of any community must await the accumulation, or at least the bringing to light, of all discoverable material relating to the life of that community. There is a new consciousness of the incompleteness of sources now available. There is a new sense of the importance of a service which historical societies have long since undertaken to perform. Less now than ever can these societies render that service by taking a receptive attitude or by merely making occasional forays into the field, because much of the newly desired material is especially liable to destruction. Active and extensive campaigns of search and education in the field are therefore plainly necessary.

The conviction that this work ought to be done, as well as the hope that it can be done, are both immensely reinforced by the growing belief that the adequate performance of this and of related tasks is a social duty which historical societies owe to their communities and which communities owe to themselves. The conception of such societies as performing a definite and necessary social function not only gives new force to their obligations but also enables them to appeal more confidently for the coöperation of the people whom they serve. Communities, as such, have already recognized the community-wide importance of historical activity to the extent of according to it varying degrees of sanction and of financial support.

The citizens of a community also, as individuals, may be brought to assist in the actual doing of work—especially that of collecting materials—which their responsible agents, no matter how well endowed, can not accomplish without their help.

Important beginnings of field work have been made in a number of Mississippi Valley states, notably in Illinois, Michigan, and Minnesota. In each of these states representatives of central agencies have engaged in field activities of state-wide scope. These efforts have varied in immediate purpose and in method, but all point to the same general end. As the most recently undertaken, the work in Minnesota includes all the significant types of field activity thus far developed in the middle west. An account of the plans, results, and prospects in the Minnesota field may serve to indicate some of the possibilities of systematic field work in general.

The work in Minnesota was begun in September, 1916, with the appointment by the Minnesota Historical Society of a field agent, who was to devote his time to work for the society in various parts of the state. The plan was that the agent should ultimately visit each county and while there make an inventory of the county archives, search for material of historical value in private hands, securing the same for the society whenever possible, and, finally, encourage in every possible way local historical activity. His work has from the first centered upon the definite task of inventorying the county archives. The pursuit of other objects was to depend somewhat upon developments in the field; but the results of the more tentative efforts have been so encouraging and so many new possibilities have arisen that much time has been spent in each county visited, and that, too, at the county seat alone, work in other parts of the county having been temporarily postponed.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Up to May 1, 1917, the county seats of Anoka, Sherburne, Mille Lacs, Washington, and Isanti counties have been visited. Some time has been devoted to field activities in St. Paul and Minneapolis also, and to the discharge, at society headquarters, of duties connected with field work in general.

The work on the county archives is being conducted along the lines followed in the recent survey of the Illinois county records. In the first place, the archives are inventoried; that is, such notes are taken on the character and extent of the records as will furnish the data for all-inclusive and descriptive lists showing the research worker what sort of information he may expect to find in the several depositories. It is the intention that this survey will be conducted in all the counties, and that the final result of this part of the work will be a much-needed guidebook to the county records of the state. In connection with each inventory facts relating to the condition of the records and to methods of keeping and preserving them are noted also, for upon these factors much of the present and future usefulness of the archives for both administrative and historical purposes obviously depends. The information thus gathered will serve as a basis for outlining and urging the enactment of such remedial measures as will then appear to be necessary.

The condition of affairs in Minnesota, as revealed in the five counties visited, is similar in all important respects to the situation in Illinois as discovered and fully set forth in Dr. Pease's volume on the county archives of that state.<sup>3</sup> The inventories reveal the existence of material containing a wealth of information, much of which has not yet found its way into histories. The character of this material may be indicated by an enumeration of a few of the more important groups of records which relate to the life of a whole community, and cover, more or less completely, the period of its political existence. Of these the county commissioners' records constitute the nearest approach to a connected and inclusive account of a county's past, but an amazing amount of instructive detail may be derived from such series as registers of births, deaths, and marriages, probate records, naturalization papers, census sched-

<sup>3</sup> Theodore C. Pease, *County Archives of the State of Illinois* (*Illinois Historical Collections*, vol. 12, *Bibliographical Series*, vol. 3—Springfield, 1915).

