

THE 1939 ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THE COMPLETION OF nine decades of continuous activity by Minnesota's oldest institution—the Minnesota Historical Society—was commemorated by its members and friends on January 16 when they assembled in St. Paul for its ninetieth annual meeting. The opening session, the nineteenth annual conference on local history work in Minnesota, was called to order by Mr. Otto E. Wieland, president of the St. Louis County Historical Society, in the Historical Building at 10:00 A. M. Some eighty people, including representatives of at least sixteen county and municipal historical organizations, attended the conference.

The first speaker, Miss Bertha L. Heilbron, assistant editor on the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society, reviewed "Local Historical Activity in Minnesota in 1938." She opened by calling attention to the new historical societies organized in the past year in Clearwater, Grant, Hennepin, Kittson, Pennington, Scott, and Waseca counties, pointing out that with these seven additions, the number of societies in the state totals fifty-five. All these organizations have become active since 1922, and all but eighteen have had their origin in the decade of the 1930's. Thus the local history movement is a comparatively recent affair in Minnesota. The speaker went on to show what these societies stand for, what evidences of vitality and growth they are exhibiting. She asserted that a number have membership rolls that include from one to three hundred names, with the largest in Clay and Crow Wing counties; that individual societies held from one to a dozen meetings in 1938; that several societies placed markers on sites of historic interest; that the majority have established museums in courthouses, schools, village armories, public libraries, community buildings, and the like;

that a few, notably those in Brown and Blue Earth counties, have acquired and equipped special museum buildings; and that valuable collections of museum objects, pictures, manuscripts, and newspapers are being assembled and preserved in these museums. "If there are any doubts about the usefulness of the local societies," said the speaker, "they can be dispelled by an examination of the visitors' registers that are kept in many of the local museums."

Mr. William M. Goetzinger of Elbow Lake, the second speaker on the conference program, represented one of the seven new historical societies organized in 1938, that in Grant County. He traced briefly the backgrounds of this rich section of the Red River Valley, which is on the route of one of the Red River trails and which was occupied to a large extent by Scandinavian settlers. Some of the problems that the historical society in this area has to face were suggested. Museum objects and other items assembled since its organization last May are now kept in the office of the judge of probate, according to Mr. Goetzinger, but the society has the promise of more adequate quarters when a new courthouse is erected. He was followed by Mr. George A. Langmack of the women's and professional division of the WPA in St. Paul, who discussed "The WPA and Local History Work in Minnesota." He asserted that the WPA looks upon its activities in supplementing the work of the state and local historical societies as a contribution to the conservation of Minnesota history and its materials; and he surveyed what has been done to assist historical activity in Ramsey, Hennepin, Stearns, Wilkin, Otter Tail, and other counties. Newspaper files in some fifteen communities are being indexed under WPA auspices, he revealed. He also discussed the program of the Historical Records Survey, which has completed surveys of the archives of every county in the state and is now publishing the results. This survey "is so broad that work to be done appears to be endless," said Mr. Langmack. Among the tasks for the future that he suggested are

the publication of surveys of state archives and of municipal, township, and school records. Lists of cemeteries, historic sites, monuments and markers, historic buildings, historic trails, and the like, also should be made available.

For the final address of the morning, Mr. Wieland called upon Professor Edgar B. Wesley of the University of Minnesota, the author of a recently published history of Owatonna, who appropriately chose as his subject, "The Writing of Local History." He undertook to enumerate the problems involved in the writing of local history, and to define the methods of gathering and organizing material for such a study. Among the difficulties that the local historian must face, according to Dr. Wesley, are the fact that his readers are apt to be fairly familiar with his subject, that local history is usually undramatic, that it is almost always social in character, and that few models are available. He advised the prospective author of a local history first to delimit the area of the community he wishes to study; and then to survey the available sources in the form of books, newspapers, public archives, school, church, and cemetery records, manuscripts, and interviews with pioneers. Dr. Wesley suggested more than twenty headings under which material can be organized after it is assembled; among them are geography, population, industry, political issues, government, public utilities, social organizations, churches, schools, libraries, newspapers, health, art, music, sports, and entertainments. In concluding the speaker warned the writer of local history to avoid too narrow a concept, too local an approach, a stereotyped organization, and an apologetic attitude in preparing such a work, but at the same time to make sure that his history is truly local, and not a mere segment of state or national history.

