

## THEODORE C. BLEGEN AND THE MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LATE IN JULY Dr. Theodore C. Blegen announced his resignation as secretary and superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society. Under a fellowship awarded by the Norwegian-American Historical Association, he will devote the coming year to research, editing, and writing in the field of American immigration history. In the autumn of 1940, he will assume full-time duties as professor of American history in the University of Minnesota, from which he is now on sabbatical leave. Dr. Blegen plans particularly to complete the second volume of his *Norwegian Migration to America*, much of the material for which he assembled while he was in Norway in 1928-29 as a fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. The first volume of this work was published shortly after his return from Europe.

Dr. Blegen served as assistant superintendent of the historical society from 1922 to 1931, when, upon the resignation of Dr. Solon J. Buck, he was elevated to the superintendency. The reputation of the Minnesota society as one of the leading historical societies in the United States, established under Dr. Buck, has received an ever-widening recognition during Dr. Blegen's tenure as superintendent. In that period its collections have shown an astounding growth, and they have attracted to the society's building in St. Paul scholars and creative writers from most of the states in the Union and from many foreign countries. The publications issued by the society since 1931 under Dr. Blegen's editorship have made available in American and foreign libraries, as well as in hundreds of private collections, the results of recent research in Minnesota history. Largely through the mediums of local historical organizations and historical

tours, every section of the state has come to feel the influence of the Minnesota Historical Society.

An example of the growth of the society's resources may be found in its manuscript division, where nearly sixteen hundred collections—more than a third of the total number—have been acquired during Dr. Blegen's administration as superintendent. They range in size from a single item to tens of thousands of letters, documents, and volumes. Among the more important collections of personal papers added during the past eight years are those of Jason C. Easton, a banker in southern Minnesota, Dean Alfred Owre of the University of Minnesota school of dentistry, Governor John Lind, and Congressman Charles A. Lindbergh, Sr. A special effort has been made to collect diaries kept by pioneer farmers in Minnesota, and the society now has about a dozen of these unusual records. Emphasis has likewise been given to the preservation of records of churches and organizations, particularly business concerns. Collections in other depositories containing material of value for the study of Minnesota history have been combed for items of interest, which were copied for the society. This was made possible largely by the acquisition of microfilm equipment—cameras, reading machines, and the like. Through these facilities, Minnesota students can now consult in the society's building large collections of manuscripts photographed in Chicago, Boston, Edinburgh in Scotland, Stockholm in Sweden, and many other places remote from Minnesota. That the opportunities for research offered by the society are being used is evident, for the number of readers consulting manuscripts increased from 373 in 1930 to 1,849 in 1938.

A similar growth has taken place in other departments of the society. Since 1930 some twenty-seven thousand items have been added to the library collection, which now includes 198,000 books, pamphlets, and newspaper volumes. The greatest increase in use occurred in the newspaper divi-

sion, which has 19,500 bound volumes of Minnesota newspapers dating from 1849 to the present. About 1,200 readers used 2,133 bound volumes and 16,000 current issues in 1930; in 1938, readers numbering 3,416 called for 11,000 bound volumes and 95,000 current issues. Some two thousand more readers used the facilities of the main library in 1938 than in 1930. In the museum several thousand objects illustrative of pioneer life and of the activities of Minnesotans have been acquired. The picture collection in particular has shown a notable growth, and much progress has been made on a catalogue of more than sixty thousand photographs, portraits, paintings, and other items in this group. Many phases of frontier life and activity are illustrated in a series of miniature groups placed on view in the museum in the past few years. Teachers are making more and more use of the society's museum, bringing class groups from many parts of the state to see the exhibits. More than ten thousand teachers and pupils who came in classes were included among the forty-three thousand people who visited the museum in 1938. Among those who have made frequent use of the facilities available in the society's manuscript and newspaper divisions, its library, and its museum are not only teachers, students, and professional scholars, but novelists, poets, playwrights, artists, architects, journalists, lawyers, doctors, state and federal officials, genealogists, radio announcers, club leaders, and the like.