ules,<sup>4</sup> election material, agricultural statistics, abstracts of original entries of government land, assessment rolls, and tax lists. One can not go through these records, even in the cursory manner which suffices for an inventory, without noting numerous separate documents or items of historical and of human interest. At Anoka, for example, are to be found a few records of Manomin County, a diminutive political unit which existed for a few years in the early county-making days, but which is now the township of Fridley, Anoka County. Among the early plats of St. Paul and St. Anthony on file at Stillwater<sup>5</sup> is one, dated 1848, upon which the following notation is inscribed: "St. Anthony city is one mile below the falls of St. Anthony which from the amount of water power and ease with which it is controlled is destin[ed] to be one of the most extensive manufact[ur]ing places in the united states is the only place above St. Paul on the East side of the river where a landing can be made . . . It is the highest point attained by Steamboats being amediately at the foot of the rapids and is unequivocally destined to be the landing and reshiping point for all the Mississippi valley above." The period of townsite speculation and of "paper towns" is vividly brought to mind by the following statement appended to a delinquent tax list for the year 1857 by an Anoka tax collector: "In regard to the Tax of these lots in Glencarrie," he wrote, "Your Collector would respectfully report that after diligent

<sup>4</sup> A file of census schedules containing the official returns made by Washington County census-takers in connection with national and state censuses from 1850 to 1885, together with a local census of Stillwater taken in 1853, has been transferred to the historical library. While most of this material appears to be duplicated by similar records on file in the state archives, it supplies the lack there of a number of important schedules for 1860 and all the schedules for 1880.

<sup>5</sup> For a number of years prior to the organization of Minnesota Territory in 1849 the region between the St. Croix and the Mississippi rivers, including the sites of St. Paul and St. Anthony, was a part of the old St. Croix County, Wisconsin Territory, the county seat of which was Dakota, a townsite included within the present limits of Stillwater.

search, he has not been able to find any town by that name." Local officials sometimes found difficulty in knowing just what was expected of them. An instance of this kind appeared in connection with the taking of the 1875 census in Washington County. Census-takers were supplied with printed schedules which called for information about the name, age, sex, color, and condition of each resident in their respective districts. There seems to have been some doubt as to just what was meant by "condition." At any rate all but one of the enumerators failed even to hazard a guess, and that one settled the question simply by reporting the condition of every one in his territory as "good."

The courthouses in which these records are kept are all old buildings which have been more or less well adapted to meet present-day needs. Only one of them appears to be of fire-proof construction, but all are equipped with supposedly fire-proof vaults. Most of the records are kept in office vaults of brick and cement, or in steel cases in the offices. Three counties make use of basement rooms and vaults for storing large masses of non-current records. In one county the overflow from all the offices is stored in a vault attached to the courthouse. The door of this vault opens into the courthouse yard and is commonly left unlocked. Most of the vaults are equipped with metal filing boxes and shelves, though the old-style pasteboard boxes, wooden shelves, and pigeonholes have by no means been entirely displaced.

The records have suffered by reason of fires, destruction by officials, exposure to dust and damp, lack of space, and faulty methods of filing. In one county the auditor's records for the first thirteen years, covering the period from 1860 to 1873, were practically all destroyed by fire. In two instances, it is said, officials have disposed of old records to make room for new, and the unexplained absence from the archives of a number of record series which are known to have existed is probably attributable to similar action, or at least to neglect, on the

part of other county officers. As a rule records have not been adequately guarded against dust and damp. Not the least serious menace is due to the crowded condition of nearly all vaults and storerooms. Shelves are full and are sometimes packed tight with volumes. Filing boxes, as a general rule, are stuffed so full that to handle the contents without injuring them is difficult, if not impossible. Nearly every vault has its portion of loosely stacked volumes and papers on the floor or on the tops of the filing cases. Large quantities of documents are so compactly folded, doubled, or rolled, and have acquired so firm a set in these forms that one hesitates to disturb a given paper lest to replace it would require a readjustment of all the records.