Among those who participated in the discussion that followed the conference were Mr. S. S. Beach, president of the Hutchinson Historical Society, who stressed the importance of enlisting the interest of younger members of the commu-

nity in the work of the local historical society; Mr. Dana W. Frear, vice-president of the newly organized Hennepin County Historical Society, who urged local leaders to bend their best efforts toward the preservation of local archives and public records; and Dr. Theodore C. Blegen, superintendent of the state historical society, who suggested that local historians who undertake the writing of community history should use Dr. Wesley's volume on Owatonna as a model.

About a hundred and thirty-five people gathered at the St. Paul Athletic Club at 12:15 P. M. for the annual luncheon and the program that followed it. Mr. Edward C. Gale, president of the society, who presided, reminded the audience of its debt to the pioneers who organized the society ninety years ago and then called upon Mr. LeRoy G. Davis of Sleepy Eye for a paper on "Some Frontier Institutions." Readers of this magazine will recall that Mr. Davis, a Minnesota pioneer of 1866, has contributed to its pages unusual articles on words and phrases and home remedies and sanitation with which he was familiar as a resident of the frontier. The paper on such pioneer institutions as the country store, the blacksmith shop, the country school, the lyceum, and the frontier church, which he read on the luncheon program, appears elsewhere in this issue of MINNESOTA HISTORY. There also is to be found the paper presented by the next speaker, Dean E. M. Freeman of the college of agriculture, forestry, and home economics in the University of Minnesota, who took as his subject, "A Scientist Looks at History." His essay is a notable contribution to a series of discussions, inaugurated in 1933, which in past years have given opportunities to a businessman, a journalist, a doctor, a novelist, and a librarian to present before the society their views of history.

Some ways in which history and science are related were strikingly illustrated by the final speaker on this program, Evadene Burris Swanson of St. Paul, a graduate stu-

dent in history in the University of Minnesota. She presented to the audience some of the "Observations on Minnesota Game Animals" that she has discovered in the letters, diaries, and published works of explorers, traders, sportsmen, and scientists who visited the Minnesota country while it retained its frontier characteristics. Among the men whose writings she exploited are Father Louis Hennepin, Jonathan Carver, David Thompson, Giacomo C. Beltrami, Henry H. Sibley, George W. Featherstonhaugh, Charles Lanman, and Henry David Thoreau. Lanman, who visited Minnesota as a sportsman in 1846, "killed fifty grouse in one afternoon near the Crow Wing River on the east bank of the Mississippi," according to Mrs. Swanson. It is not surprising that a dragoon who traversed the region with an expedition three years later felt called upon to issue the following "flippant warning to the United States government": "Uncle, the stock in your great pasture is getting thinned out."

For the business meeting of the society, about seventy-five people gathered in the Historical Building at 3:00 P. M., with Mr. Gale presiding. The report of the society's treasurer was read by Mr. Charles Stees, a member of the society's executive council. Upon its completion, Dr. Theodore C. Blegen read extracts from the report on "The Minnesota Historical Society in 1938" which is published in full in this issue of MINNESOTA HISTORY. The following thirty members of the society were then elected to serve as members of its executive council during the triennium 1939-42: Julian B. Baird, Henry N. Benson, Theodore C. Blegen, Mrs. Charles C. Bovey, Kenneth Brill, Ralph Budd, the Reverend William Busch, Homer P. Clark, the Reverend James Connolly, Gratia A. Countryman, William W. Cutler, Burt W. Eaton, Bert Fesler, Guy Stanton Ford, Edward C. Gale, Julius E. Haycraft, Louis W. Hill, Jr., Jefferson Jones, August C. Krey, Nathaniel P. Langford, Victor E. Lawson, Mrs. Clarkson Lindley, Dr. Thomas B. Magath, Andrew J.

Newgren, Dillon J. O'Brien, Ira C. Oehler, 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 for the next three years: Ira C. Oehler, president; Lester B. Shippee and Julius E. Haycraft, vice-presidents; Julian B. Baird, treasurer; and Theodore C. Blegen, secretary. On this occasion also Mr. Homer P. Clark of St. Paul read the tribute to the memory of Everett H. Bailey which appears elsewhere in this issue.