As editor of the society's publications, Dr. Blegen has placed in the hands of its members a notable series of books, pamphlets, and periodicals. "Under Dr. Blegen's able editorship," reads an editorial in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* for July 27, 1939, the society's quarterly magazine, MINNESOTA HISTORY, has become "widely known as one of the best periodicals of its kind in the country." Such well-known American historians as Allan Nevins, Guy Stanton Ford, and A. M. Schlesinger have expressed their appreciation of this publication, the latter placing it "in the front

rank of American historical periodicals." Readers of this magazine will be pleased to know that Dr. Blegen will continue as editor until the end of 1939, thus completing volume 20 in the series. Since 1922, when he became editor of the quarterly, the society has published two double and fourteen annual volumes, containing nearly nine thousand pages of articles, documents, reviews, and notes. Between the covers of these books are many general studies, but there, too, are articles on racial groups, such as the Swedes and the Czechs; on industries, such as lumbering and flour milling; on explorers, such as Radisson and Groseilliers, Lahontan, and Hennepin; and on many phases of cultural and social history. Noteworthy in the latter group are studies of frontier housekeeping, food, furniture, holiday celebrations, and institutions, and of such sports as hunting and baseball. Dr. Blegen stressed the importance of making available in published form documents from the society's collections, and he included in this magazine many letters, short diaries, and other manuscripts. Attention has been drawn to many others in the series entitled "Sources for Northwest History."

In order to present in published form some of the longer basic documents relating to Minnesota's past, Dr. Blegen inaugurated a series of *Narratives and Documents* in 1932. He defined the series, in his introduction to the first volume, as a "vehicle for the publication of diaries, letters, newspaper items, and other historical materials of distinct Minnesota interest." He planned to make these volumes "less formal and comprehensive than the *Collections*" of the society, and to present them "in attractive and popular, though inexpensive form." In the two volumes that have been published appear the diary and sketches of Frank B. Mayer, a Baltimore artist who attended the treaties of Traverse des Sioux and Mendota in 1851, and the letters of Jane Grey Swisshelm, a St. Cloud editor and feminist of the period of early statehood. A third volume published under Dr.

Blegen's editorship and now ready for distribution presents two *Minnesota Farmers' Diaries*.

Another series of publications launched by Dr. Blegen consists of *Special Bulletins*. These are intended to serve as keys to significant materials for the history of Minnesota and the Northwest and to methods and practices developed by the Minnesota Historical Society in preserving and administering the records of the state and its people. Two of these *Bulletins* were issued in 1935 and two in 1936. They are a *Guide to the Personal Papers in the Manuscript Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society*, a set of rules for *Copying Manuscripts*, a *Bibliography of Minnesota Territorial Documents*, and a manual on the *Care and Cataloguing of Manuscripts*. A publication that was in its infancy when Dr. Blegen became assistant superintendent in the fall of 1922 and for which he was largely responsible both before and after 1931 is the *Minnesota Historical News*. More than two hundred monthly numbers of this clipsheet, containing about a thousand short stories on the history of the state and historical activity in Minnesota, have been placed at the disposal of Minnesota newspaper editors.

The local historical movement in Minnesota had its origin in the summer of 1922, only a few months before Dr. Blegen joined the staff of the state society. When he became superintendent in 1931, twenty-one local historical societies had been organized; today fifty-six are active in the state. Many of the county and community societies have established excellent museums, where pictures, objects, manuscripts, newspapers, and other items of local historical interest are preserved and displayed. Representatives of the local societies have assembled each January in St. Paul to exchange ideas and receive suggestions in a local history conference held in connection with the annual meeting of the state society. The Minnesota Historical Society, on the other hand, has visited the local societies in a series of

summer tours, which have penetrated the far corners of the state from Fillmore County to the Lake of the Woods. Dr. Blegen has been much in demand as a speaker before meetings of the local societies, as well as of other organizations throughout the state. Radio talks on Minnesota history, arranged under his direction on various occasions, have reached a wide audience.

One of the comprehensive plans projected for the society by Dr. Blegen called for a canvass of records preserved in Minnesota by public officials, social and business organizations, and private individuals. It became possible to carry out this plan when the government historical projects were inaugurated. As long ago as 1917 the society had made a beginning on a survey of county archives in Minnesota, and this project was revived in 1934 under the CWA, continued as a feature of other government projects, and taken over by the Historical Records Survey of the WPA in 1936. Under Dr. Blegen's direction, surveys of both county and state archives have been completed, and since 1937 the results of surveys in a number of individual counties have been published. In 1936 also he became director of a survey of federal archives in Minnesota—a project that was completed in the following year after the records of more than a thousand federal agencies in Minnesota had been listed. The Historical Records Survey has also made inventories of the archives of hundreds of cities, towns, and school districts, and of the records of churches, cemeteries, fraternal, business, and other organizations. Through Dr. Blegen's initiative, the historical society itself was enabled to make use of WPA assistance on special projects. The notable series of miniature groups now on view in the society's museum is the work of WPA artists. Indexes of names listed in the Minnesota federal census of 1860 and of Minnesotans who served in the Civil and Indian wars have been compiled by WPA assistants, and with their aid much progress has been made on a bibliography of Minnesota newspapers from