In very few of these county offices are the records systematically arranged throughout. This is especially true of the non-current records, and of the exceptionally large quantity and variety of records in the auditor's offices. Records belonging to a distinct group are seldom kept together. In cases where like records are grouped in a body, they are commonly without serial arrangement. Bound records of the same kind have various titles. The contents of filing boxes are rarely indicated accurately by the labels, and not a few of the latter are wholly misleading. These facts would seem to indicate the prevalence of conditions which seriously threaten the permanence and diminish the utility of county records throughout the state.<sup>6</sup>

An important feature of work in the field is the investigation of local newspapers and newspaper files. Numerous and extensive as are the files of Minnesota newspapers at the state historical library, not all the publications of the state are to be

<sup>6</sup> Thus far it has not seemed advisable to inventory other public records such as those of cities, towns, and villages, but occasion has been taken to make preliminary investigations with a view of doing this in the near future. The first-hand information thus secured serves to strengthen the belief that town, as well as county, archives contain material the character and condition of which should command the attention of historical institutions.

found there and many files are incomplete. Information about local files is therefore sought chiefly with the object of increasing the extent of readily available newspaper material either through accessions to the central collection or through centralized information about supplementary files to be found in the localities. In a large percentage of cases local collections include either whole files or parts of files which are lacking in the central depository. One such file has been secured, and notes made of a number of others not at present obtainable. Two important publications have been added to the number of those regularly received by the society. Lists of all files retained in the localities, whether such files are duplicated in the central depository or not, are placed within the reach of students at the historical library. Furthermore, the attention of publishers is called, if necessary, to the importance of safeguarding their own files, especially those which are not duplicated elsewhere. In one instance where this was done, the publisher supposed that a complete file of his paper was available at the state historical library, and he was surprised to learn that there is a gap of some twenty-four years in this file. On the other hand, the checking-over of a local file not infrequently shows that there are parts of it the existence or lack of which has hitherto been unknown to the publisher. Other facts might be brought out which would further emphasize the value of such a first-hand survey of the entire newspaper resources of the state.

A like systematic, though less exhaustive, search for other material of historical value in private hands is made with a view of acquiring, or at least of locating and listing it. Before going to a county, the agent informs himself of the broad aspects of the county's history, making note of the sort of material to be especially sought out, and of the names of people most likely to have it. For this purpose the much-berated county history is useful, especially in cases where the author has revealed the existence of original source material in the

locality.<sup>7</sup> A bibliography of all material in the historical library relating to the county to be visited is prepared, and the names of members of the Minnesota Historical Society residing in the county are noted, together with such other available data as will facilitate the prompt inauguration of the work both of collecting material and of arousing local interest in historical activity.

Arrived in a community, the agent announces his presence and states his mission in the local newspapers. It is then comparatively easy to get in touch with those who can supplement the information already in hand and thus point the way to a large number of likely prospects. The pioneer, the prominent citizen, the person who is known locally as "a great hand to save everything," or the families of such men, are naturally among those visited. But it may be assumed that every one has something and that records of one kind or another may be looked for everywhere, for they have been found in hovels and in fine homes, in bank vaults and in granaries, in cigar stores and in newspaper offices, in groceries and in vacant houses, though, strange to say, the traditional attic has as yet yielded nothing. Not infrequently the trail leads to places outside of the state and must be followed by means of correspondence conducted for the most part at society headquarters between tours.

The process of getting at and acquiring material is not, however, quite so simple. Without the rights of search and con-

<sup>7</sup> In this and in other respects the history of the county is so closely associated with the historical interests of a local community that all aspects of it come within the range of a field worker's interest. Most of the Minnesota county histories at present in print are the products of commercial enterprise, and exhibit the marked defects characteristic of that type of publication. The appearance from time to time of new works of this class affords the field agent opportunity to make criticisms and suggestions, which appear in reviews of these histories in the *MINNESOTA HISTORY BULLETIN*. It is encouraging to note that one professional writer and editor of commercial histories has shown a desire to coöperate in efforts looking toward the production of more scholarly works.

demnation the agent is compelled to use whatever arts of diplomacy and powers of persuasion he may possess. A hearing is usually accorded, though people are always "busy" (until interested), and one or two very brief interviews have been conducted through slight openings in front doorways. The commonest difficulty lies in getting people to understand that what is wanted is the materials or sources of history rather than historical or reminiscent accounts. That understood, it is necessary to emphasize the fact that very old and curious documents and relics are not the only things of historical value. If, then, it appears that people know what is wanted, that they know or will find out what they have, and will display it, the oftentimes delicate task of getting permission either to inventory or to secure the material for the historical society yet remains. In asking for material a powerful argument is supplied in the many known instances of like material thoughtlessly or accidentally destroyed. A moderate appeal, also, to personal, family, or local pride is seldom without some effect. Whenever material, especially that of undoubted historical value, is not obtainable at the moment, an effort is made to impress upon the owner the importance of safeguarding it, and to secure the promise of its ultimate deposit in the state historical library or in some other suitable public depository.