After the business meeting, Mr. Gale called upon Mr. Richard R. Sackett, assistant supervisor of the Minnesota Historical Records Survey, for a paper on "The Joseph R. Brown Memorial Wayside" which is being established near Sacred Heart in Renville County. There in 1861 one of Minnesota's most picturesque pioneers built a pretentious home that was destroyed by Indians in the Sioux Outbreak of August, 1862. Some jagged bits of stone walls were all that remained to remind the visitor that members of the Brown family once lived on this site. Recently, however, it has been the scene of great activity, for on June 5, 1938, a crew of WPA workers, engaged in a project for the Minnesota department of state parks, began to excavate the site. Mr. Sackett, who directed this archaeological investigation, gave a vivid description of its results and told of the plans for the restoration of the house as a "memorial wayside." "Under debris and rubbish from two to six feet in depth were found scores of interesting items that had once been the contents of this great house," said the speaker. He enumerated many of the items that have been identified and noted that this list "proved more than interesting when compared with" an inventory of property destroyed by the Indians prepared by Mrs. Brown shortly after the outbreak. As a result of these excavations also, said Mr. Sackett, the "original layout of rooms on the ground floor" of the mansion has been determined, and much additional information about the ar-

rangement and construction of the remainder of its three and a half stories has been made available.

The feature of the evening session, which convened in the Historical Building at 8:00 P. M., was the annual address by Professor Walter S. Campbell of the University of Oklahoma. Writing under the pseudonym of "Stanley Vestal," he has published many books and articles dealing with various phases of American Indian life and history. In introducing this speaker to the audience of about a hundred and thirty people, Judge Julius E. Haycraft of Fairmont, who presided, called attention to his many notable contributions to the literature of the frontier West, including his biographies of Sitting Bull and Kit Carson. On this occasion Professor Campbell chose to discuss "The Humanity of the American Indian," revealing at the outset that his "estimate of this people is necessarily based chiefly upon observations made of the Plains Indians," with whom he has had considerable contact. He opened by analyzing certain "misconceptions of the Indian" that have been prevalent. The white man, he said, has thought of the Indian at various times and under varying conditions as a "child of nature," as a "red devil," as the "noble savage," or as a member of an "inevitably vanishing race." "There is some truth in all these notions," said the speaker, "but none of them quite coincides" with his own experience of the Plains Indians. He then went on to explain that:

Undoubtedly, the Indian was to some degree a child of nature, who understood enough of the animals he preyed upon to hunt successfully, who had some knowledge of the curative properties of plants, and who had strong family affections, consideration for his relatives, for women, and for the aged; a man whose ruling passion was his child; a man who could show great loyalty to his tribe, and be hospitable to strangers. So far so good. Again the red devil had some basis in fact, as you in Minnesota are well aware. He could endure great hardships, and when he went to war, he had no code of chivalry which would prevent him from wreaking all his force upon his enemies. Against them, almost anything was justified. The noble savage was also not unknown,

though he had his own standards of nobility. And undoubtedly many tribes and nations have vanished forever, swept away by the white man's vices, diseases, and wars.

Judging from his own experience, Mr. Campbell described the Indian as "an Oriental," who is very conventional and, above all, respectable; an "impulsive, moody, sociable fellow," who loves crowds, dances, feasts, ceremonies, color, and finery; a "yes-man" and "something of a show-off." The virtues that the Plains Indians most admired were "courage, fortitude, generosity, and fecundity," according to the speaker. But the red man "found the white soldier hard-hearted and callous; the white trader grasping; and the white emigrant over-cautious," and "he had little respect for them, because he despised cowardice, stinginess, and sharp practice." The Indian's "virtues and weaknesses were partly racial, but they were more often the result of his upbringing. . . . He was what most of us would be if we were subjected to similar circumstances, traditions, and a narrow village society."

Following Professor Campbell's address, Judge Haycraft invited members of the audience to adjourn to the west room of the museum for an informal reception. Upon this note of sociability, the ninetieth annual meeting of the society was brought to a close.

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