1849 to 1900. Under the WPA also, substantial additions to the society's building have been constructed, giving much-needed stack and storage space.

Like Dr. Blegen's services on behalf of the Minnesota Historical Society, his varied outside activities have done much to make its name familiar to scholars throughout the nation. His ability as an author has gained for him an enviable reputation. A volume published in 1938 under the title *Building Minnesota* and planned as a textbook for use in the junior high school was hailed by one reviewer as a "history of the state which everybody can read with profit," a story "told with rare skill" and "overpowering in its interest." The volume of *Norwegian Emigrant Songs and Ballads* which he translated and edited in collaboration with Professor Martin B. Ruud in 1936 is a notable contribution to social and cultural history. Dr. Blegen's study of *Norwegian Migration to America, 1825-1860*, published in 1931, has already been mentioned. He has edited for publication a number of important historical documents, including the *Civil War Letters of Colonel Hans Christian Heg* (1936), and the *Unfinished Autobiography of Henry Hastings Sibley* (1932), and he has published in this and other periodicals numerous historical articles.

In addition to editing the publications of this society, Dr. Blegen has served since 1926 as managing editor of the publications of the Norwegian-American Historical Association. In this capacity he has supervised the issuing of ten volumes of the association's *Studies and Records* and of eleven books. Among the latter are two volumes of the writings of the late Professor Laurence M. Larson, a study of *Norwegian Settlement in the United States* by Carlton C. Qualey, a biography of *Laur. Larsen, Pioneer College President* by Karen Larsen, and a volume of *Letters of Ole Munch Raeder*. A recent comment in the *Pioneer Press* calls attention to the fact that Dr. Blegen's "outstanding studies and publications on Norwegian immigration have not only

brought him personal honors, but have fired a wide interest in the contributions of the Old World to the civilization of this state." In recognition of his researches in this field, the Royal Frederik University of Oslo, Norway, in 1938 conferred upon him the honorary degree of doctor of philosophy. Three years earlier he was awarded an honorary doctor's degree by St. Olaf College, Northfield.

During the period of his connection with the Minnesota Historical Society, Dr. Blegen has served also as professor of history first in Hamline University and then in the University of Minnesota. His students have made extensive use of the society's collections, and several have contributed to this magazine articles and documentary studies prepared in his classes. One result of his teaching of courses in Minnesota history is a study outline published in 1937 under the title *Minnesota: Its History and Its People*. This volume of 237 pages is designed as a reading guide for students and teachers of Minnesota history, hundreds of whom, trained in Dr. Blegen's classes, are sharing the benefits of his teachings with high school and college students throughout the Northwest. The outline has found a wide use also by leaders of study groups and clubs building programs about some phase of Minnesota history.

Dr. Blegen's influence has been extended into the national field through his membership on committees and governing bodies of leading professional organizations. These include the committees on archives and libraries, on organization and policy, and on historical manuscripts of the American Historical Association; the executive committee of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association; the committee on archives and libraries of the American Library Association; and the council and the committee on public relations of the Society of American Archivists. He was one of a committee of ten who organized the latter society in 1936. In 1938 he was named a member of the advisory board of the American Council of Learned Societies for a four-year

term; he is serving on the advisory council of the "Dictionary of American History," now in preparation; he was a member of the advisory committee that planned the Northwest Territory Celebration of 1937-38; and he is a member of the Minnesota committee for the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Inc.

Such, in brief, is the record of Dr. Blegen's service as superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society. It indicates the extent to which his ideal of carrying the history of Minnesota to the people of the state has been fulfilled, as well as the ways in which the society's sphere of activity has expanded. In the words of an editorial writer for the *Pioneer Press* of July 27, 1939, he "can leave his post with the assurance that his eight years of directorship have greatly invigorated historical activity and interest in this state."

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