These activities have resulted already in the acquisition of considerable material and of information, carefully recorded, about material which may yet be secured. The material acquired dates from the last years of the eighteenth century onward, though most of it falls within the last sixty years, and some of it is quite recent. It is largely local in character and is valuable more for the cumulative than for the independent character of its evidence. The printed matter includes such items as works by local authors, old school books, directories, charters and ordinances of cities and villages, publications of local institutions and organizations, and miscellaneous ephemeral matter. The manuscript material includes several collections of letters and papers, one of which comprises thousands

of documents; a number of business account books, which have to do with such matters as logging, lumber manufacturing, mercantile transactions, and river transportation; and a quantity of miscellaneous documents. A number of maps, both printed and manuscript, together with numerous pictures, photographs, and miscellany, make up the remainder.

But valuable as these acquisitions undoubtedly are, they are probably insignificant as compared with what might have been secured had there been time and favorable opportunity for following up all the known prospects, to say nothing of others yet to be discovered. A number of collections were not available when they were located because of their close association with the lives and interests of the owners, who were, in most cases, aged pioneers. Still other material, accounts of which were promising, was stored in such a manner as to render it temporarily difficult of access. The task of inventorying and perhaps of securing two very large collections of records relating to lumbering on the St. Croix had to be deferred because those in authority were either out of town or too busy at the time to give the matter the attention it required. The owner of a very valuable collection of the letters and papers of two pioneer missionaries retained them with the expectation of using the material for publication.<sup>8</sup> Another important collection was withheld in the hope, apparently without much foundation, that some agency in the locality where it originated might be induced to make adequate provision for its preservation and use. Finally, an unknown quantity of material is in the hands of the large number of people who were not reached in the comparatively short periods of time available for this phase of the work.

Some part of this unfinished work may yet be done through correspondence or on return visits, but it is obvious that only one who is permanently on the ground will be in a position to exhaust all of the possibilities. Here is where actively inter-

<sup>8</sup> This collection, when discovered, was about to be taken to a distant city, where it might easily never have come to light.

ested residents and local societies should come in, and it is the field agent's business ultimately to see that they do so. On a first visit, however, the character and extent of his efforts in this direction must be determined largely by the situation as he finds it. It so happens that in the localities thus far visited there is little active interest in local history and so far as this interest goes it is limited to a very few members of the state historical society and one local pioneer association which is predominantly social in character. It has therefore been possible only to commence a work which will be carried to completion as favorable opportunities arise. Of course the very search for material serves at least to call attention to historical activity. Furthermore, every opportunity is seized to acquaint people fully with the character, importance, and needs of the work which the state historical society is doing. Those who appear to be interested and those who ought especially to be interested are invited to join and coöperate with the society. A definite effort is made to enlist the interest of some one person in each locality who will agree to keep a lookout for material; one who will either take steps to secure such material or inform the society about it; one, in short, who will act as a sort of representative of the society in his community. Conferences, also, are held with librarians, teachers, and others that the foundation may be laid for coöperative effort on the part of the historical society and local schools, libraries, newspapers, and organizations. Finally, suggestions are made which, if followed, will facilitate the organization of local historical societies.

When the time is ripe, it is proposed to follow up this work along the lines of some such comprehensive and definite plan as that worked out in Michigan, where a systematic effort is being made to enlist the services of local workers and organizations all over the state in promoting general interest and widespread coöperation in local historical activities of all kinds, with special emphasis at this time on the collection of material. A single worker may in time inventory all the public records

and newspapers and collect considerable privately owned material, but the fate of the public and of undoubtedly large quantities of private records rests with the people as a whole and as individuals. If, therefore, the field agent for the time being is more collector than missionary it is only that so much material as possible may be brought to light without delay and that the unrealized possibilities thereby indicated may be brought the more forcibly to public attention.

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